

*Myth and memory in the “queen of dreams”*

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**Abstract:** Aristotle said that where the historian tells us what took place, the poet tells us how it came about. More recently, Gore Vidal defined ‘memoir’ as how one remembers one’s own life as distinct from an autobiography which is history, requiring research into dates and facts which must be double-checked.

Memory and Myth play an important role in memoir, allowing the writer to incorporate the real underpinnings of a story that has been lived through rather than simply the account of a sequence of actual events. It might also be argued that the patina of memory that coats the ‘memoir’, as distinct from autobiography, might indeed add its own dimension, taking the account of something very real into a more surreal space.

What I call my Rora stories published in Spanish under the title *Todas Esas Guerras-- All Those Wars* – have never appeared as a collection in English but have been published separately in literary journals. These stories, the very closest I think I will ever come to writing autobiography, grew out of a need to explore my own background – so fragmented in terms of geography, history and culture – at a time when, as a writer, I felt the desperate need to find out exactly who this multicultural person with her mixed baggage might be.

*The Queen of Dreams*, one of the stories in the collection, uses the memory of the child Rora as she attempts to understand the drama and magic of sexuality and love in a grown-up, intolerant world at war. While the story explores the child’s personal history, it also reflects the psyche of Australia at that particular moment.

**MYTH AND MEMORY IN “THE QUEEN OF DREAMS”**

Aristotle is probably a good place to start this particular exploration with his definition of the historian as someone who tells us what took place and of the poet/narrator telling how it might have come about. However, when we add the extra dimension of myth and memory, we can begin to place an account of something very real into a much more surreal space. There are various ways of defining myth but I like Jung's idea that myths reveal the archetypes of the collective unconscious.

What I want to explore here with you today is how myth and memory reveal something of the collective unconsciousness, the psyche if you like, of Australia at a particular moment, in my story "The Queen of Dreams"... from *All Those Wars...* a collection of stories set in North Queensland where in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a large number of Southern Europeans, including many Italians, had settled to work and subsequently to own the big sugar plantations in the area. By 1940, around 40% of the Italian community in Australia were naturalized and several thousand more had been born in Australia. We must remember, of course, that there was no separate Australian citizenship until 1949, so that all Australians held British citizenship under the Commonwealth. In this same period, Mussolini insisted that Italian emigrants, naturalized or not, were to remain Italian.

When in July 1940, Italy entered the war on the side of Germany, Italians in Australia were declared "enemy aliens". Some 4,700 were interned and their assets confiscated. As Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien points out in her book *Enemy Aliens: the internment of Italians in Australia during the Second World War*, the social and legal position of Italian immigrants in Australia during the war was a fairly logical outcome of Australian immigration and settlement policies and practice in the preceding years.

As Europeans, Italians had easy entry into Australia although it wasn't their preferred destination. Most of them would have chosen to go to the United States. However, when immigration restrictions to the U.S. were imposed at the beginning of the 1920's, the Italian population in Australia began to increase considerably. The Italians settled well in Australia and many were attracted by opportunities in the sugar industry in North Queensland. Seasonal work harvesting sugarcane paid good money and before long many of the farms in the area were owned by Italians. This caused concern among some Australians who feared that Italians would dominate the sugar industry, both as cane cutters and farm owners.

Despite the opportunities, however, for individuals, the period between the two wars was rife with political and industrial unrest and opposition to Italian cane cutters increased. Moreover, most Italians in the sugar districts were restricted by what was known as British Preference, where 75% of jobs were reserved for British workers. As naturalization didn't qualify you as British this posed a real restriction for Italians. From time to time Italian-born farm owners and workers would campaign for their rights and this would later be used as evidence against them of anti-British activity.

When Australia entered the Second World War in 1939, the government enacted a National Security Act which gave it extraordinary wartime powers. The reason I feel it important to know and remember exactly what this meant is because historically the world seems to enter periods when an irrational paranoia takes hold that makes suspect any citizen easily identified as a foreigner. Today, where a similar paranoia has become rampant in our multicultural world, I feel it imperative that we learn from the mistakes that have been made and use them to guide us.

Under the National Security Regulations in Australia immigrants were classed as enemy aliens if they had not been naturalized. However, there was a Regulation 28 which made it possible to consider Naturalized British Subjects of Enemy Origin as Enemy

Aliens, while Regulation 26 provided the power to intern citizens whether they were naturalized British subjects or Australian-born. All of these people of "Enemy Origin" could be restricted on where they lived, where they travelled or worked, on their owning cameras, wirelasses, motorcars and carrier pigeons. It was an offence to speak other than English on the telephone and freedom of assembly was denied.

