

## Against Embarrassment

*Helen Garner*

I read the other day a review of a recent life of Marcel Proust that sketched out the themes of his great novel *Remembrance of Things Past*. This one caught my eye:

*'Happiness is a fine thing, but largely without intellectual content.'*

He meant 'for an artist', I suppose; and who am I to deny that a writer qua writer thrives on *unhappiness*, discontent, anger, jealousy, loneliness, fear of death and so on? But as I turn sixty, become a grandmother, and survey the wreckage of my past, I permit myself to question the compulsory wretched solitariness of the artist.

Does one *really*, professionally, have to be so damned miserable?

Quite some years ago, when I was in my forties, I went on holiday to Vanuatu in the Pacific with a kind but restless man, not an artist or a writer, to whom I would not much longer be married, though I didn't know that yet.

He was at ease in the Pacific climate, but I hated the tropics with a passion: all that sweating and melting and shapelessness and blurring. And what I hated most was the sight of a certain parasitic creeper that flourished aggressively, bowing the treetops down and binding them to each other into a dense, undifferentiated mat of choking foliage. I longed to be transported at once to Scotland where the air was sharp and the nights brisk, and where plants were allowed to grow separately and upright, with individual dignity.

Every evening the whole population of the island walked into town, and so did my restless husband and his discontented wife. In velvety air and under a starry sky, a stream of people padded along a sandy track, quietly chattering and laughing.

One evening a Melanesian man in torn and baggy clothes was walking on his own in front of us. He seemed to be holding something small against his chest. Occasionally he lowered his face over it. We heard faint rhythmic music; and when we passed him we saw that he was playing a tiny stringed instrument, strumming it very softly as he swung along by himself in the cheerful crowd. He wasn't performing, or wanting anyone else to hear what he was doing. He was playing just to keep himself company.

I wanted one of those instruments. I wanted to hold it in my arms.

Surprised and embarrassed by this stab of longing, I crushed it with my usual puritanical savagery: 'You're too old. You've already failed at the piano. You have no musical talent. And ukeleles are not *serious*. You will make a fool of yourself and everyone will laugh at you. Pull yourself together, woman, and *slog on*.'

Now I should mention here that in the 1970s, when I was an urban hippie, I lived in big households where everyone but me wanted to be in a band. Actors and acrobats who performed brilliantly at night would sit around our kitchen all afternoon, playing huge acoustic guitars. I snobbily despised them for their pastime. I spent my free hours in my bedroom ploughing through the world's great novels and reading Shakespeare's sonnets out loud to myself.

Where music was concerned I was, and had been most of my adult life, a passive consumer. Greatness was all: I revered only the mighty composers and their interpreters. I believed that real musicians played reverently in orchestras under the batons of awe-inspiring conductors; and this attitude persisted well into my forties.

But after that evening in Vanuatu, I was haunted by the solitary Melanesian and his ukelele. I got down my copy of Percy A. Scholes' *Oxford Companion to Music* and looked it up:

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Ukelele: it has four strings and a very long fingerboard ... Its ultimate origin is Portuguese. It was patented in Honolulu in 1917, from which date it gradually became popular in the United States *amongst people whose desire to perform was stronger than their willingness to acquire any difficult technique or their desire to make intimate acquaintance with any very elaborate music.*

In defiance of this snotty tone, I went downtown and searched all the music shops till I found a ukelele that didn't look trashy. It was made in Czechoslovakia and it cost \$45. I also bought a basic instruction manual. I went home and hid the whole kit & kaboodle in a cupboard.

Whenever I was home alone I would rush upstairs and take the ukelele out of its cardboard box. It was so intimate, so unawe-inspiring, with its curvaceous waist and pretty metal frets and creamy tuning pegs. And it was small – unlike the hulking, ominous piano which years earlier had brought me to my knees in guilt and shame. No one could possibly be *afraid* of this instrument. I fell in love with it: I spent hours sitting on the bed, strumming my way through elementary chord progressions.

