

YET STILL STEADFAST AWARD

Isabelle Miller LOCAL ENCOURAGEMENT



Isabelle grew up in Corryong, and later moved to Melbourne to pursue her studies. At Melbourne University she completed a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Creative Writing, followed by a Diploma of Education. Isabelle has always loved to travel and explore different cultures and parts of the world, however, something has always drawn her back to her hometown. In 2016, Isabelle and her partner purchased a cafe in Corryong. She is now kept busy running the cafe, writing whenever she has time, and planning her next adventure overseas.

YET STILL STEADFAST

We took our father over to the coast once. He'd never seen the ocean before. He stood for an hour or so, his toes in the sand, shaking his head at the vastness of it.

We went whale watching out on an old boat, but our father chose to stay behind. He wasn't certain, just yet, about the trustworthiness of the water.

"The ocean is a dangerous place," he said, full of bewilderment.

Instead he walked up and down the shoreline, collecting seashells and debris with my brother's child. The sand burned his feet. They were so red and blistered he had to walk around in slippers for the rest of the holiday.

My father moved in with another woman quickly after our mother died. His new woman was a widow, and our father had never seen a house like hers before. Walls of books and crooked Persian rugs on hardwood floors, Indian quilts and a mess that no one seemed bothered by.

Our mother had always kept their house neat and tidy. "Always ready," she would say, "for if Queen Elizabeth dropped by for tea."

The new woman wore silk scarves wrapped round her mop of grey hair and read Kafka by the fire at night. She smoked - long thin cigarettes - from the corner of her mouth. We didn't even know her surname.

She was from somewhere in England, but we never asked where. We never asked, either, how her husband had died.

"She probably murdered him," my wife laughed darkly in our bedroom one night. "Maybe she drove him over the edge," I suggested. Our mirth filled me with apprehension and guilt, but I couldn't see how I was supposed to like her considering the circumstances.

We didn't know what this woman saw in our father. She was educated and worldly. She knew about things and about people. The only conclusion we could draw was that she thought there was a bit of money in the sale of the farm. She was holding out, my brother suggested, for our father to die. Of course, we were loath to trust her.

"You could move closer to me," my older brother had suggested on a rare visit, with the stern face he wore in the courtroom. He paced up and down the living room floor. "We could find you a nice house down the road from us. June would understand you know, if you decided to move."

I chimed in as well. "You could move in with us," I said. "You could use my office until we find something more suitable for you." I couldn't imagine my father in our tiny apartment, drinking his morning coffee overlooking the city below, the ferries cruising in great, patient arcs through the water. I couldn't imagine him walking up and down the city streets and knowing where he was.

Our home was far from the valleys and mountains and rivers he had grown up around. We had harbour views.

"I don't want to be a bother," our father would say, waving us away. "It wouldn't be a problem at all."

"Son," he gruffly said, "I just want to read the paper in peace. I honestly couldn't care less about where I live. It doesn't matter." And then, with great sadness in his eyes, "nothing really matters to me anymore. I'll be dead soon enough."

"Don't say things like that," my wife chided, as though he was a child. Jenny was frustrated by my father's melancholia. We all were.

We told him he should see a counsellor. He told us to mind our own business. "You kids think you know everything, but you don't. I'm happy enough, so just leave me be."

We wondered about his happiness, but we let it be. Our lives rushed on.

Our mother was always sure there was a ghost in the house we grew up in. She said sometimes when she was alone she could feel the presence of someone in the room with her. She imagined him, she said, to wear a sort of helmet – perhaps a relic from the First World War. He was a friendly ghost, she said. She never felt threatened by him: he just seemed to know when she needed company.

"What rot," my father said. He never bought into any of her fantasies.

But we knew that our great-uncle had died in the house, in the room we now called the Good Room. He'd installed the pressed-tin ceilings and built the fireplace, brick-by-brick, in that room. Our father would proudly tour guests around our house every time someone came to visit, and The Good Room was the Tour De Force.

Our father wasn't to know, then, how much that house and property could mean to someone. He didn't know how he would hope, as he drove out of there for the last time, for the trees and paddocks and fences to remember him. How he hoped that, if ghosts were real, that his would join his uncle's.

In the old days, he rose every morning just as the first heat hit, as the cockatoos began their screeching in the bull paddock behind the house. He would stay out in the paddocks all day, returning with nightfall. He was always weary, his skin and clothing thick with sweat and dirt and sometimes the blood of an animal or his own hands, ripped open with fencing wire.

At night, in the Good Room with the pressed-tin ceiling, our mother played Schubert on the piano.

"I always wanted to travel the world in an orchestra," she had told me once. "Why didn't you?"

"Well," she sighed, "I fell in love with your father. And when you really love someone, you have to make sacrifices. Besides," she added, "sometimes you have to be practical."

Later, just before our father put the farm up for sale, our mother died in that house too.

Our father came to stay for a while in the city. We took a ferry from the North Shore down to Circular Quay. Out on the stern of the boat, with the wooden plank seats that the business commuters avoided, we felt the wind from the ocean hit our faces. The tourists around us began to madly take photos, pushing against each other to get a better view of the city.

"There's the Bridge," my wife pointed out to my father. The ferry bucked and tipped, spray from the salty water splashing down our clothing.

"If I wanted to see the Sydney Harbour Bridge," my father said, "I could have just looked in a book."

"What about the Opera House?" I asked, nodding in its direction.

"What rot," he cried. "I'll never understand why that's considered good architecture." He kept his eyes on the floor of the ferry for the rest of the trip.

Later, when I called my brother, we thought perhaps he was losing his mind. "At least this time he came on the boat."

