

## My Greatest Ambition

(1984)

Morris Lurie

My greatest ambition was to be a comic-strip artist, but I grew out of it. People were always patting me on the head and saying, 'He'll grow out of it.' They didn't know what they were talking about. Had any of them ever read a comic? Studied one? *Drawn* one? 'Australia is no place for comics,' they said, and I had to lock myself up in the dining room to get some peace. My mother thought I was studying in there.

I was the only person in my class – probably in the whole school – who wanted to be a comic-strip artist. They were all dreamers. There they sat, the astronomer, the nuclear physicist, the business tycoon (on the Stock Exchange), two mathematicians, three farmers, countless chemists, a handful of doctors, all aged thirteen and all with their heads in the clouds. Dreamers! Idle speculators! A generation of hopeless romantics! It was a Friday night, I recall, when I put the finishing touches to my first full length, inked-in, original, six-page comic-strip.

I didn't have the faintest idea what to do with it. Actually, doing anything *with* it hadn't ever entered my mind. *Doing* it was enough. Over the weekend I read it through sixty or seventy times, analysed it, studied it, stared at it, finally pronounced it 'Not too bad,' and then put it up on the top of my wardrobe where my father kept his hats.

And that would have been the end of it, only the next day I happened to mention to Michael Lazarus, who sat next to me at school, that I had drawn a comic-strip, and he happened to mention to me that there was a magazine in Melbourne I could send it to. We were both thrown out of that class for doing too much mentioning out loud, and kept in after school, to write fifty eight-letter words and their meanings in sentences – a common disciplinary action at that time. I remember writing 'ambulate' and saying it was a special way of walking. Do I digress? Then let me say that the first thing I did when I got home was roll my comic up in brown paper, address it, and put it in my schoolbag where I wouldn't forget it in the morning. Some chance of that. Lazarus had introduced an entirely new idea into my head. Publication. I hardly slept all night.

One of the things that kept me tossing and turning was the magazine I was sending my comic to. *Boy Magazine*. I had never bought one in my life, because it had the sneaky policy of printing stories, with only one illustration at the top of the page to get you interested. *Stories?* The school library was full of them, and what a bore they were. Did I want my comic to appear in a magazine which printed stories, where it would be read by the sort of people who were always taking books out of the library and sitting under trees and wearing glasses and squinting and turning pages with licked fingers? An awful prospect! At two o'clock in the morning I decided no, I didn't, and at three I did, and at four it was no again, but the last thing I saw before I finally fell asleep was Lazarus's face and he was saying, 'Publication!' and that decided it. Away it went.

Now let me properly introduce my father, a great scoffer. In those pre-television days, he had absolutely nothing to do in the evening but to walk past my room and look in and say, 'Nu? They sent you the money yet?' Fifty times a night, at least. And when the letter came from *Boy Magazine*, did he change his tune? Not one bit.

'I don't see a cheque,' he said.

'Of course there's no cheque,' I said. 'How can there be? We haven't even discussed it yet. Maybe I'll decide not to sell it to them. Which I will, if their price isn't right.'

'Show me again the letter,' my father said, 'Ha, listen, listen. "We are very interested in your comic and would like you to phone Miss Gordon to make an appointment to see the editor." An appointment? That means they don't want it. If they wanted it, believe me, there'd be a cheque.'

It serves no purpose to put down the rest of this pointless conversation, which included such lines as 'How many comics have you sold in your life?' and, 'Who paid for the paper? The ink?' other than to say that I made the phone call to Miss Gordon from a public phone and not from home. I wasn't going to have my father listening to every word.

My voice, when I was thirteen, and standing on tiptoe and talking into a public phone, was, I must admit, unnecessarily loud, but Miss Gordon didn't say anything about it. 'And what day will be most convenient for you, Mr Lurie?' she asked. 'Oh, any day at all!' I shouted. 'Any day will suit me fine!' 'A week from Thursday then?' she asked. 'Perfect!' I yelled, trying to get a piece of paper and a pencil out of my trouser pocket to write it down, and at the same time listening like mad in case Miss Gordon said something else. And she did. 'Ten o'clock?' 'I'll be there!' I shouted, and hung up with a crash.

