

## My Mother's Garden

Once more. If he says it one more time I swear I will hit him so hard he will never speak again. 'If only...' he says, and he frowns and shakes his head. 'If only...', his hands grip the arms of his chair. 'Ready for a cuppa Dad,' I say, loudly. He blinks. 'Oh. Tea. Well, alright. But I was saying, those people... if only they would clean the floor properly....' 'Back in a minute,' I say, and I'm gone. In the kitchen I clatter cups and saucers, turn on the radio while the kettle boils, hunt for some biscuits

When I carry the tray into the living room, he is staring out the window. 'Here you go Dad.' I hand him a cup, two biscuits resting in the saucer. He accepts with a grunt, the nearest he can get to 'thank you.' I sit on the couch and look out the window. Mum's garden is resplendent; mature eucalypts, small bushes bright with spring flowers. I work in the garden every time I visit, as much to enter Mum's world as to escape his. I think she must have done the same, worked in the garden for the love of it and for refuge. I imagine her needing to escape so much more often after he retired and could growl his litany all day.

'She' figures frequently now, as in, 'If only she had done what I told her,' and, 'If only she spent less on herself.' I wonder how long they were married before she understood, before his admonitory phrases became a dreaded theme in her life. Phrases which were amongst the first things I remember hearing from him.

'If only you kept all the receipts in one place. If only you had the dinner ready on time. If only you cleaned the bathroom once in a while.' It hurts, remembering what came next.

'I wouldn't have to...' With his face a mask of regret, he would cut back her allowance, or refuse her the use of the car, or not allow her to watch her favourite program for a week.

When I was small, I wanted her to do as he said so I wouldn't have to bear the consequence when she didn't. I missed out too when she couldn't use the car, or couldn't buy me an ice-cream on the way home from school. I suppose you could say

that I was on his side. I feel bad, thinking of that now. I changed my view soon enough though, when I became a teenager and he started on me. 'If only you kept your room tidy, I wouldn't have to ground you,' or refuse permission for the new dress, or the sleepover at a friend's house. Sometimes, when he had a particular look on his face, eyes narrowed and mouth tight, his 'if only' and faux regret would come completely out of the blue and I would find myself being grounded for ignoring something he had not said. There was no questioning him, of course. If I reacted with bewilderment, 'What? You never said...' he just looked pained and increased the punishment. One time he took away the text book I needed for an assignment. 'You should have thought of that,' he responded when I protested. I bit my arm until it bled.

Occasionally his focus shifted outside his immediate sphere of concern. 'If only those idiots at the council would fix the holes in this road. Someone will break an axle soon.' Or, my particular favourite. 'If only those people across the road would move their barbecue to the backyard. The smell of sausages hangs around all day.' In those moments of respite, we were happy to agree with him.

Mum and I became allies and practiced in deceit. She was skilled and devious; you wouldn't believe what she was capable of. Hidden stashes of cash. Evasion. Lies. She lied about where she took me on a Saturday afternoon. As I got older there were times when we told the same lie without rehearsing, our expressions free of guile. We lied about how much school books cost, how the scratch came to be on the car. Now and then she took huge risks with receipts. He didn't always check, preferring the random approach, keeping us in an even more heightened state of anxiety than we already inhabited. She 'mislaid' receipts only when it was really important. To buy that new dress for me, to pay for the school camp. That one was a doozy. When asked if I could go, he said, 'If only your mother hadn't spent so much on that new rug, we could afford to send you.' The thing was, my mother had asked for and received his approval for the purchase of the new rug. He knew how much it cost. Mum used the secret stash for the school camp. She told him she had some spare in housekeeping. He took the car keys away for a week, just when her sister was in town and mum wanted to show her around. Her sister hired a car and mum got to spend time with her while he was at work. My aunt would not come to our house.

Mum sent me away as soon as I finished school. He said, 'You should stay here and get a job, help your mother,' but she arranged for me to live with her sister in another city; I would go to University there. I had a grant so there was nothing he could say about money. Mum helped me pack, and bought the train ticket and explained over and over why I had to leave. I must get a good education, have the experience of living in a different city. She didn't mention him at all. I cried and cried. I wanted to go but could hardly bear to leave her there. I wanted her to go with me. 'We could get a place together. You could get a job.' I was angry that she stayed with him, and worried because I knew he would punish her for helping me leave.

