

**Are they funny,
are they dead?**

Marjorie Ann Watts

for Harold

All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Audio recordings of the stories 'No Message' and 'A Vivid Imagination' are available from Spoken Ink (www.spokenink.co.uk).

First published in 2010
by CB editions
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL
www.cbEditions.com

All rights reserved

© Marjorie Ann Watts, 2010

The right of Marjorie Ann Watts to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

Printed in England by ImprintDigital, Exeter EX5 5HY

ISBN 978-0-9561073-4-3

Contents

Mrs Calder and the Hyena	1
No Message	15
Ships that Pass in the Night	25
Are They Funny, Are They Dead?	39
How Things Turn Out	53
A Fine Day	67
Religious Studies	83
Birthdays	101
A Vivid Imagination	117
Christmas Eve	137
Galactic Mayhem	155
Black Madonna	167

Mrs Calder and the Hyena

‘IS THAT TRUE, MOTHER? Or have you made it up?’ Elinor drummed her fingers on the table as if she could hardly bear to remain seated a moment longer and stared round the littered kitchen. Bottles, ash spilt along the window sill, and what was that brown substance in the appalling saucepan in the sink, the dish on the draining board? The room stank. She turned again to her mother.

‘He’s just a tramp, isn’t he?’

‘Tom? He’s educated,’ Mrs Calder said.

‘Oh?’

‘We have long conversations,’ her mother said. ‘In French. More coffee?’

She took out her cigarettes. How have I come to have a daughter like Elinor, she thought; although when she remembered darling Rupert’s insistence all their married life that facts are facts, no monkeying about, perhaps Elinor was more explicable. Mrs Calder smiled. Rupert had had so many other qualities.

‘A tramp,’ Elinor said again, her face like a block of wood.

‘Polish,’ her mother replied mildly. ‘A dispossessed child. After the camps, he started walking and he’s never stopped.’

Not much younger than me and he knows nothing else. You couldn't expect him to live in a hostel now.'

'No one would have him,' Elinor said. 'Drunk, filthy. Where does he sleep?' Mrs Calder did not reply and Elinor added, 'Catholic, I suppose. Hasn't he got a family?'

'Well, I'm a Catholic –' Mrs Calder began.

'Oh Mother, you're not! How can you say that?'

'He sleeps in the churchyard. In the derelict bit at the top.'

Mrs Calder picked up their coffee cups. Why does she come, she thought, carrying the tray over to the draining board. She wondered if Elinor would notice if she took out the half glass of gin she had behind the parsley in the fridge. It's a mistake, letting her have a key to my flat, she thought, opening the fridge door, I'll have to get it back.

'That coffee has made me thirsty,' she said. 'Do stay, dear, but I have to leave you shortly.'

'Where are you going?'

'My Californian admirer –'

'Mother! Don't you think it's, well, dangerous? Just going off for the afternoon with someone you have only met on the telephone? You hardly know him . . . I mean, who is he? Do you know anything about him?' Elinor sounded aggrieved.

'He's a Calder,' her mother said. 'Wants to trace any members of his family over here. He knew your father, slightly . . . through the university. He is an academic too.'

'Well, I hope you are not going on the Underground,' Elinor said, picking up her keys. 'Do you want a lift?'

'It's the opposite direction.' Mrs Calder glanced behind her and stood for a moment gazing towards the door, the

hall beyond. 'Did I tell you I saw a hyena on the common yesterday? It growled at me.'

Elinor stared at her mother.

'A *hyena*?' She still was never sure what was serious, what was a joke. 'What on earth do you mean?'

'Always a little on the edge of my vision, but definitely getting closer.'

'What?'

'Of course we are near the zoo up here, and there's all this rubbish everywhere,' Mrs Calder murmured as if to herself. 'I heard it laughing – which makes a nice change.'

She looked directly at her daughter, her eyes gleaming behind her spectacles.

