

Little Hands

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

I

IT was during a school excursion to the Blue Mountains, and a visit to the Caves, that Tessie came up with an idea while watching all the hand prints and stencils in the Red Hands Cave. She decided to leave her own mark somewhere in her parents' house or garden. At age seven she was a strong-willed little girl with an artistic mind and an avid curiosity. She would freely take some initiatives and express strong leadership qualities. Her *joie de vivre* was noticed daily in her singing, partying, and chatting with friends.

She picked some paints and brushes and wondered where she could leave her mark. Her mum suggested she walk around the garden till the best spot stood in front of her and then she would know it was the one. And so it happened. The tall scribbly gum at the back had the ideal face to be painted on with its wood faintly curving all around its circular body. It was a very old copper gum tree full of intricate paths carved by insects common to these trees. She gave it light pats, thought it had the right texture to apply her painted hands. Dancing on one leg around it and clapping she sang a little tune.

Zinnia, Tessie's mother, followed her out. Both of them held hands and danced, singing the same song, before sitting down at the foot of the tree with paints and brushes. Zinnia applied a thick coat of red ochre paint on her daughter's palms and fingers. Tessie laid them, all smudged and wet, flat on the wall of the tree, pressing firmly, fingers apart, thumb almost meeting thumb. In turn she painted her mum's hands the same way. These were also placed firmly one on each side of Tessie's hands. Above them the little girl traced a heart with arrows; on the left of it wrote "Tessie", on the right "Mum" and "Dad". The bare spots were retouched, with an

extra coat also added to the whole design. Tessie then kissed the tree with a thank you and a few playful taps.

In the evening she led her dad by the hand to the tree and asked him to add his own mark on each side. She then sang "Look at the hands painted on the tree ...," her lilting voice recomposing an old jingle.

II

WITH the weathering, the image had to be recoated or dabbed here and there several times over the years until it lost some of its novelty, supplanted by other activities. And the hands resting on the tree took a life of their own, slowly shedding their shine in the scorching sun and the fall of rainy days.

As for the little hands, they grew into stronger and more versatile ones, experienced many adventures, visited the world, touched on the way by its dramas and its joys. Until one day they flew far away like thin ribbons in the wind before landing on the waves.

III

ZINNIA is alone now. She lives by the sea. A mermaid perhaps. She wanders contemplatively, her suntanned body offered to the waves, the wind, the sun, the dunes. Her mind open to soul encounters. For each memory of her Tessie she picks up a shell. She has now a collection. One shell for when Tessie played with the dolphins, when she put on her first skis, when she sang her favourite song, when she turned twenty. One for when she wore a flower in her hair. And many many more. A life, even short, can be strewn with memorable moments. Zinnia knows that. All the little miracles in Tessie's life are being relived and they, in turn, redouble in brightness. Sometimes their glow warming her face.

IV

AFTER some tranquility by the sea, Zinnia decided to make a pilgrimage and visit places her daughter had seen. First she would visit the famous Red Hands Cave. As she watched the murals she felt the air, the spirits perhaps, touching her. It was palpable, floating around her, offering a note of comfort. She stood quietly, watched until she could almost see the hands wave at her. Their energy was mesmerising. These hands had once belonged, attached to limbs, to bodies. Lives that had stories of their own, fireworks, thrills and stirs. Their secrets hidden yet allowing many visitors to leave with at least one deep thought, a question perhaps, some emotion, some hope even. A wonderful, dreamlike experience, Zinnia thought.

This visit interlocked with another. Already her car was stopping at a white house with a hedge. As Zinnia opened the gate she met the resident, pottering around, asked if he wouldn't mind her seeing his garden as she had once lived in that house. He recognised her as the previous owner.

"It's Zinnia, isn't it?"

"Yes, and you must be Tom. I remember you now. I actually have a strange request. I'd like to see the gum tree, if I could."

They were standing on the side of the garden. Looking towards the back Zinnia saw the tree cut down into a huge pile of logs. Its tall presence, hugging Tessie's family painting, now reduced to firewood. Zinnia recalled how the gum tree had stood in front of Tessie, telling her it was *the* one. It might also "talk" to her about the whereabouts of the family's mark.

"It had to be done. Neighbours complained. And it was partly sick," he said, apologetic, noticing Zinnia's obvious disappointment.

"It's just that I would have liked to see our hand paintings once more. Maybe I could go through each log to try and find them. Do you mind?"

"Zinnia, I had a feeling that you or your daughter would one day come back. I have kept your hands. Come I'll show you." He directed her to his nursery. "The log is inside there, probably looking a bit lost. I'll let you find it. I had to chop it into a smaller size so that you could carry it away."

He let her linger in the greenhouse between the rows until she found it. It was in a corner under a fern amidst timber and rattan planter boxes. The image, cracked and faded, still had red blotches, all bearing the aches of time. Zinnia looked at the little hands between her own and those of Tessie's dad, somehow worked out their outline, surprised at how small they were. "She was only a baby then," she whispered, remembering the past scene. She cradled the log and walked out.

"Thank you, Tom. That was very thoughtful of you."

"I must say, when I looked at it, it brought my own memories back; my habit of carving my initials on the bark of trees. Anyway, that's a long time ago. And how is Tess? I recall a very tall smart young girl."

"She's fine," Zinnia answered with a hand on her heart and looking deeply into his eyes.

"Wait a minute," he said, after a moment of startled reflection, I've got something else for you." He went back to the nursery and came out with a bunch of white tulips. "Here, it's spring."

Zinnia placed the log in the front seat, the bouquet against it, and put the seat belt around them both. In whispers, as she drove along,

she talked to Tessie, about the Red Hands, the log, the tulips, the little hands, this and that. She would now return to the waves and look for another shell to add the latest beautiful moment to her treasure of memories.

