I Know What Lies Beneath the Eucalyptus

Joyous and content my grandparents’ house made me feel. It was not big, it was not grand, it slept beside the bitumen road and hid beneath sleepy eucalyptus. Come inside, my grandmother says. Come inside and drink tea, hot and milky in tall mugs. Dine on lamingtons and fairy bread. Spear the diced watermelon with vintage cocktail forks. And gaze around the room, searching confidently for the elephant painting hanging in its proper place above the peacock feathers and the flower-patterned love-seat sofa. The dying upright piano slumps beside the patio and I play it, making nothing, feeling tuneless, not knowing I would write my own music one day. I run my hands along the gilt spines of my grandfather’s set of Charles Dickens.

“Give them to me when you die?” I beg. It is a tragic request, but I must ask it. Must not let my aunt take them. They will be mine. I feel a panic, as if I know I won’t be there much longer. Psychic tendencies, even then.

For twelve years my mother drives our rattling van along the highway to the house behind the eucalyptus, where lived the English preacher and his Bermudian bride. Beyond the house and further along the sunshine road was Fremantle and the prison overlooking the sea. But my grandparents’ house was often as close to the sea as we got – miles away but remembered in the Fremantle Doctor that blew, legend-laden, across the suburbs in the late afternoon, the blessed breeze from the Indian Ocean. Just as the zephyr blew mysterious across the sun-baked dwellings of sand groppers, my grandparents’ house was my blessed mysterious haven, a place where I learned to love nostalgia with a fierceness, where my love for books could blossom, and my delight for the hidden and the unloved wrapped around the trellis of my soul to become morphed with my person for the rest of my life.

In the preacher’s house on a grey-gold-green Australian street, I studied old things. The door key beneath a green glass bubble vase. My grandfather’s drawer of quirks and
tricks. A pipe. A tube of green water-filled plastic. A tiny box that contained a man trapped eternally, screaming to get out when you pushed a button. A rubber egg. The tiny cupboard supporting the television that held British television dramas preserved on VHS. My grandmother. My grandfather.

My grandfather, the boy preacher from Somerset, lived most of his waking hours in the two-room building at the bottom of the garden, emerging for elevenses and lunches of tiny tuna sandwiches. Mentored by Martin Lloyd Jones, whose portrait hung on his study wall where I could frown at it in suspicion, he penned sermons about the glory of God, poems about his grandchildren aging, and sang when he thought no one could hear him. He had the richest baritone I have ever heard. The kind that sells records. Alas. He was the sweet-giver. The tease. The one who gave piggy-back rides and took us to Baskin and Robbins. The man of beautiful words. He shaped my perspective of England before I knew it existed.

My grandmother is short and brown and energetic. She can outwalk me. She believes fervently in the power of being curious and will chase people down to get the information she wants.

“What is that word?” she says. “What is its definition?”

We groan.

We know that none of us will rest until she has learned what she needs to know.

“What is that? Where is it from? What year did that war take place?”

She reaches for the dictionary.

Sometimes I rush off to search Google for the answer just so we can move on and discuss other things.

I close my eyes and I see her standing in the living room, one hand on her hip, the other cupping her chin, looking at us playing. She reads Bill Peet’s fabulous stories to us, her voice high and emphasized. Pamela the Camel is petrified because my grandmother makes
her so. Chester the Pig learns a lesson about vanity. The little mountain goat is safe and sound at last.

The day is made splendid by an unexpected visit to my grandparents. The Toyota van turns off the road onto the beaten gravel driveway, crushing fallen yellow flowers to pulp.

Hello, 27 Moorhouse Street.

“Come in my dear.”

My grandmother holds the screen door open with her fingertips, a red plastic bangle hanging from her skinny brown wrist. She wears a sleeveless cotton dress with a blue and white striped skirt, a red beaded necklace hanging low and free, bouncing against her chest. My three sisters and I spill over the doorsill. The little ones run for the dress-up box. I head for the bookshelves like a homing pigeon. Plonking down on the carpet with a stack of twenty stories, I sigh with satisfaction. I am surrounded by old things that are made to last. The rooms I explore still look dark even in the sunshine, every niche a wealth of dust. I am encircled by a hundred collections. Silver teaspoons, hideous vases, ornaments from Asia, and blue and white china people. Vinyl. Hundreds. My grandmother’s old teaching notes. Her diaries and dog-eared poetry books.

My grandmother reads books and saves the world by saving everything that crosses her path. She kept a glass jar of red rubber bands that bound envelopes in the mail. She saved the envelopes as well. The backs of cereal boxes. The water from the washing machine for the flowers outside. Bath-time consisted of my siblings and I shivering in a water level that lay two inches deep. Turn off the lights if it isn’t pitch black outside. Dig for Victory.