'Actually, hyenas *can* be dangerous,' she said after a pause, 'should one be unprepared.'

Driving home, Elinor considered the problem of her mother. She wasn't well; indeed, she looked obviously ill, had for some time – although she refused to discuss it. She's so irredeemably barmy, *potty*, Elinor thought; always had been. Brief but humiliating scenes from childhood crowded into her mind; her mother, the looks people gave each other; the over-active imagination, fabulation, eccentricity – how had she got away with it? Charm, thought Elinor bitterly. But there was a different dimension now. Bob said it was senility, but then he had never got on with his mother-in-law.

She is so, so . . . what was it? Unreliable, irresponsible – *mad*, thought Elinor, hooting at the red Audi in front: some idiot who didn't know right from left. Her mother

drank, certainly more than was good for her, neglected herself. She wondered if she had kept the last appointment at the hospital, what it would be like when she was gone, dead, finally extinguished? For a moment, the neat suburban house waiting twenty miles out of the city, lovely lawns perfectly in place, shining windows, brick path up to the front door clean and swept (Bob liked things well done, was a fanatic about his garden) – for a moment the whole image faded, became paper thin, void.

‘It’s my home, I love it. It’s what I want,’ she said aloud to the passing traffic. Resentment flared comfortingly. She’s mad; she’ll say anything, *anything!* All these ghastly fabrications, you never knew where you stood. The Californian, for example. Which was worse? – that her mother had invented him or, at over seventy, had actually gone to bed with a total stranger in the middle of the afternoon at the Savoy Hotel, as she boasted to everyone? As for that awful game in the Underground – pathetic, obscene. She and Bob had discussed it at length with various social worker friends and decided that some old people got like this. Always harder for the carers anyway, muttered Elinor savagely, hooting again at the man in the Audi, right-hand indicator still flashing meaninglessly. At least Mother doesn’t drive, she thought, overtaking him at last in a satisfying surge of speed as she reached the dual carriageway. What a relief to get going and think about something else; although she would have to get in touch with the hospital again. Bloody hyenas!

*

Mrs Calder retrieved the tumbler from behind the parsley, added more gin and seated herself on the stool by the kitchen window.

Most of the flat was dark, inward facing, but from her kitchen and at the height she was, she looked straight out into the western sky and, if she wanted, halfway across London. At night, low on the horizon over to the left, the yellow lights of Heathrow winked and glowed in interlocking chains of topaz. In the day, large aeroplanes made their way sedately across her line of vision, very often close enough for her to see the particular markings: the red leaf of Canada, white cross of Switzerland. Glass in hand, Mrs Calder would sit by the window imagining the passengers; the myriad hopes, fears, jealousies, impending tragedies, joys, travelling slowly through the air towards their various consummations.

Recently she had begun to watch the sky itself more closely. About a month ago, she could have sworn to having caught sight of some indistinct figures sitting on a large cumulus cloud drifting ponderously but at speed in a south-westerly direction. One of them had looked very much like Rupert – although he wasn’t exactly a cloud man, as she had said to herself at the time. She had stopped watching the airliners in the hope of seeing this phenomenon again. Naturally she hadn’t mentioned anything to Elinor.

Mrs Calder stood her glass in the sink. A pity Elinor hadn’t any children; or perhaps it was a good thing? Preferable for the children, she thought, as she let herself out of the flat.

Down in the street it was very warm; a perfect June day.

Like we used to have, Rupert and I, she thought as she walked between the lines of parked cars – a tall, imposing, rather untidy figure in tennis shoes and a creased floral dress, the hem of which was beginning to unravel. Other pedestrians hurried past her somewhat apprehensively, aware perhaps of the intense scrutiny that one and all were subject to.

‘You are not locking those gates, are you?’ She had reached the entrance to the parish churchyard, all shadows and dappled sunlight. ‘My husband is buried in there . . .’