My aunt did her best. She was patient with me through bouts of homesickness, chivvied me out of depressions, insisted that I got help to stop lying. Giving up lying was hard. I felt as though I was breaking a connection with Mum, and I had to tell the counsellor why she lied, why we lied, what we lied about. The counsellor never judged, even when I railed about Mum staying with him. I was surprised when she knew what I was describing, could even predict some of his favourite sayings. It took me a long time to stop lying, particularly to men.

Eventually I began to enjoy being a student and relish the freedom of my aunt's house. Mum and I spoke every week. She had a secret phone and we arranged our calls by coded emails. I laughed when she told me where she kept the phone; at the back of his sock drawer. As it was her job to keep the drawer tidy, he never did more than reach in and pick up the first pair of socks he touched. It was a risk, but worth it for the secret pleasure it gave her. She never spoke about him, or about how she was and after a while I stopped asking. She loved to hear about what I was doing and was over the top proud when I was awarded the University medal in my third year.

I began post-graduate study and moved into my own place. Mum visited, staying with my aunt, at first only for a day or two then gradually the visits lengthened until she would stay for a week or more. She seemed content, and sometimes talked about people she had met. I never asked how she managed to get away, but my aunt told me that my father had some health problems and couldn't get around much. I still wished mum would leave him. I wished he would die.

When I got my PhD, Mum came to the graduation, and came again to celebrate when I landed my first academic job. We had dinner at an expensive restaurant. She died

two days after she got home. My aunt called to tell me after my father called her. She said he was crying. I went home and arranged everything for the funeral and the wake. Afterwards I couldn't remember how I did it, only that my face was frozen and I couldn't cry. I kept clear of my father, leaving someone else to push the wheelchair. I did notice, though, that there were more people at her funeral than I expected. It seemed that she was active in the neighbourhood, volunteering here and there, talking to a neighbour over the fence, meeting a new friend for coffee, and people liked her. She kept looking after him though. One neighbour was at pains to tell me how lovely mum was with him. I said nothing.

My father demanded that I return home to look after him. I told him my home was elsewhere. As he refused outright to go into a nursing home, I engaged all the levels of help I could access. Over the next several months he got rid of every helper who arrived on his doorstep, phoning to complain about 'them' and adding, 'If only you would come home where you belong.' But he had no follow-up any more. No bullet in the chamber. No fuse to the bomb.

I waited him out until, finally, a roster of helpers was in place, and reports were that he was, if not appreciative, at least not refusing help. I began to visit. My aunt was puzzled, and I couldn't explain, only muttering something about needing to check that the roster was working, or that nothing in the house needed repairing. She knew, and I knew, that I would have been told if anything needed attention, but she didn't pursue it.

At one level it's obvious. I come to the house to be with mum. The house is as it was when she was alive, except for additions like rails in the toilet. He lives downstairs. I can go into her room upstairs and lie on the bed.

He starts to say something. I leave the room, climb the stairs, lie on her bed and fall into a deep sleep.

By the time I wake, the light is fading. I can hear him calling. I stumble downstairs and into the living room. He looks up at me, tears running down his face. 'I thought you'd gone,' he says, 'I thought you'd left me alone again.' I stare. He is pathetic. And suddenly, through the daze of afternoon sleep, I have a flicker of understanding. My mother loved this man. She married him and chose not to leave him, even as he became a monster. She saw what he needed, and she provided for him. How did she

do it? What do I know of the multifarious arrangements, the transactions and permutations of love in a marriage? I only know that when she broke the rules, she did it for me. She enabled the possibility of a different life for me. I feel an immense surge of gratitude.

I take a very deep breath. He is still looking at me, this old, pathetic man, tears wet on his face. Another breath. I say, 'It's OK Dad. I'm still here. I'm here for another day. And I'll visit again next month.' He nods.

'OK then? Why don't I make us some dinner?' He nods again, saying nothing. I head into the kitchen, thinking about what might be in the fridge. I am my mother's daughter.