



Global Short Story Competition November 2013

Winner : Jacqueline Winn
Her Quiet Company

Highly Recommended : Vicky Daddo
If you're happy and you know it

Her Quiet Company

Jacqueline Winn

My mother sits in the corner of the room, when she should be resting in her grave. Hands gripping the arms of her soft old chair, lungs wheezing like a steam pipe, she stares at me. Not unkindly, it must be said.

Without saying a word, she watches as I rummage and sort, fold and stack all her clothes in neat piles on her bed. Before I started, I made up the bed with fresh sheets, even though she won't be sleeping there again. I took my time, tugging at the bottom sheet to smooth out any irritating wrinkles and making sure the top sheet was placed with exactly the same length all round before tucking it in.

Of course, to please her, I started tucking from the foot of the bed and made my way up to the head, on both sides. Nice and even. Then I layered the cream cotton blanket onto the bed before folding over the top of the sheet, just the right amount. No bedspread.

Too heavy, she always tells me, too hard to breathe. Lastly, two fresh pillowcases to the pillows before placing them together, one slightly higher than the other. She prefers them that way, in case she wants to sit up and read.



When I stood back, I had to remind myself that she won't be sitting up in this bed any more. Even so, I turned to the corner and tried to give her a bit of a smile. But it came out all wrong and I had to look away again before she picked it.

Then I started on her clothes. She's never been one to criticise, not openly, not to my face. Either way, I'm going as carefully and neatly as I can, as if she might flinch at any thoughtless snatching from the drawers, any haphazard crumpling from the hangers.

She's always kept her drawers neat. The top drawer has underwear to the right, socks to the left. All the socks are paired and rolled, no odds floating around waiting for a partner. Short sleeves fill the second drawer, long sleeves the third. I won't open the bottom drawer. It's packed with all her winter woolens and I can leave that for another day. It's not as if she'll be needing anything warm, even though winter's not quite over. For as long as I can remember, she's knitted all her own jumpers and cardigans, the fine lacy patterns as well as the chunkier Arans for those bitter days. Even now, the click-clack of her needles still echoes. I'll keep them all, since her hands and fingers will forever be there in the twist and wind of the yarn. But I can't bear to touch them just yet. As if I might be touching her.



Once the top three drawers are empty, I walk past her corner to the wardrobe. Her eyes follow me, as I run my hand along the length of hanging clothes, jackets giving way to trousers, then skirts, then blouses. She's never been one for dresses, more of a mix-and-match kind of person. She's so methodical that all the colours sit like by like, a pastel rainbow of shades. Shoes are paired on the shelves below, special occasions at the top, sneakers at the bottom. Her clothes have always been cared for and ordered in this way. Especially in this moment, I'm aware that she deserves no less from my hands.

It's slow going, this packing of her clothes. It doesn't have to be but I'm stopping every now and then to hold up the outfit she wore to my daughter's wedding, the jacket she made for going out to the theatre, the comfortable trousers that she made in multiple colours for the time when she needed to be sitting more often. Like her knitwear, most of these clothes were made by her.

As clear as if it was right there in front of me, I can still see the sewing machine she had when I was a child. An old black Singer with a handle on the right-hand side that worked the needle up and down. She made everything for us on that machine, right hand turning, left hand guiding the fabric through. It was forever on the end of the kitchen table. When I first asked if I could sew something, maybe I was eight or nine, she made me practice on newspaper.



She removed the thread from the needle and made me sew up and down the columns of print, page after page of perforations, until she was satisfied I could manage a straight line. Then she let me sew a simple shift dress. I wore it only once before it fell apart in the first wash. Her own sewing is a magnificent thing. Blind hems, finished French seams, hand-stitched buttonholes. She can line a jacket, turn a perfect cuff, hide a zip. Along with her knitwear, I'll take some of these clothes home. Not to wear. Just to keep.