In all, Australia interned 4,721 people of Italian origin, some of whom were naturalized British citizens and some Australian-born. The majority were from North Queensland. While it might be argued that these were reasonable security risks, Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien cites documented evidence not publicly stated that shows how internment was considered a method of increasing public morale in support of the war effort by finding an enemy within.

For anyone wanting to know more details of the Italians considered enemy aliens during the war, I recommend highly O'Brien's book published by Connor Court in 2005. However, here my interest is rather to show how memory can work to uncover Jung's idea as myth displaying archetypes of the collective unconscious. And not only political and social archetypes, but those that dominate a country's psyche in terms of sexuality as well.

*The Queen of Dreams*, one of what I call my Rora stories from the collection *All Those Wars*, published in Spanish and Catalan as *Todas Esas Guerras* and *Totes Aquelles Guerres*, has never appeared as a book in English but the stories have been published separately in literary journals. These stories, the very closest I believe I will ever come to writing an autobiography, grew out of a need to explore my own background – so fragmented in terms of geography, history and culture – at a time when, as a writer, I felt the desperate need to find out exactly who this multicultural person with her mixed baggage might be. The stories use the memory of the child Rora as she attempts to understand the drama and magic of sexuality and love in a grown-up, intolerant world at war.

## THE QUEEN OF DREAMS

Down toward the Railway Station was the spaghetti factory. Rinaldo Benedetti reckoned well when he set up his Bella Ciao Pasta Proprietary Limited. Now macaroni and spaghetti were no longer confined to puny cellophane packages. An infinite variety of shells and tubes tumbled out unhampered into huge vats marked with extraordinary names: gnocchi, tagliatelli, manicotti, grandini, linguini, vermicelli. Gradually, even people who had never got beyond an insipid plate of macaroni and cheese bought Rinaldo's excellent pasta. Even Mrs. Raleigh Donoghue's cook had been seen buying broad lasagna strips while Rinaldo beamed at her and urged her to try the grated parmigiano.

"It's made from buffalo milk. Special Italian buffalo. It'll put some da-da-da-da into old Donoghue's balls. Tell the Missus that," Rinaldo laughed delightedly using both hands to demonstrate the power he was claiming for the stiff white slivers of grated cheese.

The woman's pale face flamed a violent pink and her hand trembled as she held it out for her change. Raleigh Donoghue was the manager of the Commonwealth Bank. Having his cook in the shop was like putting a royal seal on each package. Everyone

agreed that whatever else you could say about them, the Italians really knew how to make pasta.

Alongside the factory, Famagusta –Rinaldo Benedetti's eldest daughter– set up her hairdressing salon. The tendency among the Italians in the town to stick together was matched by the bitter rivalry of the various factions among them, be they of the same family or just people from the same village. Fama's Beauty Salon did sporadic business for a couple of weeks and then catered almost exclusively to the Benedetti family. Between sisters-in-law and cousins there were enough heads to keep Fama busy. But Rinaldo's business sense was offended.

The Famagusta Beauty Salon closed down and the sign outside was replaced by a brand new one painted in the same red paint as had been used on the Bella Ciao awning next door. Famagusta's Boarding House had room for ten guests. Almost immediately, the beds were filled and Rinaldo's pride satisfied. He turned his attention back to his spaghetti factory and the newly-painted Boarding House sign was neglected to peel in the scorching tropic sun.

Most of the boarders were drifters and canecutters from the south who stayed on in town drinking away the little hoard they had made during the short cutting season. Although there were a few regulars as well.

The Rev. Brandon Spicer made his home at Fama's. He always called Rev. though no one was certain what church he belonged to or even what religion he was affiliated with. He just appeared in town one day with his paints, an easel and an old cardboard suitcase. The Rev. kept to himself a lot of the time, disappearing for weeks at a time then arriving back, his old Studebaker loaded with canvases which, according to Fama, were nothing at all like the coast he said he had been painting. She claimed there were dozens of them stacked up along the wall in his room. If the Rev. kept it up, she said, there would be no room in there for the bed. And as Fama was the only person who ever got into the Rev.'s bedroom, people had to take her word for it.