"I've been researching," my brother said. "Anger is one of the first signs of dementia. We should probably consider, you know, putting him in a home or something."

We never spoke of it again. We would have to take him by force. Our father would never admit defeat.

My brother had told my father when he was twenty-two that neither of us had any intention of ever coming back to run the farm.

My brother was studying politics at university. Later he would study law. He saw the world on a grand scale.

"But you have to," my father said, matter-of-factly.

My brother shrugged. "But we don't want to." He was rebellious, and brave.

"My family fought for this," he yelled. He was fierce when he wanted to be, frightening, like a deep rumble of thunder right on top of the house at night. White spit gathered in the corners of his mouth. "Generations before you. This is where the Carters have always lived. This farm, this house – this is our life."

"Back me up," my brother hissed at me.

I was frozen, staring down at my teacup, barely breathing.

They were on their feet then, standing across the table from each other like two cowboys from a Western. My heart quickened at the thought of one of them madly dashing to the gun safe, wrenching it open, shooting madly.

"You ungrateful bastard. If only your grandfather could see you now. He'd be so disappointed."

We thought my father was going to hit my brother.

Instead, he sat down at the table, staring at his hands. I'd never seen my father look so small, so tired. And then, quietly, "It's all been pointless."

In the kitchen, my mother wept great, wracking sobs of the deepest grief.

There is a photograph of my father from when he was forty-five, the age I am now. He has already gone grey,

his face lined with the stories of hard work, leather thick and deep brown.

He lies on the grass by the river that ran through the property. He smiles candidly at something: perhaps a joke told by someone outside of the shot.

I had come home from University for the holidays.

“We should have a picnic,” my mother declared. She had grown very thin then, I remember, her body run down from years of hard work.

“I’ve got a lot of work to do,” my father replied, but she looked at him with one of her serious looks and he timidly agreed.

We packed bread and wine and cheese and a heavy bacon and egg pie wrapped in a tea towel into a wicker basket, and the three of us drove down to the riverbank. “Remember you kids used to swim here when you were little?” My father said. “Couldn’t get you out of the water, even when it turned cold. You’d splash around shivering until your mother dragged you out.”

We all laughed. “Your lips would turn blue.”

I went swimming that day. My mother dipped her toes in at the edge, her comfortable slacks rolled up past her ankles so they wouldn’t get wet. My father never went in the water if he could avoid it.

He was strong back then. Later he would seem to shrink, his shoulders sagging forward, his muscles disappearing without the work of the farm. He would grow an unexpected beer gut, and his joints would swell painfully with arthritis. But that would all happen later, after the farm was sold.

I pulled out my Christmas present camera, a brand-new Canon, and took some photographs. The one of my father is the only one I kept over years of moving homes. There is something about it, some hope of remembering my father as he was, once.

We had to re-establish ourselves after our father’s death.

He had always been a presence lurking in the background of our lives. We existed in the town we had grown up in only as his children: we were no longer locals there, no longer embedded in their history. My brother and I were unrecognisable without him by our side in the main street.

We were tourists.

A few hours before his funeral, my brother and I drove to the top of the driveway down to the old farm. We heard Chinese investors had bought the land from our parents’ successors. They had knocked down the old farmhouse, we heard, and built a more maintainable structure for their farm manager to work from.

I felt a great sense of displacement, as though a rug had been pulled from beneath me. “Perhaps one of us should’ve taken it on,” I sighed, my body tired with the thought of it.

“Perhaps,” my brother replied. “But we would’ve hated Dad for it.”

We stood in silence for a while, our arms resting on the roof of my brother’s car, our eyes dragging slowly across the landscape of the farm. I didn’t know, then, that that would be the last time either of us would see that land again.

We didn’t know, either, over a year ago at a drawn-out, hot Christmas, that we would never see our father again.

June had been there when he died.

She had been the one to call us, hours later, and whisper the bad news down the phone line. We had been expecting it, but we never realised the enormity of it.

My wife played Schubert on the piano at the service. The church was full of unfamiliar faces, etched only out of the faintest memories of my youth. Some smiled sombrely and nodded their heads in my direction.

“What a wonderful man Walter Carter was,” the priest had said. “A husband, a father, devoted to his craft and his community.”

Later, at the wake in the Youth Club Hall, I ate tiny, soggy cucumber sandwiches with my back to the wall. My wife was caught in conversation with a couple of second cousins in the corner.

“Funny, isn’t it,” June said. She had sidled up to my while my eyes had been searching the crowd for anyone I knew. “How many people come out of the woodwork when there’s a funeral on. All those free sandwiches.”

I laughed, choking a little on my own mouthful. “I’m sorry we hadn’t been to see you in a while, to help you out with him,” I said.

She waved my apology away. “Please. It has been my pleasure to know your father.” “What will you do now?” I asked.

June shrugged. “I’ll find something. I like to think Walter has made me an honorary local, but we’ll see about that when all this mourning business blows over.”

She said she was going to have a smoke outside, and if I liked, I could join her. I knew then that she had become as unstuck from that town as I had.

We were all in limbo without him to hold us in place.

I like to remember him, now, on the veranda at the farmhouse with a whiskey at the end of a long day. He has not yet changed out of his work clothes. He smells of cow shit and sweat, a deep earthy combination that I can still remember. My mother sings from the kitchen, her voice straining to reach the higher notes. She is making a roast from one of our steers, killed and butchered by my father.

My brother and I play at our father’s feet, some game with toy horses and cattle, penning them in to little yards we’ve made from sticks. We are playing at farmers. This is all we know how to play, all we want to play. The sun is only just beginning to set, sending the clouds into a brilliant hue of pink and gold.

Our father smiles deeply as he surveys the farm in front of him. It is his empire, and here, he is King.