The bed is almost completely covered with neat piles before I take out her suitcases and bags. She traveled a lot over the years but her matching luggage will only make one more trip out of this house. I start packing everything off the bed, keeping co-ordinates together, putting the more fragile items on top to avoid crumpling. By the time I click down the lids and stand the cases by the wall, ready for collection, there are still a few piles left on the bed. But none of these are precious and they can go in one of the cardboard boxes.

A last drawer remains, the one in her bedside cabinet. I've been going for a couple of hours now and I'm desperate to sit. But I won't sit on the bed. While my mother is in the room, it's her bed and I won't disturb it. Before I open her special drawer, I turn to her and ask permission. It only seems right. Of course, she doesn't reply but I think I glimpsed a nod, so I open the drawer as gently as I can so as not to appear intrusive.



Yesterday, her jewelry roll was in this spot but I took it out while everyone else was here. Always ahead of us all, she'd labeled items for special people and I gave them to each one in turn. When I took out her jewelry, I expected to find her book, whichever one she happened to be reading, but she must have rushed through and finished it in time. The only things left in this drawer are mundane. Her pills, ointments, lozenges, hand cream, spare glasses, a few pens, a couple of recent receipts and some odd bits of ribbon that she likes to use as bookmarks. And then there's her address book. I open it and the first thing that hits me is her handwriting, so neat, so familiar. It brings to mind birthday cards, notes for school, shopping lists, postcards from abroad, all in her elaborate looped style, the letters leaning to the right as if to lead the reader on. Tears are starting to fill my eyes so I keep my face averted from her corner. She doesn't need the burden of my sadness. I quickly push the little book into my pocket and turn my attention to the remaining contents of the drawer, scooping them up and tossing them into the nearest box.

Then I'm finished. For today, at least. Everything else, on the top shelves of the wardrobe, in the bookshelf, in the storage boxes under the bed, can wait. None of them are personal to her, none of them require her presence here in this room.



As I walk past her chair, I sense a soft movement of air, almost as if her fingers are reaching out to touch me. It's a gesture of gratitude, I'm certain of it, and my eyes begin to well with tears once more. I can't lift my face, can't find my voice. I can only stretch out my hand and, as I sweep past, a cool breath passes through my fingers.

Without looking back, I leave the room and I'm careful to shut the door quietly behind me. If I were to open it again, chances are she wouldn't be there. When my mother died in the hospital, five days ago, others did the washing and the placing of hands, the brushing of hair and the dressing of her pale, wasted body. But today it was my turn to pack away the things she wore, the things she made, everything she touched with her own hands. And today she graced me with her quiet company, sitting in her corner chair while I gave her the reverence she deserved.



Highly commended

If you're happy and you know it

Vicky Daddo

The rhythm of the creaking was unmistakable, as were the raspy vocals. I listened from the bottom of the stairs, rooted to the spot by a combination of intrigue and disgust, before the latter took a hold and I retreated back to my car. I felt hot blood seep into my cheeks. How dare she? Under my roof, too.

When enough time had elapsed for me to make a more obtrusive entrance, I opened the car door again, letting it slam this time. I rattled the key in the lock a little louder and announced my re-entry with a generous clearing of the throat. I walked to the kitchen and let the noisy plumbing add to the sounds of my arrival. The kettle hissed and I clunked the mug down onto the bench just as she appeared. Sheepish. Yes, definitely a little coy.

“You’re home for lunch then?” Her voice was wispy, airy even. Ain’t love grand? Aren’t I a queen bitch?



“Yes. I told you I would be, remember?” I held her eyes and she looked away first. Victory. But it wasn’t sweet. I think I blushed more than she did.

“Oh. I thought that was tomorrow, love.”

