

Lemons and Leaves

My sisters and I stood arms linked on the back porch. Tears in our eyes and pain in our hearts silently watching our mother say goodbye to her lemon tree. We knew this day would come. The house which was the only home we'd known until we became mothers ourselves had become needy. Too many rooms for one person who had in her own time conceded the house she built which tenderly held all our memories was now a shell; outgrown by all who had once cherished its warmth.

I looked at my mother transfixed on this tree, which to any other eyes bore lemons and leaves, knowing which moments she was remembering. The countless pets buried under it, the children and grandchildren clamouring over it, the images of our father rustling possums out with a broom. Any other lemon tree would not be covered in scars from swings and strings; the support to our adventures and the flavour to our celebrations.

While my sisters wept I contemplated the garden, not ready to walk out for the last time. Each pot a family outing, each fence a superficial barrier. Flower beds where we spent weekends together on our knees covered in dirt laughing and playing and enjoying our lazy afternoons together. I relived our first summer. The house just built smelled of paint and construction of the new neighbourhood provided a constant layer of dust over the manicured garden. Freshly installed, immature and fickle. Years of experiments and redesigns culminated in the current arrangement. The lemon tree the only remaining plant from the original garden. Robust and resilient the longest serving resident of this home would remain for the next family to enjoy.

We had asked our mother whether she wanted to take the lemon tree to her new flat in the retirement village but she felt the tree would be wasted on her alone and preferred the next family have the pleasure of its company. Watching her now I wanted to beg her to take it but I knew it was really me who didn't want to part with this integral fixture from my childhood. Our father, our house and now our lemon tree. It seemed too much but my mother understood it was not the tree we missed. She stirred from her daydream reached up and patted the lowest branch, whispering her thanks for its fruit and shelter. One sister shuddered and the other broke away from our embrace to gather the last of the lemons.

I walked the corridors checking rooms for stray trinkets we may have missed. Boxes lined the walls. Furniture wrapped ready to be relocated or donated and delicate heirlooms in my car to be carefully transported with the devotion deserved. Stripped bare the house revealed its tiredness. Hidden carpet stains exposed, cracks illuminated against the emptiness; the fullness of my childhood left its mark on every surface. My sisters ushered our mother to the car while I locked the front door for the final time.

No one bothered to try and hold back tears. Neighbours devastated stood on their porches braced for our departure. Goodbyes had been said in intimate settings over the preceding months and weeks. Late into the night my mother and her contemporaries reminisced over the children they had raised and the lives they had led from this little street. Decades of stories to decanter and repackage, reviving the outrageous and dwelling on the momentous. The process of honouring a home in street of homes readying to be reincarnated. While I moved out many years ago this street would always be home. An extended family behind every door; a friend keeping watch at every window.

Before driving away we looked back on the building which was no longer ours and the street where we no longer lived and contemplated how lucky we had been. My mother sat beside me with a basket of lemons on her lap and a shiny new key in her hand. She turned to me and smiled, and told me she was ready to go home.