Henry Wong, who had worked for years as cook at the Golden Horseshoe Hotel until the day he just up and left without any explanation, got a room at Fama's. Henry spent all his time locked in his room until six-thirty in the afternoon. Then he would put on his one grey suit with a tie, stick a paper carnation in his buttonhole and stroll over to the Horseshoe's dining room where he would proceed to eat and drink everything on the menu, complaining when the steak was not tender or the roastbeef not sufficiently rare. After dessert, a couple of brandies and a cigar or two which Henry would make last until the diningroom staff were already upturning the chairs on top of the tables to swab down the floors, he would stroll back to his room at the boarding house and lock himself in his room until six o'clock the following afternoon.

For a while people speculated on how long he would be able to keep it up and what he did all by himself in his room. But after a few weeks Henry's idiosyncrasies simply took up their own space in the life of the town and no one thought another thing about him. Like many tropical towns, this one, too, attracted misfits from all over the world. The bizarre underpinnings of their lives were what held the fabric of the town together.

Then Elvala and Nando arrived. And they, too, ended up at Famagusta's Boarding House. The first Rora knew they were in town was when she went on her bicycle one afternoon down where the railway bridge crossed the old creek. She liked to go down there and sit on the side of the bank waiting until a trolley came charging overhead across the high narrow tracks. The men working up the line used the trolleys to come back to town. They were nothing more than a platform on wheels with a long

handle that had to be pumped to move it along. As the small grooved metal wheels spun over the iron railway lines they made a whirring sound that echoed down into the creekbed below like the wail of a banshee. The regular grunt of the trolley handle pumping back and forth was the human element that put fear into the unreal eerie echoing song. Rora would sit among the damp clumps of grass and ferns that rolled like green waves down to the miserable trickle of creek water and wait, her heart in her mouth, until she could see the trolley, tiny and shrill, suspended on the tracks above her. Halfway across the steep gorge the regular screech of its wheels would turn into echoing screams that trembled up and down her spine with fear and excitement. It only lasted a moment; once the trolley was over the other side, the sound it made was regular and predictable again.

That particular afternoon no trolley came screaming through the air above the narrow gully. Rora sat and waited until her dress was wet through behind. To add to her frustration she got a flat tire and had to walk home wheeling the limping bicycle beside her.

She turned into the main street where Fama's Boarding House stood on the corner. Rinaldo Benedetti and his brothers had built the place themselves. It was an attractive unpainted building left to weather with narrow slats of wood covering the open area under the house and stretching right up to the little porch above the open staircase.

As Rora passed she could not help but notice the two people leaning on the porch railing as if they were in a theatre and about to perform a scene. The woman seemed all bones. Her red hair was tied back with an enormous green chiffon scarf. Her dress looked like chiffon, too. And around her neck she was wearing a little furpiece with a flat head and beady eyes that glistened in the sun. It was a scorchingly hot day but neither the long narrow green sleeves nor the furpiece appeared uncomfortable nor out of place. Rora thought she had never seen anyone so beautiful in her whole life. Beside her, with an arm around her waist, was a small thin man with thick brown hair plastered down on his forehead. He wore a brown three-piece suit and a narrow moustache under his straight thin nose.

Later Rora could never remember how it was that they started to talk to her. Or she to them. It might simply have been because she stopped in her tracks, abruptly silencing the dull ugly noise the front wheel rim of her bike made as it grated beside her.

"You're a melancholy child."

The woman's voice was deep and husky. If Rora had not been able to see her standing there looking fragile in her green chiffon dress she might have thought it was the man speaking.

Rora did not answer immediately. Was "melancholy" something to be proud of?

The woman threw back her head and laughed. It was a deep happy sound so Rora laughed too. Although it was a bit the way she used to laugh at Sawdy's Revue when she didn't understand the jokes. More or less to be polite. And also so they would not think she was dumb.

There were so many things to remember from that first meeting. Where had they come from? What did they do? Why were they there? They had travelled the world over, they said, and had lived for so long out of a trunk they had forgotten what it meant to have a home.

"We're circus folk," the man explained. And there was a respect in his tone that gave the high, light voice great dignity.

He introduced himself as Nando –the Strongest Man in the World. And the slight figure in the dark brown suit gave a little bow as he said it, as if he was receiving the applause of the whole town down below.

"Then I know who you are?" Rora said breathlessly to the woman.

The red painted lips looked delighted.

"You're the beautiful lady that comes out to bow with him and hold all his things and..."

