

Hannah Gadsby (b. 1978) is an Australian comedian, writer and actress.

Hannah Gadsby

The Proverbial Glass House

Most people think that there are only two ways to respond to mortal danger: fight or flight. I'm sure they both have their merits but apparently my instinct is to sit very still and just have a bit of a think about things. I discovered this was my survival strategy on the day before my ninth birthday after I rode my bike into the back-end corner of a glass greenhouse. I don't remember the accident itself, other than the sudden
5 and overpowering smell of tomatoes. I didn't scream, panic or cry. I think I must have been in shock. I was certainly very confused, not least because I couldn't work out why I wasn't riding my bike anymore. Without waiting for my comprehension to catch up with events, I just set about extracting my leg from what was left of the glass pane, hobbled clear of the debris, found myself a patch of grass and sat down to have a bit of a think.

10 The wound on my knee was particularly distressing. Nobody should meet their own kneecap. My older brother Ben had once told me about Rorschach tests¹ and said that if you saw something bad in an inkblot then you were sick in the head, so I tried my best to see a butterfly in the blood pooling out of my knee, but the white of my kneecap kept taunting me and I ended up feeling very sick in the head anyway. I turned my attention to a large shard of glass sticking out of my thigh, which made me feel even sicker in the head, so I
15 decided the best course of action was to lie back on the grass, hoping I would die before Mum could kill me.

Before the accident I had believed with absolute certainty that if I were small enough, and owned a small enough boat, I could've gone sailing all around the wonderful world of my innards. I had thought there'd be plenty of room to navigate between my various bits and pieces, that there would be a nice little bay where I could anchor before climbing onto dry bone-land, where I could swing like Tarzan from veins to arteries,
20 making my way to the land of my belly, a jumping castle of inflatable organs. And when I tired of all the good times, I could climb back into my little boat and set sail for my brain, the comfiest bed in all the kingdom.

But once I met my kneecap and the guts of my thigh, I had to reassess; I didn't like the truth that I was being forced to accept. Not at all. I didn't like the idea that beneath my surface ran a deep river of pain and
25 ugliness just waiting to burst free; that I was nothing more than an unregulated abattoir of blood and guts wrapped up in a far too pervious suit of skin.

It was all a great shame really, as the day had started out so brilliantly. It had been warm and sunny and the preparations for my pirate-themed birthday party were in full swing, Jessica had just made pirate boats out of oranges and jelly and I knew there was a treasure-chest sponge cake she had hidden under a shroud of
30 foil in the fridge, and to top it all off, Mum had agreed to let me draw myself a moustache for the occasion.

¹ *Rorschach tests*: psychological tests in which people describe what they see in inkblots on paper

But the best thing about this particular day had nothing to do with it being my birthday eve. The best thing was that the plaster cast on my arm had finally been removed that morning, which meant that I'd been given the all-clear to take my brand-new bike out for a spin.

35 I had been more than a little disappointed when I first laid my eyes on the pink girl's bike under the Christmas tree a few weeks earlier. As far as I was concerned, I didn't need a floral basket or a skirt-friendly pedalling experience, I needed a BMX² so I could keep up with Hamish. But I didn't dare complain because I knew Mum would not hesitate in taking the bike and feeding it to the starving kids in a television famine appeal, which had become the blanket threat she gave whenever I complained about not having stuff. I didn't understand why we couldn't just sponsor a child already, I was sick of being grateful. But Mum was in charge, so, like an arranged marriage, I learnt to love my new bike.

40 The one thing that I could easily love about Pink, as I had imaginatively named my two-wheeled steed, was her bell. I had never had a working bell before. The best I'd ever had was the rusted-out number on my old bike that sounded less like a bell and more like a robot dying of emphysema³. By contrast, Pink's lovely *ding-a-ring-ring* was a marvellous carnival of sound joy. But ringing the bell was the only thing I had been able to do for the three weeks since Christmas, on account of my arm being in plaster. I hadn't felt any pain for weeks, and in my tiny brain that meant I was good to go. But Mum refused to budge and so I had to endure the interminable wait until the plaster was removed before I could go for a ride. The wait had been nothing short of excruciating, even the *ding-a-ring-ring* of the bell couldn't make time pass more quickly. And so it was, that on this lovely sunny birthday eve, no sooner than I got home from the doctor's surgery, 50 Hamish and I were both astride our bikes, breaknecking it all over the high school grounds like the reckless cop and the nefarious robber we believed we were.

When Hamish eventually found me, he summed the situation up very quickly and succinctly. "Shit!" he said, "Shit! Shit! Shit!" He took in the scene, hands on hips, biting his lip before delivering the news neither of us wanted to hear: "We're gonna have to tell Mum." I looked up and nodded. *Shit indeed*.

