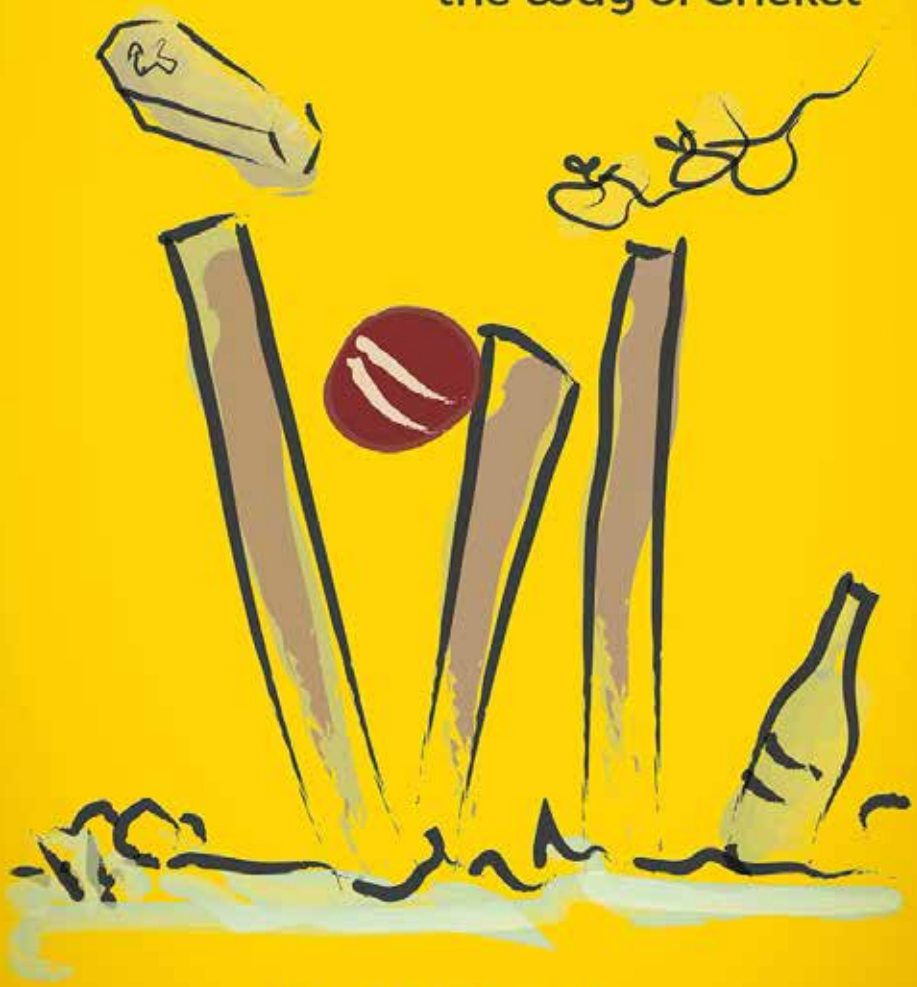
Between Overs

How Life Gets in the Way of Cricket



Michele Savidge

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A story of love and loss inspired by Sir Viv Richards

pitch

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A DESICCATED dead mouse lies on its side on a plate of old, cold chips. One of its eyes is open, completely white and staring at me. I tear open a packet of bright yellow Marigold rubber gloves, put them on with a shudder to pick up the mouse and walk out to the garden, where I lay it gently on a pile of crinkly leaves. Going back into the house, I notice that the edge of the front door is deeply gouged and I realise it must have been scarred by the paramedics when they took my mother out for her journey to the hospital. I know she will be (sorry, would have been) absolutely furious that they had damaged the door. I trip over a pile of newspapers and dozens of tins of food – mostly rice pudding and sliced peaches – as I make my way back into the living room and begin to gather up some damp clothes and put them in a carrier bag. I am crying so much I feel as though I am under water and my chest

aches, almost as if I have been punched. I can feel my mum's spirit all around me; she cannot rest yet.

My mother was a world champion hoarder and every inch of carpet is smothered in rubbish. I know that the tiniest morsel of detritus had meant something to her, even the Fruit Pastilles wrappers of which there are dozens. I can hear her voice in my head saying, 'Just leave that, will you?'

I can't leave it but how can I even begin to sort it out?

Among the chaos, my father's slippers are still lined up neatly side by side at the foot of the armchair where he used to sit until his death five years before. On the chair is an open, empty CD case: The Treorchy Male Choir, a favourite of my mother's. (Definitely not of my father, who was passionate about big band jazz and Frank Sinatra.) I switch on the CD player.

Well, that was a big mistake.

If you are already feeling bereft, would hearing a Welsh choir help? And if you then heard them sing:

Close thine eyes and sleep secure
Thy soul is safe, thy body sure
He that guards thee, he thee keeps
Who never slumbers, never sleeps
A quiet conscience in a quiet breast
Has only peace, has only rest
The music and the mirth of kings
Are out of tune unless she sings

Then close thine eyes in peace and rest secure
No sleep so sweet as thine, no rest so sure

Would that help you to feel a) better or b) worse?