Behind her, just like a teenager, Don Carpenter trod down the stairs, believing himself invisible, no doubt. He was still fastening his shirt. Mum rolled her lips together, her eyes begging me to stay quiet. I really wanted to shout a big, fat hello to him, but the sight of her, in the same maroon velour robe that she’d worn when dad was still alive, made me feel mean enough to button my lip. I watched him shuffle out of the door, holding my breath as though it was my son and I was willing him to make his escape.

“How could you, mum?” I almost threw the coffee granules into the cup and caught a splash of boiling water on my hand as I slammed the kettle back onto the bench.

“What? Have sex or get caught?”

I scowled at her as I opened the fridge. She was right, of course. I was being prim, but it was my house.

“I still have feelings, Karen. Even at my age. And yes, I have been careful,” she added, with a mischievous wink. She made herself coffee too and joined me in the living room.

I let out a frustrated breath. “It was a bit embarrassing.”



“For you or for me?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you with my out of control ways,” she smirked, pulling up the sleeve of the robe to reveal the tattoo she’d had done last month. A bird of paradise, if you like, perched on her bony wrist. If forty was the new thirty, then old-age must be the new mid-life.

“I’m not offended. It was just a shock. I mean, I don’t expect you to stay on your own, you should have friends.”

“Oh, thank you, Karen. I’m so glad you’ve been giving my life some thought.”

“For heaven’s sakes, mum, I just mean, that it’s difficult for me, seeing you with someone other than dad.”

“He’s been dead six years, Karen.”

Yes, he has, I thought as the familiar sadness filled me.
“But Mr Carpenter?”

My mother’s lips curled into a smile. “He’s a good man. He’s generous, witty, kind and he’s fabulous in...”

“Mum! Too much information.”



“Well, it’s not as if your father had much time for me, what with Lions and Rotary and the Salvos. I might as well as have been widowed when he retired from the force. It was bad enough when he was working, all the hours doing reports and whatnot. And when he got out he seemed to forget that I was there half the time.” She gave an apologetic smile. “It’s just nice to have somebody who pays me attention.”

Over dinner, my husband Mick let rip with a hoot of laughter. “What, Mr Carpenter with the handlebar moustache? That must have been why she left the old people’s home.”

“Third age facility,” I corrected. “And I suppose that could explain why she came back here in such a hurry. It’s probably not the done thing to consort with the neighbours in one of those places. But it’s not funny, Mick.”

He sucked in his cheeks. “No, you’re right. Not funny at all. You catching your mother at it with a one-legged old codger.”

My mouth dropped. “He’s only got one leg?”

“Didn’t you know? He lost it to cancer a while ago. He’s always rattling tins for the Cancer Council. He’s one of their biggest collectors. He comes into our office a couple of times a year.”



“That’s why it took him so long to come down stairs, then. Poor old soul.”

“I wonder what he does with it, then. Stands it up by the bed? Lays it gently on the covers? Tucks it into a holdall?” Mick snorted again and this time I had to join in.

When I told my daughter, she giggled. “Good on her. At least someone’s enjoying themselves. I don’t seem to be able to get any. And now I think of it, she has been looking great lately. Must be all those hormones.”

I had to agree. Mum had been looking exceptionally well. The best I’d seen her in years. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for my father, daft as it sounds, but she never paid that much attention to herself when he was still alive. “It’s bad enough with your father reminding me day in, day out about what a good time gal I’ve got for a mother. Even when you and your sister lived at home, we didn’t have to check who was doing what in which bedroom.”

“That’s because we didn’t let ourselves get caught.”

I lay listening to Mick’s heartbeat, and the contented rhythm of his breathing. The fine hairs on his chest tickled my nose.

He lifted his head towards me, probably sensing my brain clunking. “What’s got into you? That’s twice in a week.”



I slapped his bare thigh. “Are you complaining?”

“No, of course not, but if this is about your mother, then maybe you need to talk to her and not use me in your fight.”

“We are not fighting and I am not using you.”

“I was going to say that I quite enjoy being used, but seriously, Karen, you do need to sort this out.”

