



Photo credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

The first song Danuta learned in Mrs. Martin's class was *Build your house on a good foundation.* "It's a special song called a

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Mrs Martin stood at the piano, hands resting on the keys, ready to play. “You’ll like it,” she said, her voice rising above the first chord. And they did. A lot. Afterwards they sang it almost every day. Danuta especially liked the second line. *Build your house on a good foundation/and happiness will follow you.* She sang that line loudly. That way she felt it might really come true.

Mrs Martin printed the words of the song carefully on the blackboard. Next to them she drew a picture of the house. It was made of red bricks and stood on a high, pale yellow limestone foundation. There was a large window either side of the front door. The roof was of orange tiles. In front of the house was a lawn, green and carefully mowed. Between the lawn’s edges and the front fence were flowerbeds with roses, hydrangeas, stock, snapdragons and carnations. Mrs Martin used

the special coloured chalk she kept in her table drawer to colour the flowers and the rest of the picture. "I grew up in a house just like this," Mrs Martin told them. She ruled a frame around the picture and printed DO NOT RUB OFF under it. Mrs Martin told them she lived in Perth before she married Mr Martin and came to the tobacco farm to live with him.

Each day before the 'home bell' rang, Mrs Martin let the class to stop work and pack away their books. Mrs Martin sat on the front of her table, between the piles of spelling and writing books, legs crossed, arms folded, handbag on her lap. She waited until everyone was sitting up straight and there was silence. Then she reached into her handbag and took out a round, gold compact. She opened the compact and looked at herself intently in the mirror, turning her face to the left and to the right, lowering her eyelids, touching the skin under her eyes. Sometimes Mrs Martin sighed before placing the open compact on one of the piles of books and reaching again into her bag. Out would always come a small, square bottle with a gold top. This, they knew, was 'the foundation'.

"There's nothing more important than a good foundation," Mrs Martin always told them. Then she'd tip a bit of muddy pink lotion from the square bottle on to a small sponge and pat it over her nose, chin, cheeks and forehead. After that Mrs Martin took a long pencil from her bag and drew over her eyebrows, making them darker and thicker. Last of all she applied bright red lipstick, first to the upper lip, then to the lower lip and finally pressed her lips together, as if tasting the lipstick.

If she finished doing her make-up before the bell rang, Mrs Martin told them about Mr Martin. He was a tobacco farmer now, but before, during the war, he'd been a pilot. A fighter pilot, she told them. That was in England where he flew with Douglas Bader. Mrs Martin told them about Douglas Bader too. He was an incredibly clever pilot but he had an accident and crashed his plane. He was badly burned, especially his legs. He didn't die so the doctors cut off the burnt bits and they gave him two new tin legs. He was brave and learned to walk again, and to fly his plane. When the war came he was allowed to join the Air Force to fight the Germans. Mr Martin had been a pilot in Douglas Bader's squadron.

When Mrs Martin talked about Douglas Bader and about Mr Martin being a pilot she looked happy and excited. She told them that when Mr Martin came back to Australia from the war, he was still a pilot. "I remember when I first met him. He was in uniform and looked so handsome. More handsome than the Archangel Gabriel."

Danuta had met Mr Martin. He was tall and skinny. His face was brown and wrinkly. He didn't have much hair, just sandy strands that he carefully arranged to cover the pink skin of his scalp. His lips

were thin, he frowned a lot and he had a ginger moustache. He didn't look one bit like the Archangels that Danuta had seen in her mother's holy pictures. Those angels were all fair, soft-faced boys with long, golden ringlets and high white wings growing out of their backs. Not one of them had a moustache.

During the tobacco season, Danuta's mother and other people worked on Mr Martin's farm. At weekends Danuta went with her. The house on Mr Martin's farm was built of weatherboard and had a tin roof, just like Danuta's. It was on stumps that became high stilts at the front, where the paddock sloped down to the dam. There was no lawn, just a tangle of bracken and raspberry canes growing around the stilts. The only flowers were the watsonias that grew wild and had long spears of small fuchsia-pink blossoms in spring. Mrs Martin told the class she grew coleuses in pots on the back veranda, but Danuta didn't know what coleuses looked like.

Towards the end of the season, when there were just the tobacco leaves to be sorted and threaded on to drying frames, only Danuta's mother worked at the farm. When Danuta was there she played outside the sorting shed or walked up and down between the rows of tobacco plants in the nearby paddock, lifting their broad sticky leaves in search of ladybirds.

One Sunday after lunch, Danuta's mother sent her to the house to fetch Mr Martin. Danuta hung back, reluctant to go.

"Don't be scared," her mother said, shooing her outside. "Just knock on the back door."

