

MY GRANDMOTHER'S MANOR

My thigh muscles tightened as I stood high on tiptoe, craning my neck to watch them perched on the branch, lined up next to each other like ornaments on a store shelf. The first kookaburra let out a cackle and the others followed. Standing in the middle of the blanket of fallen jacaranda flowers, I soaked up their laugh, a raw and joyous calling card, but when I moved towards them they flew away. It made me wonder if my grandmother had a special gift, or magic power even. Perhaps God bestowed upon her an affinity with kookaburras when he was handing out special gifts. Not only did they not flinch when she moved towards them, but they actually came to her.

Each time we visited our grandmother, I watched in wonder as one by one the kookaburras glided on to the stone ledge of her veranda. She laid small pieces of prime mince on the flat stone and they snatched at the meat, shaking their heads in delight as they gulped the soft, wet morsels. Once they had their fill they flew back into the safety of the nearby branches, watching her shuffle back inside, the blood from the meat swirling on the large white plate. Michael and I had to watch from behind the curtain in the lounge room, so that we wouldn't scare them away. This ritual fascinated me. Not because of her relaxed command of our native bird. I was fascinated with how the experience transformed my grandmother. It was the only time I saw her show compassion or the shadow of a smile.

Although she lived in a sandstone house rather than a castle, I thought she was a witch. I read books about evil witches who didn't like children and cooked them in stews, picturing my grandmother standing over a heavy cauldron, stirring while she mumbled to herself. Mind you, Mum often reminded Michael and me that she wasn't really our grandmother because she was Dad's father's second wife. It was clear from early on that our family's relationship with our grandmother was based on a sense of duty rather than love.

Mum and Dad were tense before and after visits to our grandmother's house. Their patience with us and each other decreased in direct proportion to our proximity to 75 Beach Parade. I don't remember how often we visited her, but it was too often. She lived on the

north coast and it was such a long journey that, in any other circumstance, it would have made sense to stay overnight. The only road to the coast wound around the mountains as I wrapped my hands around a paper bag. Cookie, our Maltese terrier, and I were the only ones who suffered motion sickness. I suspect that staying overnight was something Mum refused to do. Perhaps the compromise was that, yes, she would endure the visits but on the condition that they were as short as possible. When we arrived the four of us dragged our feet from the small iron gate up to the house, loaded down with the day's supplies and a collective sense of dread.

My grandmother was tall and lean like a tower. She wore a crown of tight wavy grey hair like a cap on her head and long pale shift dresses of sufficient length to conceal her sturdy support hose. The skin on her neck was soft and crepe-like and it sat like a scarf above her collar. She had the harsh edges of a greyhound but moved like an aged Labrador.

Each visit began with a sterile greeting at the front door then she made her way to her throne in the far corner of the lounge room. Once settled, she stayed there for the day, with the exception of taking lunch or going to the toilet which was at the back of the house on the timber sleep-out. Michael and I stood stiff beside her, waiting for the cue from Mum to talk.

"Emily got Honours again this year in her ballet exam, Agnes," Mum said. "She'll have six items at this year's concert, which is more than any of the other girls." Mum spoke faster than usual, nodding at me which was her signal for me to smile. I looked at my grandmother, but she was looking out the window. Her hands lay flat on each arm rest, except for the digit finger of her left hand. She lifted it and lowered it over and over, as if she was counting a beat in her mind. "And Michael's grades," Mum said, "were much improved this year, which we put down to his new teacher, Mr Newton. Michael really likes Mr Newton...don't you Michael?" Mum nodded at Michael who smiled at our grandmother. Dad sat in the recliner chair that used to be his father's, his feet crossed at the ankles, his arms resting across the buttons of his hand-knitted cardigan. Mum glared at Dad. He cleared his throat and rubbed his ankles together. "We drove past the jetty,

Agnes,” he said, “and it looks like they’re developing it nicely.” Mum was still sitting high and forward in her chair.

Our grandmother looked straight at Dad. “If you like that type of development, Bruce,” she said. “It may look good for the tourists but when you live here it’s a nightmare. The only people who patronise those establishments are hoodlums. Loud and unruly with their motorbikes and rock music.” She shifted her weight in the chair, finding a more comfortable position. “The young people of today have no respect.” The speed of her left digit finger increased, tapping the arm rest like a woodpecker, then she leant over the other side of the chair and pulled out a little silver box. She opened it to expose hundreds of silver coins. She took some coins from the box, placed it back on the low shelf of the side table, and turned towards us, then pressed twenty five cents into each of our hands and sent us on our way. Our grandmother never explained what the coins were for but we knew it was the ransom she paid to free herself from the nuisance of children. I don’t know what she did enjoy, other than her moments with her kookaburras. She certainly didn’t enjoy children.

