

Red Fox Rampant

by Myra King

Damien Rouge is having his fifteen minutes of fame posthumously.

Hanging up in a tree like a primate.

The TV cameras are discreet, showing only the aesthetically acceptable aftermath of the plane crash, the squeamish stomachs of the six o'clock set have to digest their dinners after all.

I recognise Damien immediately from his ponytail dreadlock and distinctive tattoo; a red fox rampant.

I remember that because I was the one who did it for him, thirty years ago.

Do the tat up high will you Marcie. I need to be able to cover it when I go for interviews.

Damien's leg is cocked back, dog like, an angle denoting dislocation and fracture, held together by army pants, the type with reinforced utility pockets. Only God knows what they hold now.

I wonder if I should call my son. I wonder what I would say.

Hey Matt, your father, you know the one you've never seen? He's on telly. Yes, now. On the news.

It gives a whole new meaning to a public viewing.

I decide not to. It is better he remembers his father from the faded photo he left me.

Standing over a fresh kill, arm outstretched, fingers pointing to the lethal tusks of a huge boar. Mouth set in similar countenance.

Damien, the big game hunter.

Shit, Marcie, I thought you were taking something. I mean you did say you were on the pill. I don't want no screaming brat. Get rid of it.

I had been taking contraceptives, but what did I know? I'd had too much to drink, thrown up one day and missed a dose. And I was seventeen and fertile as the plains.

Hey, Marcie, one of the guys at work said if you run for an hour and then have a hot bath that will bring on your period.

I trusted him. He was twenty-seven years old and knew the world. But nothing happened. My period was as stopped as its namesake.

I told Matt about his father the day he turned ten, not long after he learned about the facts of life. I figured he would understand it better then. Understand that the dad he'd known for the last eight years of his life was not his biological one.

All it did was to add fuel to fire, over the recent divorce.

Really, nothing I could do back then was right.

As the years passed he grew curious. Matt began to search, I began to search, his grandmother, who lives in the same city where I'd last seen his father, began to search.

We came up with names and addresses. But nothing matched.

Damien Rouge was as unlisted as his phone number.

Kids should be put in a sound proof room and hosed down once a week. And not taken out until they are fifteen and more interesting.

I laughed when Damien said this. It was pre-pregnancy and seemed funny.

I realise now how much he hadn't wanted kids. He was far too busy being one.

The plane crash has happened in France, the voice over sounds so nice, dulcet tones of French with lines of hysteria. You know, the sort the media manufacture. It sounds the same in every language.

The subtitles declare it the worst aviation disaster in twenty years. No survivors.

I remember the old joke: *If a plane crashes on a hill and one part falls to the North and the other part to the South, where do they bury the survivors?*

They don't of course, I answer myself, bury the survivors.

But *I* have been buried for years.

The camera pans back to Damien. His seat from the plane is still partly wedged in the fork of a tree, an oak I think: *Quercus Robur*.

His seat belt has worked, he is still strapped in.

He swings around and I am treated to a brief glimpse of his face, eyes squeezed shut as if peering into a letter box or just waking up. A brief mockery from the afterlife.

Look Marcie, you have found me but I still ain't going to acknowledge your bastard son.

His face reminds me of the death mask photo of Manfred Von Richthoven - the Red Baron. But this is no tri-plane.

Pieces of the aircraft are scattered widely over a landscape littered with clothes and body parts. I notice a water bottle and marvel at its completeness. It is still holding water.

I'd met Damien just before my seventeenth birthday, at the place where I worked, Body Artz.

Over six foot four, he stooped slightly to fit through the door. His presence filled the shop.

I had just finishing piercing some kid's ears and was telling the mother about the aftercare.

He waited until I was finished.

"Hi... Look... Marcie," he said, placing my nametag straight. "I'm after having a tattoo done."

He opened the portfolio he was carrying and unclipped a drawing. It was a picture of a red fox rearing. I didn't think it a probable pose. But the customer is always right.

And this one was brave. He didn't even wince as I dipped and pricked.