Danuta stepped up onto the back veranda and tiptoed to the fly-wire door. Perhaps she would see Mrs Martin today and say hello. She wondered how Mrs Martin would be dressed and whether she'd be wearing foundation and lipstick. Near the door was a pot plant with large, coloured leaves. Maybe this was one of Mrs Martin's coleuses. The back door was partly open and Danuta could see the chrome leg of the kitchen table. Suddenly there was the loud thwack of a pot being slammed down hard on the stove. Mr Martin's voice shouted, "You lazy, fucking, good for nothing bitch." It was like when her father and mother argued early in the morning, thinking Danuta was asleep.

There was crying. It sounded like Mrs Martin. A door slammed. Danuta stared at the rusty mesh on the fly-wire door. She felt frightened and ashamed and wanted to run back to her mother. But she made herself knock. The door was yanked back and Mr Martin stood glaring at her.

"Mr Martin..." Danuta couldn't go on. All she could think of were the swear words Mr Martin had yelled at Mrs Martin.

“What is it Danuta?” Mr Martin was trying to make his voice sound kind.

“Mum told me to come and tell you she needs you up at the sorting shed.”

On the way home Danuta told her mother she’d heard Mr Martin and Mrs Martin arguing. She didn’t say anything about the swear words Mr Martin had used because she knew she’d be in trouble if she repeated them. Her mother sighed.

“Sometimes grownups argue because they have a lot of worries, Danuta. The tobacco’s not selling. Mr Martin owes people money.”

Danuta nodded. When her parents argued early in the morning it was usually about money.

“I don’t want you repeating this to anyone, understand?” Danuta’s mother added severely. She always said this when she’d told Danuta more than she should have.

What Danuta couldn’t understand was why Mr Martin had spoken to Mrs Martin like that. She was sure Douglas Bader would never call his wife ‘a lazy bitch’, or use the other really bad swear word. Even if she didn’t make a tasty lunch or tidy the house. Even if his stumps ached.

A few weeks later, at the beginning of the ‘News’ session, Mrs Martin stood in front of her table smiling and announced *she* had news to tell the class.

“Children, you remember me telling you about Douglas Bader?”

“Yes, Mrs Martin,” they chorused.

“He’s a Pommy pilot,” a boy said.

Mrs Martin glared at him. She didn’t like people from England being called ‘Poms’.

“Douglas Bader is coming to Perth.” Mrs Martin spoke slowly to allow the class to appreciate the importance of her news. “He’s coming very soon, in just four weeks.”

Mrs Martin added he was coming all the way from England to meet some boys who’d been in a bus accident and had their legs cut off too. The really thrilling thing was that Mr Martin had a special invitation from the Governor to go to a ‘reception’ for Douglas Bader.

“A ‘reception’, is a kind of special party for grow-ups,” Mrs Martin explained. “I’m invited too! And

I've got two weeks of extra holidays before Easter to go with Mr Martin."

Mrs Martin told the class she was going to buy a special new dress for the 'reception' and a new hat and shoes. She and Mr Martin would be going to lots of other parties and dinners for Douglas Bader and she'd be buying other new clothes. Mrs Martin promised to wear one of her new dresses to school when she came back. But only if the class was truly well behaved for the teacher taking her place — Mrs Smith.

The first day back after the Easter holidays Danuta was at school before eight o'clock. Mrs Martin usually arrived just after eight. Danuta wanted to be first to speak to her and see what she was wearing. And help her get the room ready. Maybe Mrs Martin would tell her something about the 'reception' and the other Perth parties.

Mrs Martin still hadn't arrived at half past eight when the other kids started turning up. Danuta thought she was probably tired and needed to sleep in after her long trip. The bell rang at five to nine for class. They lined up on the veranda as usual and waited. After a while, the Headmaster came and told them Mrs Martin wasn't going to be at school that week. She'd had to stay in Perth for some extra rest. Mrs Smith would come again after recess. In the meantime they had to go into class and get on with their reading.

Mrs Smith was short and plump and always wore grey or brown dresses. She didn't use lipstick or any other makeup and wouldn't let the class pack up until the 'home' bell actually rang. Her husband was a farmer, like Mr Martin, but he'd never been to England or been in the war or been a pilot with Douglas Bader.

Mrs Martin didn't return the following week or the next or after the May holidays. Mr Martin was back at the farm though. Danuta knew because her mother still worked there. Some kids said their parents told them Mr Martin was going to divorce Mrs Martin. Danuta told them it wasn't true. But couldn't help thinking about the swear words Mr Martin had shouted at Mrs Martin. Maybe Mrs Martin was sick of living on the tobacco farm, Danuta thought. Maybe she'd asked Douglas Bader to take her to England with him.

Mrs Smith ended up being their teacher for good. She couldn't play the piano and didn't teach them any new songs. Sometimes, towards the end of the day, she let them sing, *Build your house on a good foundation*. When Danuta sang that song she thought about Mrs Martin and felt sad.