It hadn't occurred to me to mention to Miss Gordon that I was thirteen and at school and would have to take a day off to come and see the editor. I didn't think these things were relevant to our business. But my mother did. A day missed from school could never be caught up, that was her attitude. My father's attitude you know. A cheque or not a cheque. Was I rich or was I a fool? (No, that's wrong. Was I a poor fool or a rich fool? Yes, that's better.) But my problem was something else. What to wear?

My school suit was out of the question because I wore it every day and I was sick of it and it just wasn't right for a business appointment. Anyway, it had ink stains round

the pocket where my fountain pen leaked (a real fountain, ha ha), and the seat of the trousers shone like a piece of tin. And my Good Suit was a year old and too short in the leg. I tried it on in front of the mirror, just to make sure, and I was right. It was ludicrous. My father offered to lend me one of his suits. He hadn't bought a new suit since 1934. There was enough material in the lapels alone to make three suits and have enough left over for a couple of caps. Not only that, but my father was shorter than me and twice the weight. So I thanked him and said that I had decided to wear my Good Suit after all. I would wear dark socks and the shortness of trousers would hardly be noticed. Also, I would wear my eye-dazzling pure silk corn yellow tie, which, with the proper Windsor knot, would so ruthlessly rivet attention that no one would even look to see if I was wearing shoes.

'A prince,' my father said.

Now, as the day of my appointment drew nearer and nearer, a great question had to be answered, a momentous decision made. For my father had been right. If all they wanted to do was to buy my comic, they would have sent a cheque. So there was something else. A full-time career as a comic-strip artist on the permanent staff of *Boy Magazine*! It had to be that. But that would mean giving up school and was I prepared to do that?

'Yes,' I said with great calmness and great authority to my face in the bathroom mirror. 'Yes.'

There were three days to go.

Then there occurred one of those things that must happen every day in the world of big business, but when you're thirteen it knocks you for a loop. *Boy Magazine* sent me a telegram. It was the first telegram I had ever received in my life, and about the third that had ever come to our house. My mother opened it straight away. She told everyone in our street about it. She phoned uncles, aunts, sisters, brothers, and finally, when I came home from school, she told me.

I was furious. I shouted, 'I told you never under *any* circumstances to open my mail!'

'But a telegram,' my mother said.

'A telegram is mail,' I said. 'And mail is a personal, private thing. Where is it?'

My mother had folded it four times and put it in her purse and her purse in her bag and her bag in her wardrobe which she had locked. She stood by my side and watched me while I read it.

'Nu?' she said.

'It's nothing,' I said.

And it wasn't. Miss Gordon had suddenly discovered that the editor was going to be out of town on my appointment day, and would I kindly phone and make another appointment?

I did, standing on tiptoe and shouting as before.

The offices of *Boy Magazine* were practically in the country, twelve train stations out of town. Trains, when I was thirteen, terrified me, and still do. Wearing my Good Suit and my corn yellow tie and my father's best black socks and a great scoop of oil in my hair, I kept jumping up from my seat and looking out of the window to see if we were

getting near a station and then sitting down again and trying to relax. Twelve stations, eleven stations, ten. Nine to go, eight, seven. Or was it six? What was the name of the last one? What if I went too far? What was the time? By the time I arrived at the right station, I was in a fine state of nerves.

The offices of *Boy Magazine* were easy to find. They were part of an enormous building that looked like a factory, and were not at all imposing or impressive, as I had imagined them to be. No neon, no massive areas of plate glass, no exotic plants growing in white gravel. (I had a picture of myself walking to work every morning through a garden of exotic plants growing in white gravel, cacti, ferns, pushing open a massive glass door under a neon sign and smiling at a receptionist with a pipe in my mouth.) I pushed open an ordinary door and stepped into an ordinary foyer and told an ordinary lady sitting at an ordinary desk who I was.