Elvala's laughter cascaded out over the balcony as she shook her red hair back and fro.

It was Nando who explained proudly that Elvala was the Queen of Dreams.

There was so much to talk about. Rora asked them if they had ever come across Pinhead the dwarf or Amelita the Fat Lady but they never had. Right at that moment they themselves were on vacation. They had just picked the town out of a hat, Nando explained. Or at least Elvala had, he said. Picking dreams out of a hat was her specialty. As he said it he reached up and planted a gentle kiss on Elvala's white neck, and Elvala laughed a light frothy laugh that had nothing at all to do with the sultry afternoon in the little tropic town, nor with the peeling paint on Fama's Boarding House sign, nor the incessant chug-chug of the machinery at the Bella Ciao spaghetti factory next door.

After that day, Rora passed by the boarding house at more or less the same time every afternoon. And Elvala and Nando would always be standing on the stoop of the tall front stairs as if they were waiting for her. They never came down and Rora certainly never went up. Her mother would have killed her if she had. But the very distance they had to communicate across added another dimension to their conversations.

"They must be terribly famous," Rora told the family dinner table. "They've been everywhere. Paris. Rome. I think they've even been to Istanbul!" She wasn't sure where Istanbul was but it sounded like a place that would definitively identify someone as famous.

"What do you say their names are?" her mother asked nervously as if she were wondering what kind of influence Istanbul might have on a person.

"He's Nando, the Strong Man. And she's Elvala, the Queen of Dreams."

Her grandfather snorted at his end of the table. And her uncle hooted with delight.

"Elvala! That's a racehorse's name!"

It was hard to get the family to take her new friends seriously and so Rora, as much as she could, kept them to herself. But it made her mother uncomfortable to know the girl was spending so much time standing talking on the main street of the town to two strangers no one knew anything about. Furthermore, the two newcomers did not seem to have any place of their own at all. Nowhere they could fit in. Or be catalogued.

"They've got scrapbooks and newspaper clippings and all sorts of things they're going to show me." Rora said it by way of proof.

Another grunt from her grandfather's end of the table.

"Don't you ever take it into your head to go inside Famagusta Benedetti's place," her mother threatened the girl. "Not to see anything!"

"But..."

The snort this time from her grandfather was directed at his daughter, Rora's mother, as if she had no idea how a child ought to be brought up. So what could you expect?

"But Elvala said..."

"Elvala's a racehorse's name," her uncle hooted again.

"She's the Queen of Dreams, you can tell she is. You can tell she's different. She can make the most extraordinary things happen, just by wanting them to. Nando told me."

This time, the grunts, the taunts, the squealing affirmations were like an orchestra tuning up around the dinner table.

Rora fought back tears and hardly ate anything at all. She wanted to tell them all she felt melancholy. She knew what it meant now, she had looked it up in the dictionary. But hers was a family that hardly admitted melancholy. More than ever, she felt that only Nando and Elvala, especially Elvala, understood her at all.

Later though, when she and Angelina were doing the dishes, her grandmother surprised her by suggesting:

"Why don't you ask those friends of yours to tea on Sunday afternoon. You and I will be here alone and I'd like to meet them."

Nando and Elvala said they would be delighted to come and for the next five days Rora did little but plan the tea party. Right down to the very last detail. She even convinced her grandmother to serve tea in the sitting-room.

The sitting-room was a cramped, dim room off the hallway opposite her grandparent's bedroom. It seldom received the kind of formal visitors its darkness warranted. The pianola was in there, black and shiny, piled high with music rolls – "La Cucuracha" and "Amapola" getting equal space with "The Student Prince" and Chopin's "Minute Waltz". To the right of the piano was Angelina's curio collection: teasetts and complete little kitchens, minuscule people in national costume, delicate crystal animals and impeccably crafted farm implements, sets of dominoes and clocks and swords and pistols and musical instruments. And not one of them more than two inches high! To Rora, the curios were like a perfect little world her grandmother had furnished for herself. It was small enough to carry around with her so she would never have to leave any one part of it behind the way she already had left behind her several countries, friends, her father and three brothers. Two great-grandparents looked imperiously down from the wall. Rora was never certain how they came to be in the family. She hated the sternness in the faces that did not appear to be attached to anything but seemed to float disembodied in the middle of the oval wooden frames.