With our coins clasped in hand, we walked through the front gate onto Beach Parade, the day stretching out ahead like an endless string of time. The little town was our playground. Our adventures started on the beach, which was only one block away. We climbed down the wooden stairs that connected the road to the beach, jumping from the last step onto the soft sand. At high tide there were hundreds of rock pools which we scoured for crabs and sea anemones. I taunted the anemones, poking them with sticks or seaweed to see if they were awake. Michael and I spent hours there, hardly talking, other than to share our delight when we found an even bigger crab than the last one. By the end of the hunt our buckets were filled with sand, salt water, shells and crabs. The smell was enticing and repulsive at the same time.

We walked down to the town centre, our buckets growing heavier with each step, and loitered in the park that bordered the bay. Hundreds of pelicans came to the park to be fed. We watched them catch their lunch in their enormous beaks, billows of skin stretching to accommodate the live, thrashing fish. I never believed they could actually fly until one

lumbered along the hard sand and took off into the air, hovering low over the water like a sea-plane.

There wasn't much for children to do, except when the fair came to town during school holidays. That was also when our cousins were in town with their grandmother. They were lucky; she was like the Good Fairy from the Wizard of Oz, but quite a bit older and not as pretty. She loved children, had a messy home, and a huge fridge filled with iceblocks and soft drinks. Michael and I loved being in her home because it was like a magnet for people. Everyone was welcome, so there were always people there. We were even allowed in the back door without washing the sand off our feet.

Most of the time it was just Michael and I wandering around, hunting for things to do. Even though we had each other I think we both felt lonely on those trips because we knew we weren't welcome. Of course we had to return on time for lunch at high noon at the manor. A vigorous rinse under the garden tap was essential if we wanted to enter the house for lunch. My grandmother had the first carpeted kitchen I'd ever seen. I thought she must have had lots of money if she could afford to carpet her kitchen and wondered how she kept the carpet clean, but realised she hardly ever cooked or ate so she didn't need to worry about mess in her kitchen. The four of us joined her at the rectangular linoleum table, the six chairs covered in green vinyl.

Lunch was always the same: china dinner plates which smelled of washing detergent, paper napkins neatly folded in the stainless steel triangular frame, heavy silver cutlery, and a few plates in the centre of the table with a predictable selection of foods. The meat was either roast chicken which Mum had bought from the chicken shop, or ham out of a tin, with that slimy jelly covering it. Canned asparagus, broad beans, coleslaw and mayonnaise accompanied the meat. Dessert was apple pie with cream or ice-cream.

Michael and I watched and listened as Dad, Mum and Grandma talked. The only things they ever discussed were the status of Grandpa's estate, of which Dad was the executor, and the status of Grandma's shingles. She carried her left arm limp most of the time and Mum made a point of asking about it every hour or so. Grandma liked to talk about her shingles.

After lunch we were sent away to amuse ourselves. We stayed close to the house in the hope that soon we'd have to pile back into the car and head south for home. Michael and I used the front steps as our base. Mum and Dad could keep an eye on us there as the lounge windows looked out on to the front steps. There were six stone steps, etched with deep cracks, worn and smooth in the centre. At each side of the stairs stood a stone sculpture of a lion. Michael and I climbed them and patted them and fed them. They came alive, bounding around the garden, having to be tamed with a lasso or brought under control with our whip. There was a large crack in the stone on the third step which, I was sure, led into a secret world under the house, where strange animals lived, watching us play and waiting for us to leave so they could go about their lives of hunting and feeding. I imagined that at any moment a snake would crawl out from behind the step, and brush up against my thigh as I sat watching the kookaburras. Just like a jungle girl, I would tame the snake with one smooth stroke of its slimy scales.

Between the front stone fence and the house was a huge forest of palm trees, hiding my grandmother from the rest of the world. Michael and I chased each other around the palm trees until we couldn't run anymore. We fanned one other with the large fallen palm fronds, moving the hot summer air around our bodies. There was a mulberry bush near the back door which was draped like a heavy blanket over an old timber fence that separated the normal garden from a small orchard of fruit trees that my grandfather had planted many years before. In spring, it was lush with green leaves and hundreds of berries. I picked handfuls of the deep purple berries and stuffed them into my mouth, staining my hands and lips. The mulberry paint exposed my fingerprints which I pressed against the stone steps.

In summer, we were allowed into the house in the afternoon. My grandmother deigned to open the giant cupboards in the hallway and retrieve grandfather's bag of coins. It was an old canvas bag, just like he might have used in a bank robbery. There were coins from many years ago, even one with a hole in the middle. Michael spent hours sorting through them, putting them in piles according to the year they were minted. I quickly tired of the coins so it became a ritual that he and my grandmother shared. It made sense to me that she would favour him. He was quiet and polite and knew how to behave. I was

cheeky and restless and quick to question everything. Also, I wasn't dainty and porcelain enough for her liking.

My grandmother died when I was in high school. My family displayed deep sorrow that she had left the family fortune to the church.

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