It was not the vicar, whom she knew by sight, but some plump, mustachioed, too-well-dressed young man who turned abruptly at the sound of her voice. She waited, swinging her bag.

‘Tramps!’ he said, fiddling with a chain and padlock. ‘Not to mention kids. And the litter!’

‘I imagine Golgotha must have been knee-deep in litter,’ Mrs Calder said.

The young man eyed her, frowning. ‘We are having problems.’

‘I thought problems were His speciality? Although’ – she inclined her head towards the newly painted gleaming church beyond the trees and railings – ‘I am not convinced that He, or She, would feel much at home in there, are you?’

‘We’ve had dogs in here too,’ the young man said.

‘What makes you think it’s dogs?’ She stood watching him struggle with the padlock, an odd speculative smile lighting up her face.

‘How old are you?’ she asked suddenly. He was not to

know of course, but in her mind’s eye she had removed the impeccable suit he wore and replaced it with a leopard-skin leotard: with his moustache, dark hair parted in the middle, he made a good, if plump, Victorian high-wire acrobat. Oh, wait! – she had forgotten the black polished shoes. She removed these too, then changed her mind; replaced the shoes, socks, took away the leotard and stood gazing at him, her grey spiky hair lit up and made almost gold by a shaft of light striking through the dense shadow of the cedars under which they stood.

‘I’m not locking these gates,’ the young man said with irritation. ‘Just trying out the key. Your handbag is open, you know.’

Elinor was right about one thing, thought Mrs Calder, walking away from the churchyard towards the Avenue. It was a game; but a good one – and quite a challenge to play. Anywhere would do, but the Underground was certainly one of the best places; people tended to stay put, you could see them, get a good view. Buses were more problematical.

A row of naked people sitting opposite one in the Tube was entertaining; but that wasn’t the object of the game, as she had sometimes tried to explain.

‘But Mother! – it’s, well . . . *kinky*, it really is.’ Elinor had sounded quite shocked.

‘Well, they don’t know,’ Mrs Calder had said. ‘Very discreet, really.’

‘Surely there are more interesting things to – to think about?’ responded Elinor primly. ‘Why don’t you read, if you must go on the Underground?’

It was a different doctor today. He sat at a desk, white coat on the back of his chair in the centre of a large bright room – windowless, Mrs Calder noticed – talking to a double semicircle of students. She disliked him immediately.

‘. . . a lady of seventy-six . . . probable carcinoma of the kidney and a grip on reality which, to say the least – ’ He broke off, gesturing vaguely at a chair set at an angle in front of him as Mrs Calder walked in with the nurse.

‘Sit down, Mrs, Mrs . . . How are you today?’

‘Good afternoon,’ Mrs Calder said to the room in general, fishing for the packet of cigarettes in her bag.

‘This is a non-smoking hospital,’ the consultant said, not meeting her eye. Mrs Calder glanced at him again as she sat down. A tall, grey-haired man in a crisp blue-and-white shirt, immaculate tie, smiling at her without humour. Automatically she removed his shirt.

‘We have had the results of your scan,’ he said, picking up some papers. ‘A bit inconclusive. We would like you to come in for a few tests. Do you live alone?’

Mrs Calder gazed at him. A hairy chest, she thought. How surprising. She hung a medallion on it. Pity she couldn’t see the rest of him.

‘I have my devotees,’ she said. ‘And then there is the hyena.’

‘Your daughter is worried about you, Mrs Carter –’

‘Calder. She thinks I am potty.’ Holding an unlit cigarette between thumb and forefinger, she blew imaginary smoke out of her nose and watched as it drifted in two fine skeins towards the ceiling.

‘Well, we would like you to come in here, next week.

Just a few tests, so we know where we are. I’d like to explain . . .’ Mrs Calder stopped listening. She found it strange that it should look as if there were sunlight in a room with no windows. Sunlight, flowers and long grass. Rupert loved long grass in the summertime – and me, in the grass, she thought. Smiling, she changed the nurse’s starched cap into a butterfly, frail white wings spread out and palpitating. Summer, green and lush, stretched across water meadows into the shade of willows. She could smell it.