I dash out the back door, sprinting over the pink and white bricks, past the white trellis my mother slept beneath in the sun the day before her wedding, cucumbers pressed to her eyes. I do not knock on the preacher’s study door, but slide the screen back with a jerk,
crushing the black caterpillars in the groove, stepping into a tome-filled world of termites and theology.

My grandfather looks up from a Matthew Henry commentary and hugs me when I burst into his office.

“How are you going?” I ask, peering over his shoulder at the papers spread before him on his desk, the meticulous outline of the sermon he will preach the coming Sunday.

“How well,” he says. “How are you?”

“I lost the last of my baby teeth.”

“Wonderful!”

“Come play tag. Are you almost done?”

“Almost.”

He resumes his work and I honour my own rituals by perusing a few bookshelves in the adjoining room. They line the walls from floor to ceiling, history, social commentaries, essays, but mostly religion and theology: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis, and Calvinists that I will learn to disagree with in years to come. Then back out into the sunshine.

My sisters play with flowers beneath an awning of bougainvillea, making soup from geraniums and lavender. The smallest sister with the golden curls begs a ride on the green tricycle. I flit between the piles of books in the playroom and the sun kissed garden, running back and forth across the dining room linoleum, which sinks beneath my sandals. I do not play, so much as wander, hiding by myself in sunny or shady alcoves, studying the flowers and watching sand fall through my fingers. Once, I stumbled upon a patch of nettles in the deep green seclusion of the dark recesses of the garden and felt their soft sting. I returned a few times after that to search for more, brushing my hand against the satanic leaves to watch the white dots grow upon my fingers. Fascinating.
Amidst an endless wander round a thousand patches of flowers, my grandmother calls from the back step that lunch is ready. Racing up the garden path, pulling on the sun-warmed door knob, teetering on the perilously narrow step, swinging inside before plunging to my death on the brick paving beneath, I plonk down on a chair and eat as many sandwiches as I can. They are tiny sandwiches. My grandmother cuts her sandwiches into fourths, and each fourth is about the size of an Oreo cookie. My siblings and I are healthy, growing children, and realistically fond of food. We try to snatch at least eight quarters, inwardly groaning that our grandmother will always underestimate the size of our appetites. The knowledge that my grandfather consumed this meagre fare every day of his life and never complained and was still alive was some comfort. I have moved on. Quarter-cut sandwiches are in the past.

Lunch over, there are projects to embark upon. If it is late spring, or early summer, my siblings and I are eager volunteers in the ambitious undertaking to harvest my grandparents’ annual yield of loquats that grow upon the magnificently wild loquat tree at the heart of the garden. Our wages are boundless tastings of the saccharine fruits, unmatched in sweetness. I sorrow to imagine a mortal unfamiliar with the taste of a ripe loquat. The Australian climate is perfect for growing the Chinese fruit, and my grandparents’ tree is taller than most. Usually the trees are only about three to four metres tall. This one is over eight metres, maybe even more. Funny, I never climbed it. I wonder why. But I would stand at its base and tilt my head back, staring up at the tough and leathery leaves and the woolly twigs, counting branches, imagining how it would feel to touch the topmost leaves. I should have climbed it.

Smiling at a sister through a network of leaves, I stand on a screeching metal ladder, a small plastic bowl positioned precariously upon the top step, reaching over my head and grasping at the soft orange ovals. A loquat is the prettiest fruit in the world. They grow about one to two inches long, are soft and fuzzy to the touch and are coloured yellow and orange.
When picking loquats, you want to look for a rich yellow colour, and you feel it to see if it is soft. Then you bite it – a sweetness like no sweetness. Candy sweet. I tear away intact strips of flesh with delicate teeth, exposing the cluster of marble-sized seeds in the centre.

When I have filled my bowl, I descend the perilous ladder and traipse in muggy November heat to the back door, depositing my collection upon the table around which sit my mother, my grandmother, and my aunt, pitting a million loquats. A bucket stands on the floor beside them, filled with loquat pits. I slide my hands under the surface, feeling the slipperiness spill over my fingers like whale milk, like a million brown pearls.

My grandmother stands over her ancient cooking pots, sweating in the summer heat, barefoot in her blue and white striped cotton dress, stirring loquats over the gas stove. She is making chutney. For weeks there will be ice-cream containers of loquats everywhere – at ladies’ bible studies, by the hymnal stands at church. Take them. Please take them. We have millions. And we have stomach aches.