55 As Hamish helped me to my feet, I was surprised to find my leg didn't hurt too much and I was able to stand up, even if I was a little reluctant to stop sitting. I wasn't upset, I had cried no tears, and aside from the stress of discovering the inside of me, I was in pretty good spirits. But that all changed when, over my brother's shoulder, I saw Pink. She was about ten metres up the path, as if she had continued the chase without me. It took a moment before I realised how badly she had fared: her front wheel was bent horribly out of shape, the seat was ripped and the top of the bell was gone, leaving nothing but its buckled guts. 60

I am not prone to hysterics, but I gave it a red-hot go in that moment, as I tried to convince Hamish to take care of the bike. "Forget about me!" I screamed. "Save Pink! PLEEEEEAAAAASE!!!" Even with the full benefit of hindsight and a mature understanding of priorities, there is still a part of me that is annoyed that Hamish refused to let me sacrifice myself for the sake of my new bike.

65 I didn't know if I was going to be in trouble or if my leg would be smothered in Vicks VapoRub⁴, and as I couldn't decide which would be the worse outcome, I was well and truly overwhelmed with anxiety by the time we made it back to the house. Hamish was diligently dragging me into the kitchen when Mum leapt out of her sewing chair to cut us off at the pass. "Don't come in here! You'll ruin the carpet!" While it didn't

² a type of bike

³ lung condition that causes shortness of breath

⁴ *Vicks VapoRub*: brand of ointment used to treat a cold

70 come close to the worst of the responses I'd workshopped in my head as I was limping home, it was still a bit shocking to find out I was less precious than our very ugly carpet.

We stopped in our tracks and waited in the kitchen as Mum pushed past us and grabbed a Tupperware⁵ container off the sink and told me to put my foot in it. Judging by the look on her face when she stood back, I think Mum was quite shocked to discover that she had not applied an actual tourniquet. The next thing she tried was at least in the ballpark of first aid, even if it was equally ineffective. No sooner had Mum
75 applied a Band-Aid than it began sliding down my leg. Undeterred, she put another one on, then another, and then another. I watched, mesmerised, as they all surfed their way slowly down into the Tupperware, which was slowly filling up with my blood.

By the time we got to the doctor's for the second time that day, Mum was well and truly on her own roller-coaster loop of emotions. I just sat. My leg was throbbing, as it was wrapped a little too tightly in a towel
80 and I could feel the glass digging in. But I wasn't about to complain. I knew Mum was stressed about my birthday party, and she didn't even know about the bike. So, I just sat and had a think about things.

Dr Rose was a jovial man who had been our family doctor for years. Mum liked him so much that when he left town, she refused to replace him. I liked Dr Rose too, except that he wasn't very gentle. You want gentle when it comes to removing glass from open and bleeding wounds. You certainly don't want big fat
85 sausage fingers digging around your insides with carelessly wielded needles and tongs.

I could feel every bit of every needle, every bit of glass being removed, every bump of Dr Rose's not so gentle approach and yet, each and every time I flinched he would just chuckle as if he'd made some sort of a joke. The whole process was exactly as excruciating and distressing as it sounds, but I did my best to keep my mouth shut and my eyes dry as Dr Rose fumbled his way in and around my wounds. Eventually it all got
90 too much, and my stoicism crumbled. Dr Rose didn't seem to notice when I began to blubber uncontrollably, but Mum did, and she abruptly stopped her moaning and pacing about and came over and stood behind me. I was sure I was about to get some kind of telling-off, but instead she just leant over and gently said, 'It's okay, little one. I'm right here. You're going to be okay.'

As much as I wanted to and as hard as I tried, I couldn't stop crying – I had seen too much, I had seen my
95 kneecap and, for the first time in my life, I saw that Mum was not in control of the world around me. I saw that she knew this and that it frightened her, and so it frightened me. Out of desperation, Mum leant in even closer and, with her eyes right over mine, she cupped her hands over the sides of our faces, blocking the world out and then, when it was just the two of us, in a whisper she said, 'Count the red lines in my eyes.'

100 I shut my eyes. I did not like what I felt at such close range of Mum's gaze, with all the crackling of her shot blood filling the whites of her eyes, but I did not need to see, I did not need to make a tally, the cocoon of her care was enough to help me find a bit of calm. As the youngest of her five children, I think I had quietly assumed that I was disposable, a backup sprog at best, and less valuable than ugly carpet. But that assumption dissolved whenever Mum pulled me in like this, and I was always left with irrefutable evidence
105 that I was loved, and that I was very precious in the bloodshot eyes of at least one person on earth.

(2022)

⁵ brand of plastic kitchenware