But sweat beaded like thaw and his voice was tight when he spoke.

"I didn't want none of that catalogue stuff. Bloody skulls entwined with snakes and I love mother. Bugger that. I got this friend who draws. I always wanted to have a fox done *ona-cow-to-me-name*."

I remember thinking he'd not seen what was available lately. But I was so mesmerised that I only managed to squeak "*why, on account of your name?*"

"My last name is Rouge. That's French for Red." He moved in his seat, shuffling up his large frame to match his importance.

It was lucky I was not injecting, I would have blurred something.

"And I play rugby. They call me the fox, cause of me moves." A wink gave affirmation that rugby wasn't the only game he was talking about.

When I finished I wiped the bloody surface with some gauze. I wasn't wearing gloves. There was no such thing as Aids in the seventies.

He took my hand before I could drop the swab and I felt his fingers rubbing above my knuckle, acknowledging the bareness of my ring finger.

"So how about it, Mar-cie?" The way he drawls it out makes it *merci*. The only French I know apart from *oui*. Which is what I say.

"*What?*" he says, raising slivers of doubt. But youth and naivety win. And I answer yes to his please.

The news clip is going on and on. Now it's *live* — adding to the surrealism. Here I sit in my kitchen, watching my first lover, the father of my only child, the man whom I have not seen for over thirty years. *Live*. Except he is dead.

The paradox screams silent from the word beamed across the screen ad-infinitum.

I remember our first date - the beach at night, sand hills draped in silent purple, with *Imagine* playing on the radio.

I squeeze Damien's hand along with the words "...and no religion too."

"That's what I reckon, Marce. Religion is for bloody idiots! Opium of the masses."

Isn't it opiate? But I'm not sure.

Damien is never unsure. He has travelled abroad. And had amazing adventures. I sit entranced in the same way I listen when my dad recounts his escapades from World War Two. It is the only time my father gives me any attention. Attention that is positive. Now Damien fills the gap.

Osmosis like, his truth becomes my own until it is 'Opium' and how could I have been so stupid.

I ain't paying for no fucken kid I don't fucken want! You can't prove it's mine. If you keep it Marcie, you're on your own.

I am screaming and thumping the steel cabinet beside my hospital bed in time with the contractions. A nurse goes past then snatches back a step. She stands in the doorway and tells me to grow up. Childbirth is natural.

I think of that first night, of religion and opium and suddenly wish for both.

The only thing Damien didn't lie about is the fact he was French. He was born there. His father signed the birth certificate before he did a runner. One trait Damien had inherited.

His mother had skittered back to Australia, a reformed repatriate.

Finally the news is over. I switch off the TV and sit staring; the blankness of the screen reflects my mind.

Everything seems back to normal but nothing will be the same.

A brief knock to herald his appearance and my son enters the room. His cheery hello tells me he hasn't seen the news. I sit with

the secret behind my eyes merging with his handsome face. Matt is so like his father. But in appearance only. And soon he will look nothing like him. I shiver despite the summer evening.

"Someone walked over your grave, Mum?" he says, unaware of how close he has stepped to the truth.

I smile and shake my head, a brief half turn. I hear his footsteps in the sitting room and a cork popped from a bottle.

"Want a drink? Sorry it's been awhile since I've called. But I've got some good news. Something to celebrate."

Matt's voice quavers slightly but I doubt that his news will counterbalance mine.

He comes back to the kitchen and hands me a glass. We clink the silence from the room.

"I've found my father," he says, and continues without halting from my shock. "Remember that phone call Gran made when the woman sounded funny and hung up on her? Well, it turns out she was his wife. They were divorced last month and it was her way to get even. Giving me her husband's number."

My son gets up and hugs me, "It's okay, Mum, he didn't mind. I met him over the weekend. I was lucky. He is travelling to France today. He said he wanted to be back in the place he was born, wanted to die there. I told him I only wanted to meet him, nothing else, no strings." I see the stamp of completeness in his eyes.

I hold up my glass. "To Damien and Matt."

There is nothing left to say. They both already have their wish.