Perhaps today we are here for a sleep-over. If so, my mother will bring in pillows from the van that she hid on the way over, surprising us with toothbrushes and the promise to return the following afternoon. We tell her she can return next week if she prefers. The day has been miraculously lengthened and stretches out alluringly. An eight-year-old knows how to fill an empty day that is just for her. No indecisiveness, just expectant bliss.

Like a stringless kite, I mull freely over old pictures in the cluttered playroom, sometimes staring out through the window onto the street, where blurry haunted images flash across my mind. Handsome identical twin boys sit on the curb opposite the house, holding tightly the arms of a young white man in a grey shirt. He tries to get away, leaping upwards, but they force him down again. He sits with his head bowed, their fingers gripping him relentlessly. The police come in a paddy wagon and lay him down on the rough road and roll him up in tape. Over and under, around and around, till he looks like he is emerging from a
cocoon. Then he looked right at me, lying there, holding his head up and looking into my eyes as I stared through the window. I tried to help my sisters remember years later. Remember? He looked at me. Rolled up in tape on the gravel. Gravel. It hurts – gravel. No one remembers. Blast those heroic twins in their matching orange shirts who chased the thief the length of the street and behaved like model citizens. My eight-year-old self inwardly pledged to root for the underdog my whole life long.

When evening comes, we practice the same-old rituals of dental hygiene in a different bathroom. The cockroaches like the dark. We run from them and duck as they fly over our heads. I leap from the floor to my aunt’s old mattress to avoid the ghoulish realm of monsters beneath the frame, making the springs scream as I land. The window opens on a hinge green with age – the garden steams in the November heat and sends a bouquet of scents towards the moon. The little window in the fly wire opens with a plastic knob and stick contraption that gives me an inexplicable nostalgic chill for the 80s. I gaze over the forest of flowers and fruit trees, beyond the back fence, over the field of sand and yellow grass and a wilderness of green oats to the highway where road trains loaded with sheep sigh and lurch. The traffic lights and streetlights are yellow in the distance and the busy sounds are a foreign thrill and exciting change from the senior quiet of my own neighbourhood. I fall asleep to the sound of truck brakes gasping while night shadows of unfamiliar trees move across my bed.

It was blissful waking up in that room because the sunshine streamed in and hit the bookshelves and highlighted every speck of dust. It was too early for anyone else to be stirring, so I amused myself by studying my bed’s headboard that was stacked with unfamiliar books. Maybe there was a book I was not allowed to read. Time to find it.

When the magpies start to sing, my grandmother comes into our room, her blue dressing gown on and her face blurry with sleep. She brings plastic cups filled with Nutri-grain. She sits on the floor while we munch away. She might talk about the day ahead, read a
book, ask us how we slept, her voice soft so as not to awaken my grandfather. We throw on old clothes and thud down the old hallway. Our grandmother makes breakfast, spooning soft and luscious porridge into brown bowls. It is the breakfast we always ask for. It is the sweetest oatmeal for we could mix in as much brown sugar as we liked. Milky and soft as silk, we spooned it with speed for the sun was shining and the outdoors was beckoning, the air already heavy with frangipani scents. But we must have seconds. The spoons scrape the bowl, and the bowl is so soft, soft like putty. The spoon seems to dig slightly into the curve of the bowl as the milk and oats collect in the ancient silver.

Our mother comes to take us home.

And finally, they sell the place. Just as the loquats are coming back on the trees. I do not remember learning of the move, nor do I recall any goodbye. There wasn’t one. My mother had given birth to a little boy and was unwell and my father was nursing his mother who was deathly ill. Life was too busy for a drive back along the sunshine road. My grandparents were busy taking the books off the shelves and wrapping the blue and white china people up in newspapers. They packed up and left and gave the keys to strangers.

I never walked through the house one last time. I never saw it empty or stood still to realise anything. I never paused by favourite places to remind myself to remember them. The house vanished from my life quickly and quietly, like a shimmer crossing a hidden pool. If there was sadness I didn’t know it, although a faint memory courses through my mind that I worried about the loquats and mourned that they would be someone else’s harvest. Months later we passed the house out of curiosity and looked out upon a distant shadow of it, dusty from construction that had already moved in to renovate the archaic architecture. Through the glare of machinery, I caught a glimpse of the garden path and felt a hollow ache in my stomach that it was barred to me for the first time.
I lost the house and it will never be restored to me. But the books, and the sunshine, and the feel of linoleum – they will always be mine, won’t they be? And go with me to the grave? At least let me walk outside one more time, stepping on the pink and white bricks, dipping my head beneath the bougainvillea arch, filling my hands with orange Montbretia. The van door slides shut one more time, the gravel crunches in a long retreat, and then we drive away. But looking back I can still see the eucalyptus waving above the highest telephone wire and I know what is beneath them.