Nando and Elvala were to come at five. But already at eleven Rora was removing the heavy green brocade cloth from the small round table in the middle of the room. Then for at least an hour the girl kept trying one after the other of the freshly starched embroidered tablecloths in the bottom drawer of the polished wardrobe in her grandmother's bedroom that served as a linen closet. Some aesthetic sense that no one not even Rora herself understood begged to be appeased. But one would hang too short, another have too narrow a crocheted border or be the teeniest bit worn right in the middle of the table to satisfy her. Finally, she settled on a white linen cloth embroidered with enormous sprigs of flowers in each of the four corners.

The little table positively glowed in the middle of the dim room. Then out of the blue felt pockets in the polished wooden box that was kept on top of the curio cabinet the girl singled out one pretty silver teaspoon after another, and graceful dessert forks and bone-handled knives – not one of them ever used except on the most celebratory

occasions. Although their guests were coming at tea-time, Rora convinced her grandmother to serve coffee. It seemed somehow more in keeping with the exotic travelling all over the world that Nando and Elvala had done.

Angel cakes, their high pointed middles cut off and placed on a mound of soft white cream; a loaf of plum cake marbled with fruit and nuts; warm biscuits; even tiny sandwiches, their crusts cut off and filled with anchovy paste! Angelina showed Rora how to fold the napkins like crowns. It would be a perfectly wonderful tea party.

By three o'clock Rora had put on her new red dress with matching socks and could not stop herself from going in to the sitting room, again and again, to make sure everything was ready. The room more than met the challenge of the occasion. The musty darkness had changed miraculously into a cool shade around the glowing round table while between the doors where the room opened out to the wide verandah the white crocheted curtains billowed entirely inwards like a series of soft sighs.

At exactly ten past five Rora saw them come past the yellow sign outside Yee Lee's grocery store next door. There, shimmering in the heat of a flaming sun that pulsated relentlessly even though it was already growing low in the sky, sashayed Elvala in a filmy white dress. She wore spindly high white pumps and over her red hair she had thrown a triangle of white lace. Beside her strode Nando in his dark brown three-piece suit, his tan and white shoes stepping out smartly under the cuffs on his pants.

Arm in arm, they turned up through the wooden gate between the pink and red of the hibiscus bushes along the front fence and walked slowly up the long staircase to the wide verandah where Rora and her grandmother stood waiting to greet them.

The girl tugged at Angelina's arm, her eyes wide with excitement and wonder as she watched the tall extravagant white figure get closer with each step.

"She looks exactly like a bride!" she whispered.

Her grandmother did not answer and when Rora looked up at her face Angelina's eyes were narrowed slightly as she chewed at her lip exactly as she did when she was trying to work out what card to play at poker.

"I think we're a teeny bit late. But then it isn't exactly polite to come right on time, is it?" Elvala's deep musical voice ended in a tinkling laugh as she and Nando reached the top step.

When Rora introduced them to her grandmother, Elvala almost curtsied and Nando drew his heels together and bowed low from the waist.

"Come on now," Angelina said quickly in a no-nonsense voice and taking hold of Elvala's arm steered her through the front door and into the dim little sittingroom.

They all sat down on the high-backed wooden chairs that Rora had spent a good half-hour dusting. The girl wanted to dash right out to the kitchen to get the tray with the coffee but Angelina patted her arm as if to slow her down.

"We can chat for a bit before we serve the coffee!"

"Oh, how divine! You're going to serve coffee. I'm a demon for it but here almost everyone drinks tea. I'll never get used to it!" Elvala pushed back a curl of her red hair under the white lace with her strong long fingers. "Nando says that's probably why I'm so restless at nights. All that caffeine!" And she threw back her head and a little peal of laughter rippled out of her.

But nobody else laughed. Not even Nando.

Elvala's laughter this time sounded to Rora like something breaking. When it died away it seemed as if the whole room was full of tiny broken pieces of something precious.

"Perhaps that coffee would be a good idea after all," Angelina suggested to Rora. The girl raced out of the room delighted to have something to do.

"Rora tells me you've done a lot of travelling." Angelina said it smoothing her skirt over her knees.

"All over the world we've been. Well, most places anyway," answered Nando. "We're circus folk, you see."

"And where are you working now?"

"Well, right now we're kind of between shows, you might say."

Rora stood still in the middle of the kitchen listening to their voices. She was terribly afraid something else was going to break in the room.

"This is the first time we've been invited to someone's home in such a long time."

