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Gina Dawson – SA.*

## Leaving home

he grandfather clock strikes one o'clock and we are into our final hour here. Percy is sitting on the bench, under the back verandah. He's wrapped in his thoughts and I want to be there beside him, but not as much as I want to be alone with my memories. I peer through the screen door at him; he is staring straight ahead, wearing that taut expression he gets when he feels unfairly criticised or misunderstood.

Percy and I have been married for sixty years, and we know each other as well as two people can. But once in a while something unprecedented happens and we don't know what to expect from each other; it feels unnatural, unnerving.

'Percy,' I call gently, not wishing to startle him.

He turns his face towards me.

'Do you want a cup of tea, dear?'

I hope he does, so I can make one last pot. It will pass the time.

'Yes, thank you dear,' he replies, and his voice sounds tired, defeated.

It's cold outside, the sky a solid block of grey that reflects my mood.

'Are you warm enough, Percy?' I ask. 'No point catching a chill over this, you know. We might have another ten good years left in us yet.'

'I doubt that, Gladys love,' he says. 'But don't fuss, I have my blanket here.' He tugs at it, pulling it up to cover his knees.

'Alright, dear, I won't be long then,' I say, and shuffle off to prepare the tea.

Back in my kitchen I look around, imprinting every inch into

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my memory. Only a few things are missing; we aren't taking much. There's the good tea service and silver cake forks, the corkscrew and can opener, a dozen useful gadgets, the linen tea towels and electric jug. The rest will be left behind, shared around, sold and donated. I couldn't bring myself to get rid of the junk, the things I know nobody will want, because each object contains a memory that I can't discard. The children will sort it out after we've gone; they'll look at the piles of metal and plastic, glass and china, and be exasperated that their mother kept this old thing or that broken one when she could afford new. They'll carelessly chuck my memories into boxes and bins to dispose of as soon as they can.

I set the kettle on the stove, arrange two cups and saucers on a tray and pour milk into Percy's cup. I resist the urge to open cupboards and drawers again, knowing I'll find something else that I can't bear to leave, something I'm afraid I might miss when it's too late. Instead I pass the time by looking out at the garden. I have enjoyed our garden for six decades, and it has constantly changed, reflecting the seasons of our lives.

When we moved here we were young, newly married and full of dreams. The garden was a blank slate, an expanse of weeds and dirt, save for a rainwater tank on a brick stand, beneath which the puppy had slept. We planted trees and bushes, flowers and vegetables, and made it our own, and years had gone by when we weren't blessed with children, and the dog became middle-aged. So we nurtured the garden instead of a family and then, unexpectedly, the babies came, four in six years, three sons and finally the delicate, fragile Elizabeth. And the garden was transformed with a cubby house, swing, sand pit and gates; it became a garden with a purpose. Later there had been another dog and bushes pruned to make way for the cricket pitch. A bench was added for Elizabeth and I as well as a table from which I served home baked biscuits and cordial between the innings.

But Elizabeth died with less than a dozen years behind her. The garden no longer rang with laughter and our sons couldn't bear to look upon our grief, which to them seemed endless. So they spent more time away, perhaps in other people's gardens, while Percy and I poured grief, love and sorrow into ours.

And it was healing. Our garden was reborn into a beautiful, tranquil place, a refuge where Percy and I would sit and feel soothed.

Because it was so beautiful our sons gradually returned to our garden; all three brides chose it for their weddings. We placed plaques to commemorate these occasions, alongside those for Elizabeth and the dogs. For a time everyone admired our garden until it changed again, becoming a playground. Spaces were filled with brightly coloured equipment that the grandchildren could climb and hang upside down from. But this transition was too brief, for soon the grandchildren's lives were filled with other interests; computers, school and friends, and they came less often.

That marked the point at which the garden began an unhurried journey backwards, towards what it once was, becoming just a little unkempt and slightly neglected. Percy and I did what we could to keep it neat, and continued to spend time there.

So although what I see through the window is a lawn with weeds and unruly bushes, I remember what was once there; exuberant puppies chasing sticks, squealing, running children, brides being kissed, along with a hundred tiny memories that may have been forgotten by all but me.

