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Another mango season
(Wayne Murphy)

Veronica Hamilton wasn't always the newspaper reader. Archie read two or more of them every day. He couldn't get by without poring over the headline stories, scanning the stock market figures, gasping at the sports scores, huffing through the letters. First thing every morning, he'd rake the leaves and then sit back in his squatter's chair with the papers, under the shade of the mango tree. It came to replace the rituals of his office once he'd retired.

Now, sitting here in the shaded corner of her veranda, she folded the paper and set it gently into her lap, careful lest the newsprint smudge her skirt. A sudden strong breeze broke through the humidity, rounding up a few stray leaves on the path and flapping pages of the newspaper almost into convulsions. Overhead, the tree murmured secrets among its branches and then dropped a single mango with a quick dead thud on the iron roof, startling her, but only for a moment.

This tree had decided them when they bought the house. Archie said you needed big shade trees in a climate like this, and this one was already ancient, its waxy dark green leaves densely shading much of the front and side verandas. The day they first saw it, forty years ago, it had been festooned in blossoms shaped like miniature Christmas trees, pale yellow and unceremoniously speckled in dull browns. Every year since she had been amazed how these scrawny wreaths spawned those small green peas that became a full load of summer fruit. Every year, the kids would wait for the first fresh copper to burnish the green skins, and once the fruit softened under a testing thumb, everyone knew it was time for sucking on the sweet, stringy flesh.

Still, you had to repay the tree its bounty by tending it, by sweeping wasted blossoms from the path, and raking up the dead leaves that crunched against intruders' footsteps. And then in season, there was the grim morning's reaping, when you had to dispose of fallen fruit that had been molested by flying foxes in the night.

Archie had been gone a year, though sometimes it seemed longer; and then at other times it seemed as though he'd just left the room. *That's how it will seem for quite a while*, she mused to herself. Well, that's what they had all told her. That a thing like this would knock the wind out of your sails for a while, but eventually you'd get back on a steady course, drift back from this low ebb. Strange how wind and water are meant to smooth the edges of grief.

The grown children had taken long flights from Brisbane and Sydney to come north for their father's funeral. They unsettled the house with noise and footsteps for a few days, cluttering each other's comfort zones. But then they were gone again, glad to escape the smothering humidity, leaving her to ponder her house and its quietnesses.

I suppose I could stay up here with you for a few more days, Sandra had said the morning after the funeral, *but I suppose you'll want to get back into your own routines*. She hadn't answered. It wasn't worth the effort of a drawn-out game of would-she-stay, or should-she-stay, or might-she-be-able-to-stay-away-from-work-any-longer. Not worth summoning up the breath she'd need to push and pull past the

questions she and her daughter had always managed to tangle around themselves. And only to end in Sandra's exasperation: *Oh Mum, you're so indecisive!*

With Archie and Sandra, things had been different. They didn't fence around each other. While the boys had always discussed the test cricket scores with their father from a safe distance, Sandra spoke matter-of-factly to Archie about her studies, and later her career and the business deals she'd made and their consequences for the company. Archie would lower his newspaper and respond with knowing nods and gruff affirmation: *Yep, spot on. No point in hanging back waiting for someone else to grab it. Just get in there and do it yourself.*

That was Archie: no nonsense, just get out there and see what has to be done, then take a deep breath and do it. No point in looking back, no regrets. *No running out of puff*, as he would say. She envied Archie that, at least.

She had always done as he had asked, without question, both of them bound within the tight schedule of his professional life. They'd moved north for his promotion, just after they were married, away from her own family. She'd settled into the routines of living at this distance from her life until this tree, this house, these now-scattered children, even these summers, came to define home.

And then it was upon them: she was caring for him as his illness inched towards the inevitable. Sometimes for hours she'd sit up, leaning uncomfortably against the bed-head, and cradle his head in her lap, soothing him as he begged her for one secret kindness in his tossing and grimacing towards sleep. Sometimes now, sitting here on the veranda, she'd imagine she could still hear the groan and labour of his breathing coming from the bedroom door. It was such a constant in those last weeks that she'd stopped noticing it. But now, a whole mango season later, it could waft back, uninvited, and mix in with the sounds of the house and the shuffling of branches in the wind.

The breeze stirred again so Mrs Hamilton pressed her hand palm down on the newspaper to rest its convulsions. She kept it there, decisive and sure, until the disturbance subsided. Then she noticed the smudge staining her skirt, just above the knee. She looked across the veranda, past the open bedroom door, where the mango tree was burdened, quietly now, with another full season's load of fruit.

Soon they'll all be too ripe and falling rotten underfoot, she thought, *and I'll have to clear them away again.*

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