‘. . . and hope to be able to help you.’ She heard the consultant’s voice as if from another planet. ‘Will you see Admissions on the way out? Nurse will take you down, help you with the forms.’

‘Some people hear the hyena’s howling as fiendish,’ Mrs Calder said. ‘I hear it as laughter.’

Outside the hospital the road, choked and grinding with traffic as usual, descended by degrees in an almost unbroken line towards the city. Waiting for the traffic lights to change, Mrs Calder saw with pleasure that the pavements on either side, broad and level at this point, were crowded and spilling over with an excess of humanity. The sun has brought them out, she thought, watching a group of old Chinese women, a black youth laughing by the flower stall. She crossed the road, joined the general movement down the hill, progressing slowly and deliberately like some gaunt, flamboyant ostrich or crane, picking its way along a public path at the zoo.

She must have been walking for over an hour when she

felt the first spot of rain. The sun still shone with an intense yellow light on the tower blocks up-ended on the horizon, but behind them the sky was black; she saw a thread of lightning dart from one side to the other and thunder rumbled over her head somewhere. It began to rain heavily, the pavement rapidly becoming slippery, shining under her feet like a mirror. Coming at this point to an opening in the high brick facade of the street, she saw beyond a grimy patch of courtyard, a few geraniums in tubs, a notice which announced: 'Welcome to this Historic Church.' It was as good a shelter as any.

The building she found herself in was cool and dark after the hot street. Candles flickered in the draught from the door, their light catching sporadically on gilded crosses, haloes, wings, fragments on invisible walls. It was disturbingly quiet. The rubber soles of her shoes squeaked a little on the smooth tiles of the nave.

Mrs Calder remained for some minutes leaning against the altar rail, her face raised towards the cross hanging above the darkened altar table; the small transparent red vessel containing the Host winked and shone exactly like the aeroplanes which swam past her window at night. As she gazed at it, she found it hard not to allow the thing to turn into a helicopter hovering above the altar, silently.

Her feet were hurting. She took off her shoes and sat down. The card placed beside the prayer book on the shelf in front of her read: 'Can we help? If you have problems we would be happy to discuss them with you.'

She sat listening to the soft hissing of the rain, pigeons up in the roof space. The silence, guttering candles, smell

of incense and polish, the feeling of time suspended for ever, made her think of her convent, the happy face of the nun who had died at the end of the autumn term. She had forgotten her name.

'Hail Mary . . .' Mrs Calder remarked finally to the Child Queen of Heaven waiting on her dusty pedestal. 'You are very quiet. I am afraid there are no answers, my dear.' Absentmindedly she divested the little Virgin of her chipped blue mantle, fluted robe, expecting to find plaster beneath. 'Black lace!' she said, smiling. 'No one would have suspected.' Before she left, she lit a candle. Rupert would laugh, she thought.

The church clock was striking six as she reached the Avenue. Still very warm, the air smelt fragrant, sweet after the rain. She turned into the graveyard and, limping, pausing at intervals to rest, walked slowly along the grassy track which led to the part of the burial ground where Rupert lay.

Emerging from between outsize yew and holly, wet grass, she came suddenly upon some youths, their clothes streaked with paint, scrambling among the vaults and graves and kicking a tin or tins from one mossy level to another. As she approached they rushed away, laughing wildly and shouting to one another, leaping over the graves and bushes like a troop of antelope. She saw at once that almost all the gravestones – the spaces were greater here – had been sprayed with paint; pale blue, orange, day-glo pink, the colours becoming more dazzling and outlandish the further she proceeded up the path. By the time she had reached the semi-derelict shelter or chapel, where vases

were stacked and Tom kept his bedding, she was walking through a punk-rocker's dream: zigzag red and black stripes, blobs of silver, blotches, star-bursts, the lot.