I am still crying enough tears to fill a Welsh valley and try to focus on a pile of papers next to where my mum, until only last week, had spent her days – and nights. She was an inveterate notetaker all her life; writing down the time when she had turned the immersion on (and off); noting what time she boiled the kettle; a reminder to wash her skirts or dust the skirting board; pages of the exact time all telephone calls were made and received, and of their duration. And every single jotting had been kept. Over the next few weeks, I will find thousands and thousands of these notes, as well as hundreds of letters she wrote and never sent.

But from the middle of the scruffy bits of paper, a menu on thick white card falls on to the threadbare carpet. It is from an *Evening Standard* lunch at the Café Royal held years ago to honour the legendary England cricketer Denis Compton. In my previous life as a cricket journalist, a career that had seemed impossibly out of reach to me when I was a young girl, I had spoken to the great man after lunch and, on the menu, Compton had written to my father, *To Bill, God Bless You, Denis Compton*.

'That was me!' I thought. 'What on earth happened to her?'

The reminder of my other life was the starting pistol to begin my journey through grief. After all, the expedition had to begin somewhere, even if it just meant putting one foot in front of the other. But how did I navigate my way through a world that no longer held my parents, who I had loved with all my heart?

The trouble was, I didn't know how to start. All I knew was that I felt I was no longer anyone's daughter and, if I wasn't that, who was I?

The Beginning

Opening the Batting
A Village in Somerset, Summer 1973

IT WAS the hottest and sunniest of days, as all our childhood summer days undoubtedly become the older we get. The sky was as blue as Paul Newman's eyes (Paul Newman, the Hollywood actor not the former Derbyshire cricketer) and the clouds were as wispy as cotton wool. I could go on but let's just say it was as close to a damn perfect English summer's day as it was possible to be. Well, who is going to contradict me from this distance?

I was sprawled by the boundary, trying to arrange my pre-pubescent giraffe-like legs into something approaching sophistication. Not much chance of that. And, anyway, my legs were (and still are) the very essence of Nottingham-grey: a shade you will struggle to find on any paint chart.

The match on the other side of the rope was trundling along like so many others before and since.

Nothing to see here, move along. I could just wallow in watching the dance in front of me. Men all in white moving in synchronised waves from the boundary ropes each time the bowler ran up to the wicket, then a lethargic walk backwards after the batsman had hit the ball. Slow, slow, quick-quick, slow. After a few overs of the dance and a throaty cry of 'Howzat?' came the quiet applause from perhaps a dozen pairs of hands.

I yawned and looked at my father, prone on the grass. He opened one eye. 'Wicket?' he asked. I nodded and he stirred to prop himself up on one elbow.

I could hear a few murmurs from the pavilion and a cloud briefly appeared before ambling off. The atmosphere changed then: it was as though a divine being somewhere above turned the sunlight to its highest setting. Yards away, the men in white became iridescent. There was a little more chatter and the air itself seemed to quiver. There may even have been a small earth tremor. Well, trust me, I felt it.

The incoming batsman prowled out of the pavilion, wheeling his right arm, then his left, his bat held momentarily above his head, seemingly already in victory. He wasn't especially tall but he seemed to tower over the rest of the men on the field. He carried himself differently too, not in an arrogant way but definitely with some swagger. It was as if a swashbuckler had arrived on a battlefield where most of the men lay dead or dying and was ready to claim he had slain them all.

He took his position at the crease, checked his guard, held his bat as though it were a blade and looked around the field for the gaps he knew he had a God-given right to breach.

First ball: thwack. It even sounded different. His predecessor's style had definitely been more: thud. The ball had no choice other than to speed towards the boundary, the fielders' slow, slow, quick-quick, slow choreography simply not up to chasing it. The next ball went the same way. How did this batsman have more time to see it and then know exactly what to do with it?

A few of the spectators sat a little more upright, my father included, in response to the change in tempo from the man in the middle. It seemed that more people were arriving at the ground by the minute but my memory, even if I have got the weather right, might be playing tricks here. I put an end to my off-field sprawl and sat up, utterly transfixed.

It was a different game now. The leaden ballroom shuffle was still being practised by the fielding side but the batsman was Fred Astaire compared to them. By the tenth ball the batsman struck, my father was on his haunches and just as spellbound as me.

He looked at me and beamed. 'He's a bit good, isn't he? I'll just go and find out his name.'

My father stood up, rubbed the small of his back as was his habit, and I watched him walk towards the pavilion.

I had been watching cricket from early childhood, mostly at Trent Bridge, where my father would drop off my brother and me at Test and county games, our little hands clutching bags of soon-to-be squashed sandwiches, crisps and pop. I had seen plenty of world-class players. But I had never seen one like this. He looked like a Greek god, if a Greek god had ever wielded a cricket bat.

My father returned with his news. 'I think we should keep an eye on that young man, don't you, sweetheart? I've got a feeling we're going to hear a lot more about him.'

And that was the day Vivian Richards changed my life.