

## Leopards

by Juliet Robinson

Growing up we had a huge holly tree in our garden. Dad used to tell me a leopard lived in its branches.

‘Watch out for the leopard,’ he would say. ‘They love to eat dogs and little girls.’

I knew there wasn’t a leopard lurking amongst the leaves, but at night it seemed possible. Fear exists only in our imagination, a seemingly confined space, but in reality, that gives it more than enough room to play, especially when one has an inventive mind. I would beg my dad to wait at the back door when I had to take the bins out. I would then run to the end of the garden, giving the holly tree as wide a berth as possible.

My dad had a questionable sense of humour. While waiting for me by the back door, he would utter a deep, rasping sort of bark which he claimed to be a leopard’s call. It sounded ridiculous, but as he had grown up in the foothills of Thunhisgala he did know what a leopard sounded like. When he was about six, not long before his family moved to Ireland a leopard started picking off their dogs, his mother had eventually shot the beast and proudly preserved its pelt.

They didn’t bring many things with them when they moved to Ireland but the leopards pelt was one of them. It hung above the range in the kitchen, a shabby, soot covered thing, until my grandfather died. My grandmother then moved to Scotland to help her sister run a small hotel near the Turnhouse RAF base. The pelt came with and was hung in the snug where it was the subject of much interest, especially when folk found out my tiny grandmother had shot the creature.

In 1939 the pelt went missing. The 603 Squadron had been in the hotel snug, celebrating as they had downed the first Luftwaffe bomber over the British mainland. At some point the leopard skin had been removed from the wall to be worn as victory cape and the next day it was nowhere to be seen. My grandmother sent my dad down to the base to try and get the thing back, but nothing came of it.

The following spring several leopard sightings were reported around the area. The stories were quickly dismissed after a secretary working for the ministry of war based at the Cammo Estate got a good look at the creature. Which turned out to be a large dog tied into a leopard fur, so that was the end of that and apparently the grandmothers leopard skin.

In 1971 my mum won piloting lessons in a writing competition. She earned her licence and took a second job at the Edinburgh Air Centre, Turnhouse in order to keep flying. That Christmas they threw a masquerade fundraiser in aid of RAF veterans. My mum who had been busy with work that week hadn't time to put together a costume, but one of the club members, Jim had come to her aid. He dug out an old leopard skin which he admitted he and his friends had stolen from a hotel during the war, he laughed as he remembered their trick of dressing the squadrons mascot in the pelt. He then draped the fur around her, declaring her an Egyptian priestess.

My dad had been at that party, on a date, but when he saw a beauty dressed in a leopard skin, he had to speak to her. Of course, he had told her about the leopard which had eaten his dogs, how his mother had shot it and the furs subsequent theft from their hotel. At this point my mum had called Jim over.

That Sunday Jim had driven mum out to the hotel, where my grandmother was reunited with the leopard skin. It was returned to its spot on the wall in the snug, where it hung until the hotel burned down in 1979, the year I was born.

When dad died in 22, he wanted his ashes scattered in Sri Lanka, but due to civil unrest that wasn't possible. So, my mum and I did the next best thing, we took him to Edinburgh zoo and emptied his urn into the Leopard enclosure when no one was looking.

Last night while out with my dog we passed a house with a holly tree and I crossed the road rather than risk it, you never know with leopards.