'And?' she said.

'I have an appointment to see the editor of *Boy Magazine*,' I said.

'Oh,' she said.

'At ten o'clock,' I said. 'I think I'm early.' It was half past nine.

'Just one minute,' she said, and picked up a telephone. While she was talking I looked around the foyer, in which there was nothing to look at, but I don't like eavesdropping on people talking on the phone.

Then she put down the phone and said to me, 'Won't be long. Would you like to take a seat?'

For some reason that caught me unawares and I flashed her a blinding smile and kept standing there, wondering what was going to happen next, and then I realised what she had said and I smiled again and turned around and bumped into a chair and sat down and crossed my legs and looked around and then remembered the shortness of my trousers and quickly uncrossed my legs and sat perfectly straight and still, except for looking at my watch ten times in the next thirty seconds.

I don't know how long I sat there. It was either five minutes or an hour, it's hard to say. The lady at the desk didn't seem to have anything to do, and I didn't like looking at her, but from time to time our eyes met, and I would smile – or was that smile stretched across my face from the second I came in? I used to do things like that when I was thirteen.

Finally a door opened and another lady appeared. She seemed, for some reason, quite surprised when she saw me sitting there, as though I had three eyes or was wearing a red suit, but I must say this for her, she had poise, she pulled herself together very quickly, hardly dropped a stitch, as it were, and holding open the door through which she had come, she said, 'Won't you come this way?' and I did.

I was shown into an office that was filled with men in grey suits. Actually, there were only three of them, but they all stood up when I came in, and the effect was overpowering. I think I might even have taken a half-step back. But my blinding smile stayed firm.

The only name I remember is Randell and maybe I have that wrong. There was a lot of handshaking and smiling and saying of names. And when all that was done, no one seemed to know what to do. We just stood there, all uncomfortably smiling.

Finally, the man whose name might have been Randell said, 'Oh, please, please, sit down,' and everyone did.

'Well,' Mr Randell said. 'You're a young man to be drawing comics, I must say.'

'I've been interested in comics all my life,' I said.

'Well, we like your comic very much,' he said. 'And we'd like to make you an offer for it. Ah, fifteen pounds?'

'I accept,' I said.

I don't think Mr Randell was used to receiving quick decisions, for he then said something that seemed to me enormously ridiculous. 'That's, ah, two pounds ten a page,' he said, and looked at me with his eyes wide open and one eyebrow higher than the other.

'Yes, that's right,' I said. 'Six two-and-a-halves are fifteen. Exactly.'

That made his eyes open even wider, and suddenly he shut them altogether and looked down at the floor. One of the other men coughed. No one seemed to know what to do. I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs and just generally smiled at everyone. I knew what was coming. A job. And I knew what I was going to say then, too.

And then Mr Randell collected himself, as though he had just thought of something very important (what an actor, I thought) and he said, 'Oh, there is one other thing, though. Jim, do we have Mr Lurie's comic here?'

'Right here,' said Jim, and whipped it out from under a pile of things on a desk.

'Some of the, ah, spelling,' Mr Randell said.

'Oh?' I said.

'Well, yes, there are, ah, certain things,' he said, turning over the pages of my comic, 'not, ah, *big* mistakes, but, here, see? You've spelt it as "jungel" which is not, ah, common usage.'

'You're absolutely right,' I said, flashing out my fountain pen all ready to make the correction.

'Oh, no no no,' Mr Randell said. 'Don't you worry about it. We'll, ah, make the corrections. If you approve, that is.'

'Of course,' I said.

'We'll, ah, post you our cheque for, ah, fifteen pounds,' he said. 'In the mail,' he added, rather lamely, it seemed to me.

'Oh, there's no great hurry about that,' I said. 'Any old time at all will do.'

'Yes,' he said.

Then we fell into another of these silences with which this appointment seemed to be plagued. Mr Randell scratched his neck. A truck just outside the window started with a roar and then began to whine and grind. It's reversing, I thought. My face felt stiff from smiling, but somehow I couldn't let it go.