See? I'm already putting on an act, trying to be taken seriously by Percy A. Scholes and his editorial team. How hard it is to shake off solemnity about music – the pretence that I'm attacking it with my intellect. I'm still not 100 per cent sure what a chord progression is. If it goes C/F/G7/C, well, OK, that amounts to a song, it makes sense and I can play it. Is *that* a chord progression? Don't even bother to answer. I don't really care.

All I want is to make a tuneful sound sometimes.

*And I just want to stop being musically passive.*

Percy A. Scholes would be richly vindicated in his scorn if he heard what I'm about to say. *The ukelele is an easy instrument to learn.* As somebody on a uke internet site points out: Four strings. Four fingers. It's not like a bloody great guitar with its six strings – you're not getting ganged up on every time you make a chord.

You can learn a three-chord song in about thirty seconds. At this point it dawns on you that there are several million

three-chord songs in the world, many of which you have effortlessly, long ago, stored in the mud at the very bottom of your memory. Up they come from those neglected depths, dripping and sparkling – so fresh and simple, so radiant with common human feeling!

And you don't need to ask anyone's permission to sing them softly – or even loudly – to yourself, no matter how croaky your voice is, because, though Percy A. Scholes dismisses it as a cop-out for lazy, talentless show-ponies, the ukelele has in fact a simple and benevolent purpose: to create a gentle bed of sound for the human voice; to enrich the single line of melody that a human voice is capable of.

When I realised I'd found an instrument that didn't scare me, I called my favourite music shop in Australia, Zenith Music in Perth, and ordered for \$500 a proper Hawaiian ukelele, a Kamaka soprano.

Now this is real love. I'd even go so far as to say it's an echo of the joy and tenderness that are drawn out of one by a baby.

My Kamaka was so beautiful that I hated putting it away in its case. Even the wind wanted to play it. One day when I'd left it lying on the back of the couch and gone into the next room, the faintest, airiest twangling sound reached me. I ran back in, and found that a breeze, coming up the hill from Bondi, was puffing over the windowsill and drawing the hem of the calico curtain gently back and forth across the open strings.

The best thing about playing an instrument as humble as a ukelele is the complete absence from the process of duty or guilt. It's so lowly that the gloomy and forbidding super-ego can't touch it. I play it only when I feel like it, and only for pleasure. Six months might pass without my taking it down from the shelf. Sometimes I just hold it on my knee while I'm reading the paper, and mindlessly make it hum without forming any chords. Then there are times when I play it purposefully for hours every evening, concentrating and trying to learn and remember. But the minute I lose interest, I stop.

Once in a while, the money-making musicians in my extended family invite me to play with them in the kitchen after tea, kindly ignoring my hopelessness. But here's the good bit – whenever I

play with other people, I become less hopeless. Something inside me lays down its gun. I start to take risks. To change the metaphor, I throw myself into the river and find I can swim.

The 'great' music I revered before still moves me, and it always will. But since I've been playing the ukelele, since it relaxed in me a certain self-contempt about *making* music, I've come to realise what we've lost, in our lifetime, in the second half of the twentieth century – what we gradually and even unconsciously gave up, as recorded music took over our world.

Not for a moment would I turn my back on CDs and records: that would be insane and ungrateful, anti-life and anti-intellectual – like the Taliban. But how did we come to be so shamed and silenced? If the best we can do is to sing *Happy Birthday*, how deep is that destruction, that loss?

These days, musically, we're like would-be novelists who do Ph.Ds in literary theory instead. We turn the blowtorch of our critical intelligence on to the modest longing that sprouts in each of us – the longing to rejoice, to mourn, or merely to pass the time pleasantly, every once in a while, in song. It's a need that goes deep in us, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with talent. Like dancing, or prayer, it can even touch the sacred.

And this is what I'd love to ask Percy A. Scholes, should he have survived the '70s with his loftiness intact: can we really live without gratifying that longing?

Somebody once quoted to me these lines: *'If only those birds sang that sang the best/ How silent the woods would be!'* I believe we ought to have mercy on ourselves. Grandchildren, I have found, are great bringers of mercy. They *beg* us to sing to them. And in their company we remember how it was when we were children: we opened our little beaks whenever the spirit moved us, and we sang like birds.