From the kitchen Rora could hear the pleasure in Nando's voice. It seemed to make things safer in the sitting-room. She picked up a pot-holder to take hold of the hot coffee pot.

"Do you know what it's like to have lived in so many countries?" he told her. "You feel as if you belong nowhere?"

Nando gave a high, nervous little laugh and Rora heard her grandmother say something although she could not make out what it was.

"I felt like that for years before I met Nando. As if there was no place at all for me. Only when Nando came along was I able to be my true self again."

Elvala's voice sounded so strange that for a moment Rora thought somebody else had come in and was talking. The girl stood still, the coffee pot in her hand, straining to hear.

The deep husky voice became confidential. "As a woman, you'll understand."

Although Rora was not in the room she could imagine Elvala leaning over toward Angelina and maybe even reaching out and touching her arm.

"When I met Nando he made me feel like a flower. Have you ever been made love to so you feel like a flower?"

The silence that followed Elvala's comment was much louder than any sound anyone might have made. By the time Rora came in with the coffee the three grown-ups were sitting stiffly in their seats in the middle of the awful absence of words hardly looking at each other.

Nando and Elvala had not brought their press clippings and there did not seem a thing to talk about. They all sat there and drank their coffee and no one ate anything at all.

When the guests left Rora went straight to her room leaving Angelina to clear the table on her own. Aware the visit had not been a success, the girl was bitterly disappointed and determined to avoid her grandmother at all cost. She had a terrible feeling that if Angelina spoke she might say something Rora would never be able to forget.

However, that night when her grandfather came home from work he brought such shocking news that nobody even thought of discussing anything else. Rora hardly listened to them. And when she did she could scarcely understand a word they were saying. It was all about "enemies" and "aliens" and "possible sabotage".

She left the table as soon as she could and went out and sat on the front steps to count the stars. But it was impossible to keep a proper tally: there were far too many glitters in the dark above her and Rora kept forgetting exactly where she had started counting. She gave up finally and went into the kitchen where Angelina was doing the

dishes. When Rora saw the hot tears sliding down her grandmother's cheeks and into the soapy water, she grabbed a tea-towel and began drying.

However, there was no room in Rora for concern about anyone else's sorrows, she was too full of her own. Without understanding why, she felt that by treating Elvala and Nando as if they were just ordinary people she had somehow betrayed them.

Rora maintained her distance from Angelina during the next few days and kept away from Famagusta's Boarding House as well. However, by Friday she could no longer bear the uncertainty. She took her bike and walked back and forth for almost an hour in front of the tall wooden house. But no one appeared on the landing at the top of the steps. The house appeared quite empty.

That weekend Angelina told Rora they were going to visit friends. Rora was pleased to be going out although she feigned indifference. She had hardly spoken to Angelina since Elvala and Nando's visit and she had no intention of acting interested in anything her grandmother might do. Angelina was unusually quiet, too. She baked all morning, rolling out the dough for empanadas filling them with ham and green peppers. After they were taken out of the oven and had cooled, they were wrapped in waxed paper and packed in blue biscuit tins with pictures of old-fashioned ladies on them.

Rora and her grandmother each carried a tin and Angelina put up her black umbrella to shade them from the sun. They walked all the way past Famagusta's and the spaghetti factory, past the railway station and the hill beyond it. When they got to the showgrounds they turned to go in through the wide gates. Rora was baffled. They only ever went to the showgrounds for the horse races on Saturdays or in August when the Annual Show took over the big paddock with sideshows and local exhibitions. But it was October and there were no horse races all month.

Two soldiers with guns stood outside the closed gates. Angelina showed them a piece of paper and the wooden gates were opened to allow them through. Though not before the blue biscuit tins had been given a thorough inspection.

Inside the grounds, the frenetic activity made Rora wonder for a moment if there might not be a special show being put on for private guests; trucks and people in uniform appeared to have taken possession of the entire area. The girl kept glancing at her grandmother hoping for some explanation but Angelina did not give the impression she was there to enjoy herself. Her grim face looked straight ahead as she walked toward the area where the cattle show was always held.

As they got closer Rora could see people inside the enclosure where barbed wire had been strung against the wooden slats. On the other side, men and women and children stood looking through it at them.

Dragging Rora by the hand, Angelina walked the length of the fence asking if anyone knew where the Badieris were. Mr. Badieri worked with Rora's grandfather at the mill. Monica was in Rora's class at school.

"What are they doing here?" Rora wanted to know.

