

ONE

There was once music in our lives,
but I can feel it slipping away.
Men are tramping the dusty
roads, asking for work, a sand-
wich, a cup of tea. My father is
bitter and my mother is sad. I
have no brothers, no sisters, no
after-school friends. The days are
long. No one has time for music.

That's why I dream it.

I'm dreaming it now.

I'm dreaming a violin note,
threading it through the quar-
relling cries of the dawn birds



Garry Disher

outside my window. When I do this, I do it for Margaret, the one I love. I imagine her watching me, listening, her eyes alight.

But dreams don't last.

They're not real.

My father's boots snap on the floorboards in the hallway. The door opens. He crosses the room. For a moment the carpet strip deadens his footsteps, then his fingers tighten on my shoulder.

'Up you get, Paul.'

And he's gone again. I open my eyes. The soft light of dawn is leaking through the gaps in the curtain. Five o'clock. I swing my feet onto the floor, drag on my clothes and boots, and leave the house.

My father is waiting for me at the paddock gate, his forearms on the top rail.

'Come on, son,' he says.

My father is a tall man, very strong. Ever since my mother joked that he has hands 'as big as frying pans', I've been fascinated by his stubby

fingers and slab-like palms and corded wrists. Before we got so poor, we owned a piano, but my father could never play it—each of his broad fingers would strike two keys together. I can't imagine a violin in his arms, or his fingers on the strings. When I look at his hands, I imagine them breaking things.

'Dreamer,' he says. 'Slowcoach.'

It's not anger, when my father talks like this.

It's exasperation. It's as if there is too much to do, and too little time, and I am holding him up.

He opens the gate and I follow him into the paddock. The grass is dewy this morning. Soon my boots feel lumpish and sodden.

The cows are in the farthest corner, of course. I watch my father tip back his throat and let out a whistle. It's a sharp note of frustration. These days I rarely hear his warbling whistle, the one that coils and dips like water over stones or magpies in a gum tree.

He whistles again.

Sometimes the cows respond, sometimes

they don't. This time they don't, so we set out to fetch them, our boots flinging jewels of water into the eyebrow of sun on the horizon.

When we reach the cows he nods his head, sending me along their left flank, and we begin to drive them back to the milking shed. By now the sun is warming the air above the empty land. My father exchanges a shy smile with me.

A rabbit streaks from the edge of the grass. It reaches a patch of red dirt pocked with burrows. There's a flash of tail, and it's gone.

Instant pandemonium.

Maddened calves charge at the fence, bulls mount the heifers, the cows kick up their heels.

'Quick,' my father shouts. 'Head them off, they're getting away.'

He runs and I run, skirting left and right. We wave our arms and yell and caper, turning their wide-eyed, stretched-out heads, while their hooves pound like drums and a startled plover streaks up from its nest.

It doesn't take us long. They're soon calm

again. It's just high spirits, I think. The morning air feels good to them, too.

At last we bolt the rickety gate, bail up the cows in the chilly shed, and begin the milking.

Milking is just one of the tasks in my endless day. After breakfast, there's a one-hour walk to school. Lessons, lunch, lessons—and rapped knuckles when I fall asleep at my desk. Then the long walk home. Chop the firewood. Collect the eggs. Weed the vegetable patch. Homework. Tea time. Bed time.

So I dream. Who wouldn't?

I close my eyes, rest my head against the warm brown pelt of this cow, and soon I'm darting my fingers across the keys of a piano and Margaret is smiling at me with love.

'Wake up, son. Get a move on.'

My father has already milked three buckets full. I have milked half a bucket. I look at his powerful fingers, watching them strip the last of the milk from the cow's teats.

Those same hands refuse to hold a gun now.

Dad refuses even to own a rifle. He forbids me to play with toy guns. But when he was a soldier in Flanders' fields, did he hold a gun? Did he shoot the enemy dead?

You see, I've put two and two together. He came back from the war in 1919, married my mother, and started a family. He put the war behind him and there was music in our lives—his warbling whistle, my mother's rippling piano.

But then we got poor.

I'm twelve now and we have been poor for half of my life. He no longer whistles. The piano was sold to a man in a rattletrap truck. Music has slipped from our lives and men are tramping the roads and my father is afraid that we'll lose the farm.

It's brought the war back in his head.