Then the man whose name was Jim said, 'This is your first comic strip, Mr Lurie?'

'Yes,' I said. My reply snapped across the room like a bullet. I was a little bit embarrassed at its suddenness, but, after all, wasn't this what I had come to talk about?

'It's very professional,' he said. 'Would you like to see one of our comic-strips?'

'Certainly,' I said.

He reached down behind the desk and brought out one page of a comic they were running at the moment (I had seen it in the shop when I'd gone to check up on *Boy Magazine's* address), *The Adventures of Ned Kelly*.

Now, Ned Kelly is all right, but what I like about comics is that they create a world of their own, like, say, *Dick Tracy*, a totally fictitious environment, which any clear thinking person knows doesn't really exist, and Ned Kelly, well, that was real, it really happened. It wasn't a true comic-strip. It was just history in pictures.

But naturally I didn't say any of this to Jim. All I did was lean forward and pretend to study the linework and the inking in and the lettering, which were just so-so, and when I thought I'd done that long enough, I leaned back in my chair and said, 'It's very good.'

'Jim,' said Mr Randell, who hadn't spoken a word during all this, 'maybe you'd like to take Mr Lurie around and show him the presses. We print *Boy Magazine* right here,' he explained to me. 'Would you like to see how a magazine is produced?'

'Yes,' I said, but the word sounded flat and awful to me. I hated, at thirteen, being shown round things. I still do. How A Great Newspaper Is Produced. How Bottles Are Made. Why Cheese Has Holes And How We Put Them In.

And the rest of it, the job, the core of the matter? But everyone was standing up and Mr Randell's hand was stretched out to shake mine and Jim was saying, 'Follow me,' and it was all over.

Now I'm not going to take you through a tour of this factory, the way I was, eating an ice cream which Jim had sent a boy out to buy for me. It lasted for hours. I climbed up where Jim told me to climb up. I looked where he pointed. I nodded when he explained some involved and highly secret process to me. 'We use glue, not staples,' he explained to me. 'Why? Well, it's an economic consideration. Look here,' and I looked there, and licked my ice cream and wondered how much more there was of it and was it worth going to school in the afternoon or should I take the whole day off?

But like all things it came to an end. We were at a side door, not the one I had come in through. 'Well, nice to meet you,' Jim said, and shook my hand. 'Find your way back to the station okay? You came by train? It's easy, just follow your nose,' and I rode home on the train not caring a damn about how many stations I was going through, not looking out of the window, not even aware of the shortness of the trousers of my ridiculous Good Suit.

Yes, my comic-strip appeared and my friends read it and I was a hero for a day at school. My father held the cheque up to the light and said we'd know in a few days if it was any good. My mother didn't say much to me but I heard her on the phone explaining to all her friends what a clever son she had. Clever? That's one word I've never had any time for.

I didn't tell a soul, not even Michael Lazarus, about that awful tour of the factory. I played it very coolly. And a week after my comic-strip came out in print, I sat down and drew another comic story and wrapped it up and sent it to them, and this time, I determined, I would do all my business over the phone. With that nice Miss Gordon.

Weeks passed, nearly a whole month. No reply. And then, with a sickening crash, the postman dumped my new comic into our letterbox and flew on his merry way down the street, blowing his whistle and riding his bicycle over everyone's lawns.

There was a letter enclosed with my comic. It said that, unfortunately, *Boy Magazine* was discontinuing publication, and although they enjoyed my comic 'enormously', they regretted that they had no option but to return it.

My father had a field day over the whole business but no, no, what's the point of going over all that? Anyhow, I had decided (I told myself) that I didn't want to be a comic-strip artist after all. There was no future in it. It was risky and unsure. It was here today and gone tomorrow. The thing to be was a serious painter, and I set about it at once, spreading new boxes of water colours and tubes of paint all over the dining-room table and using every saucer in the house to mix paint. But somehow, right from the start, I knew it was no good. The only thing that was ever real to me I had 'grown out of'. I had become, like everyone else, a dreamer.