Cheerful, Mrs Calder thought, leaning for a moment against a cerulean angel with staring yellow eyes. Life, a bit of life! She laughed suddenly. Elinor's cross face had come into her mind.

At the rear of the shelter, where grass clippings steamed in the sun and a blackbird rustled through last year's leaves and discarded wreaths, she found Tom, stretched out on a bench, asleep or drunk or both.

He lay like one abandoned by the tide, mouth open, greasy shirt unbuttoned and gaping, a sagging expanse of flesh exposed, stinking of alcohol and urine. Mrs Calder stood gazing at his mottled purple face, watching him.

'Tom?' She stooped swiftly, laid a hand on his stomach, whispered again, 'Tom?'

He stirred but did not wake, and after a moment she squeezed herself in at the end of the bench and sat clasping one of his ankles in both hands.

Like Tours cathedral, she thought, surveying the dazzling colours. She and Rupert had been to Tours on their honeymoon, and both loved bright colour; the stronger the better. Well, his grave was a masterpiece now.

Smiling and closing her eyes, Mrs Calder lifted her face up to the sun. Tom's wheezing breath, the ebb and flow of the traffic along the Avenue, murmur of bees in the privet hedge behind her, became as one sound. All the summers of childhood, of her youth, of her life with Rupert, seemed united in this one moment and eternally.

Visions of an infinite blazing multicoloured graveyard stretching up into the sky and across the world swelled through her like a great chorus. In the centre of this immense fairground sat the hyena; a small figure at this distance, but she could hear it laughing quite clearly. I'll walk up there, she thought, when I have rested; in a moment I'll go up there. The thought filled her with an intense joy and excitement. Above everything she wanted to breathe that pristine celestial air, one with the quivering rainbows, prisms of colour radiating through and across the whole vast universe. Soon I will go, she thought again, smiling face inclined towards the sky. The laughter became louder, nearer, increased a thousandfold, filled her ears, her soul, her whole being, echoing through her and blotting out all other sound. She began to laugh too. Rupert! she cried suddenly, pulling herself upright. Holding out her arms and gazing enthralled at the path ascending before her, she started to walk forward.

Tom, who had retired to the chapel and his bedding roll in the small hours, left next morning by the side gate; so did not see Mrs Calder lying flat on her back in the long grass a few yards from the bench. And the vicar, rapidly inhaling on his cigarette as he took a short cut through the upper burial ground on his way to Matins, was so appalled by the unexpected riot of colour that he did not notice her either. So it was past eleven, the sun already climbing steeply, when one of the two policemen who had come to make a report on the vandalised graveyard observed two

feet in sodden grey tennis shoes protruding from behind a particularly garish headstone.

Accustomed to death as they were, both men noticed how very peaceful the deceased appeared.

‘Happy enough,’ the older one remarked, bending over Mrs Calder. ‘Smiling, like someone told her a good joke.’

Elinor, called in to identify her mother, was struck by the smile at once.

‘Looked as if she had swallowed the cream,’ she remarked angrily to Bob that evening. ‘What on earth was she doing there? I suppose she couldn’t have seen anything? . . . That beautiful churchyard! And poor Dad’s grave, it’s going to cost the earth to –’ She broke off. ‘Bob, is there someone down in the garden? I thought I heard . . . laughter?’

They both listened, and Bob went to the window and opened it. Silence. Nothing but the black warm summer night, curtains moving a little over the sill.

‘I must have imagined it,’ Elinor said, but uncertainly for her. It was quiet now, but she knew that actually she *had* heard someone laughing; quite a loud, disturbing, maniacal sound out there in the dark. And several times during the next few days she heard laughter again, faint but absolutely clear; she couldn’t think why it upset her so much. Then, after a while, it ceased, and she forgot about it.