He was right, of course. I felt like a small child who'd been offered what she was screaming for but didn't want it anyway. Last week, mum had told me that she and Mr Carpenter would be renting a small flat, just as soon as he could extricate himself from his unit at the third-age facility. I thought about how excited she sounded when she told me. She was almost singing. Of course, I wanted her to be independent, and it was a relief that she would be moving out, but it rankled that she was so damned happy about it.

“Shouldn't she be a little more dignified about these things?” I asked my daughter later that week over cream tea.

“If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands. Come on mum, she's an old lady and she's having a very grand last waltz. Don't knock it. Enjoy it with her.”

“That's easy for you to say. It's not your mum gallivanting around.”



“Even if it were you, I’d be happy for you. Life goes on and all those clichés. She’s been on her own for a while and now she can share the golden years with someone else.”

My stomach churned. The theory was sound, but the practice was hard to take. “I know, but I can’t help thinking about dad. He’d be mortified.” She pulled a face at me and I knew I’d gone too far.

“It sounds like you haven’t quite finished grieving, mum. Dad’s right. You need to talk to nan.”

Mid-week and still in a spin after mum asked me to take her shopping for a wedding dress, I took the afternoon off to visit dad’s grave. Amongst the dirty, rain streaked and mossy arches and crosses, his simple headstone still looked new. I laid my bunch of ‘Sweet William’ on the ground, and knelt.

“What do you make of it, dad? Is she deliriously happy as she puts it, or is she just delirious?” A blackbird pecked at the grass beyond the headstone, keeping its beady eye on me. “She’s skipping around with a grin a mile wide. She’s getting married again. It’s ridiculous.”

“Why?”

I swung round to see my mum, eyes unreadable under the peacock blue beret she had fashioned low over her brow.



“Why is it so ridiculous to you that I should want to marry the man I love?”

I did a goldfish impression, unable to find any words with any semblance of meaning to answer her.

“And I do love him, Karen. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t love your father. I’m not betraying him or his memory or whatever else it is you may think is happening. I’ve simply found someone else to share my life with.” She walked past me and picked up the flowers. “He always grew these so well, didn’t he?”

“They were his favourites. I always bring them.”

“I know.” She threaded her arm through mine. “I see them every week.”

“I didn’t know you still came.”

“Of course I do. We shared almost a lifetime together. But you have to remember that we chose to love each other. You don’t get to choose your parents, unfortunately for you, perhaps you might say.” She smiled that daft grin at me. I felt tears prick my eyes.



“You saw him differently to me. He was your father, an idol to you. You probably only remember the good bits, the holidays, the trips to the football, riding your bike over the park with him. But there were lots of times he wasn’t there, times when I needed him. I spent a lot of that time waiting to have him to myself again, to rediscover the man who swept me off my feet. But when he retired, he found so many other things to do.”

“Didn’t you talk to him about it?”

“I tried, but he’d become so entrenched in serving the community that he saw retirement as his way of carrying that on, hence all the charity work. I had no choice but to let him get on with it. The only time we were together was in the garden. He grew the flowers, I did the vegetables. We were a good team then. But with Don, it’s different. We can just have the fun bits, the going out, the trips away. Work and family doesn’t have to get in the way. Besides, it won’t be for long. So can you let me enjoy it while it lasts?”

I looked at her, sensing there was more.

“The cancer’s back. It’s not looking good.”

I hugged her, savouring that ever-comforting presence against me. “I’m so sorry, mum. And I’m sorry I’ve been so awful to you. I guess I’ve always thought of you as just mum, not a person with feelings. That’s terrible, isn’t it?”



“Not really. It just means I did my job well.” She wiped away the tears and stood upright, smiling again. “Now, if you feel comfortable about it, I really would value your opinion on a rather funky dress I’ve seen for the wedding.”

“You’re not going to wear it with Doc Martens or something, are you?”

She grinned. “Now there’s a thought.”





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