Before Angelina had time to answer, there was a yell from inside and Mariella Badieri came running to the fence screaming and crying as she clutched at Angelina through the barbed wire.

"Tell them to let us go. We haven't done anything wrong, you know that. Tell them to let us go home."

Angelina talked soothingly to the distraught woman but there seemed no way to stem the flow of tears from the wide dark eyes. And two-year-old Luigi, in his mother's arms, seemed determined to cry as long as she kept it up.

Sandro Badieri stood back beside the cattle sheds listening to his wife and Angelina. He made no attempt to come over and speak to them but hung his head and peered at the ground. Rora thought he looked ashamed. She wondered what he had done. Monica stood beside her father staring across the fence at Rora and her grandmother without smiling. Inexplicably, Rora began to feel ashamed herself.

Before visiting hours were over, Angelina handed Mariella her biscuit tin. The pretty old-fashioned ladies on the outside of the tin looked out of place in the cattle enclosure. Rora was on the point of handing over her tin, too, when her grandmother told her quietly to hold on to it.

"You've got other friends here. Perhaps you should give it to them." And with her head Angelina motioned to where two men sat in the shade of a corrugated iron lean-to.

Rora recognized Nando immediately. He had his jacket and waistcoat off, but he was still wearing the striped pants from his brown suit. He had no tie on and the white shirt under his suspenders looked none too clean.

"Nando," she cried out happily. "What are you doing here? Where's Elvala?"

The man looked surprised to find someone calling him and even more so when he saw it was Rora there with her grandmother. He seemed undecided what to do for a moment and whispered something to his friend sitting on the ground beside him. When he came over to the fence Angelina did most of the talking.

"I didn't realize you were Italians, too. It's shocking what they're doing to you. What have they told you?"

"Hardly anything," Nando told her. Just that all Italian nationals are considered enemy aliens. There are rumours we're all going to be sent back to Italy. But we don't want to go. We've lived so long here now. Elvala was even born here."

"Is there anything we can do to help? Anyone you want us to write to or inform about your situation?" Angelina was eternally practical.

But Nando shook his head.

"It's Elvala I'm worried about." He looked back over his shoulder at the figure sitting on the ground in the shade. "She – she's not built for this kind of roughness. And they won't let her --" He looked back at Angelina and then quickly down at Rora. "It's very difficult for her."

His thin voice petered out and Rora felt he was going to cry.

"I understand," Angelina told him gently. "This is certainly no place for a lady."

Nando clutched her hand gratefully through the barbed wire.

"Give Nando your empanadas, Rora. Maybe they'll help Elvala to feel better."

Rora handed over the tin. She was dying to ask where Elvala was but Nando seemed anxious to get back to the man sitting in the shade beside the wall. He was a very tall man, thin and bony, with short blonde hair. He sat with his back to them and did not turn round, not even when Nando went back and gave him the blue tin with the old fashioned ladies on it.

"But they're for ---" Rora began to call out. Angelina took her hand and pulled her away.

"Come along now, that's enough for one day. Let's go home."

Rora and Angelina did not talk on the way home either, they just went straight through the big gates, past the armed guards and down on to the long main street to the big house with the gardens all around. Rora kept thinking of the tall thin man and Nando's arm around him as he gave him the pretty blue tin. It was like a riddle she felt she knew the answer to but could not understand.

Angelina made no attempt to explain until they were right inside the house. Then she sat down on a chair and pulled Rora onto her knee. For a few minutes she held the girl very close.

"It's war, Rora. It's always ugly and it reduces people to their barest selves. Can you understand that?"

Rora was not at all sure that she did.

They did not go back to the showgrounds until the following year when the Annual Show was on. Everyone said it was nothing like a normal Show; so many of the boys from the town were overseas and at least half the exhibits seemed to have something to do with the war effort, although there were the usual ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds and sideshows with freaks and fortune-tellers.

Around the cattle enclosure the barbed wire had all been taken down. There were no people inside anymore. Now only bulls and docile cows with numbers around their necks stood inside the pens waiting to be judged.

Novelist, playwright, poet Gloria Montero grew up in a family of Spanish immigrants in Australia's North Queensland. After studies in theatre and music, she began to work in radio and theatre, then moved to Canada where she continued her career as actress, singer, writer, broadcaster, TV interviewer, scriptwriter and producer of radio and film documentaries. At the end of the dictatorship, she made Barcelona her home