The kettle is steaming up the window and I bring myself back to the present. I daren't look at the clock. I pour the water into the prepared teapot, cover the pot with the tea cosy and trundle down the passage to call Percy. I look out and see he has fallen asleep. He looks peaceful and it seems a shame to wake him, so I leave him to doze and return to my kitchen. I have spent more hours in this room than in any other, and I don't know how I will bear to leave.

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'Take plenty of photographs,' they had said. 'They will make it feel more like home. We understand it's hard, but it's better that you and Dad are somewhere safe, with people to help you when you need.' At first we had resisted, but they persisted, gradually wearing us down with their reasoning.

'Your memory, Mum, it isn't what it once was and it worries us, what if you leave the kettle on, burn the place down around you...?'

We are lucky to have children who care about what's best for us; some of our friends have only themselves to rely on. Percy and I have each other and most of our children.

The phone rings and I hurry to the passage and answer it.

'I'm leaving now to collect you,' says John, our eldest, and I snap at him, panic-stricken.

'No dear, it's not time yet, you said two o'clock!'

'I'm running early, Mum, but it will be quarter to by the time I get there.'

'No! I'm not ready. I don't want to leave until two. Don't come 'til two.'

'Alright then,' he says, and I know he is irritated with me for dragging this out, there are doubtless places he needs to be; he runs a successful business and has a pretty new wife.

I put down the phone and spy an empty carton. Returning to the kitchen, I find more things to pack, carefully selecting knickknacks, the bowl that John made in woodwork, my heart-shaped dough cutter, my recipe book with the notes made by Elizabeth next to newly tried dishes. I won't need recipes; it's the comments I want. Children's egg cups fill the last spaces and I put the box with the others by the front door.

So this is how it ends, I think. I'll hold my head high because they think I'm just a sentimental old woman who won't accept that I've become too dodderly to look after myself. And if we stay here and have an accident they'll feel guilty that they hadn't persuaded us to be somewhere safe. They like the idea

of us relaxing with nothing we have to do, and being centrally located so they can visit easily and be assured that we aren't lonely. That's what they want. The light-filled, modern rooms they have chosen for us will, they tell us, soon feel like home when we have filled them with our clutter; there we could live for twenty years, make it to the century and what a celebration that would be!

My children would feel satisfied that they looked out for us in our old age, and rejoice that their parents are long-lived, and therefore it must be in their genes.

The grandfather clock is approaching two o'clock and every minute goes slowly, yet so quickly, and now I hear John's car on the gravel. I get up and make my way to tell Percy that it's time to leave. As I step onto the veranda my heart misses a beat because Percy is so still, his head and shoulders hunched over, his mouth open and his eyes closed. I reach down and touch his dangling hand; it feels limp and cold. Hot tears start rolling down my cheeks as I remember what he said, all those years ago.

'They'll carry me out of this house in a box, Gladys love. That's the way I'm leaving.'

Now John is standing behind me, holding my shaking shoulders to steady me as I let out a wail.

'Percy, oh Percy!'

And Percy jerks and snorts and bangs his elbow on the bench and shouts 'What? What is it?' and I feel lightheaded with relief.

Percy says, 'What are you trying to do, woman? Give me a heart attack?' But then he sees John and his old eyes fill with moisture.

'Well, Dad.' John steps forward and offers his arm to help Percy rise. 'It's time to go.' They look at each other, both with the same eyes, and Percy speaks in a voice that is old but strong.

'No, son, I'm staying right here. I'll take my chances here.'

Before John can reply I say, 'I'm doing the same, John, Dad and I will take our chances together.'

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And Percy's face lights up with such sheer joy and I see the young man he once was, and know that we have made the right choice. My tears are now of happiness as Percy takes my hands between his.

'We're not ready to get put away just yet,' I say to John. 'After all, we might still have ten good years in us yet.'

'I reckon you could be right about that, Gladys dear,' says Percy. 'I reckon you could be right.'

He smiles at me. 'Now,' he says, 'what's happened to that cup of tea?'