

Family Passions by Gail Loon Lustig

Birds and boxer dogs were probably the main creatures we learnt about as kids. Perhaps I should include tropical fish. My father had a small tank of exotic fish when I was really small. He gave up that hobby after we returned from a vacation to the Kruger National Park to find the fish floating on the water. He'd left the job of daily feeding to a neighbour, asking him to put enough food on a tickey (once the smallest coin in South Africa); apparently three pennies were used instead, since a tickey wasn't found!

Poor fish died of forbidden binging!

Donny had countless hobbies. He loved immersing us into his passions, teaching us that the world was an exciting place and that there was no end to the knowledge and pleasure to be found learning something new.

One such hobby was birdwatching which was taken very seriously. We'd pile into the car, head for a forest, lake or seashore and sit patiently trying to "spot" the bird. A heavy clumsy set of binoculars would be passed around amongst us kids. Invariably we'd miss the carefree bird with the amazing red chest, shiny tail or fascinating call, but we loved being in the company of our father at his most relaxed.

What we learnt about birds formally, came through the purchase of the "First Guide to South African Birds" written by one Leonard Gill in 1936. The guide-book became our bird-bible. It was clearly laid out, included the Afrikaans names of hundreds of birds of the 800 or so species in the region and had numerous lovely coloured plates illustrating the individual birds. A unique South African publication.

The years have passed and my love of birds has grown. I notice them on my walks, observe their habits, their repetitive behaviour and seek them out whenever I can. I have learnt that the beautiful ones might be invaders in our country- such as the parakeet and feisty myna birds. The Egyptian geese at the park are charming and full of personality as are the common sparrows that persevere in trying to scrounge a crumb or two on the kitchen table when I leave the window open on our fifth-floor apartment.

I think it's my mother's side of the family that led to *my* hobby of collecting. My grandfather, Isador, was a regular at live auctions, which were far more exciting than the modern-day online type and found many a "bargain" which he brought home to Yetta, who was much less sympathetic to the passion.

Over the years, I have collected bakelite items; necklaces, bangles and buttons are my favourite. But it is the South African artists that have stirred my curiosity most. I find them on eBay.

My chief pleasure in collecting is first studying the item before actually buying it. This is so easy today since Google offers endless information and leads. And so, when the "Malay Girl" popped up a few years ago. I discovered that it was an oil painting on canvas, done by one Marion Gill, originally English, who had joined her brother Leonard in Cape Town.

Yes, no other than the Leonard Gill, who I learnt was the director of the South African Museum in the Gardens, Cape Town, whose passion was South African birds! Apparently, Leonard and his sister, Marion, emigrated to the Cape from England in 1924. Together, they published the first bird guide which was published in 1936. Marion illustrated the book and Leonard wrote the descriptions. In the Introduction, he praises his sister for her help and devotion to the task. Marion was a great artist and obviously enjoyed painting in general. She must have had a wonderful time doing just that while living at the foot of Table Mountain.

I put in a bid for the painting, won it easily at a low price and waited for it to arrive on our shores, all the way from Australia. The Malay Girl was a natural presence in our home; in fact, it hangs on the wall next to me as I write. On the back of the painting, in black ink, the words "ten guineas", which must have been its original price, probably in the twenties of the last century.

I have had endless pleasure connecting to the ambience of my mother country through this special lady - her naivete, curiosity and shadowed cheeks are intriguing and comforting in this world of uncertainty. And of course, I recall the Gardens in Cape Town, a wonderful public garden housing the South African Museum which we loved visiting of a Sunday afternoon. And the scones and whipped cream and tea and squirrels climbing the trees....

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