

Old Maids

Their mother and father's automobile slid from the road one rainy night on a weekend visit to Talbot. They would have survived but the cliff was narrow and the sea below treacherous. They perished. At this moment the daughters were filled with breathless excitement, for they were entertaining their boyfriends at the farmhouse. Joy was offering around a dish of mini-frankfurters while Edith mixed four whiskey sours on the rocks. They were closed off from the world for a time. Joy put a hit record on the player and she happened to glance at her reflection in the naked glass. There was no world outside but dark unknown. And later when the girls looked at one another, it seemed as though at any moment one or the other would take her boy's fingers in her hand and lead him from that room and into the passageway with a smile. Then, there was a policewoman at the door.

The following morning the girls drew together out of the house. Their great-grandfather had built it from tight boards on a valley side that fell down to the sea, and on each edge of the house beyond the small garden the man had planted a row of banksia trees, now corded and dark in age. But their capricious grandmother had one day poisoned the seaward row, for a view it was supposed. The view was far and visitors often noted, picturesque, but it left the house prone to buffeting wind from the Southern Ocean for now no tree would grow in that place. Edith picked her way down the cliffside and Joy followed. On the beach the sisters found the sea had thrown up jellyfish large as dinner plates. They took sticks and aimlessly prodded the ice-blue mouths. It was too late for a revival.

A funeral was arranged. Family and friends came near, for a time. They carried dishes to the doorstep of the farmhouse and held discussions in the sitting room about the future, of rooms in town, of good jobs for those who can type 100 words per minute. Neither girl had an inclination to leave her childhood home. It seemed an anchored ship at sea. Thus, they resolved to carry on with farming. Edith was disposed to animal husbandry and was to care for the cattle and farm business. Joy to the matter of housekeeping. They took up their roles with vigour, all the while wondering with a kind of remoteness, why the road should fail at that moment. At night they listened to the white noise of the sea sliding onto the sands. And what could anybody do? Visitors saw their efforts to be thorough and altogether satisfactory and the days took on a dependable sheen.

Photographs of the girls' childhood show them standing side to side. Edith fidgeting and Joy, taller, staring away from the camera. In high school they had found themselves suddenly celebrated for their quiet wit, a subterranean rebellion. This surprising power put springs in their steps. Joy was permitted to drive the ute at night. They began to attend parties and dances. Joy applied red lipstick in the rear vision mirror and jumped down from the cab, slammed the door and carried her bag in her hands. Edith pierced her ears with a darning needle and cork and wore hoops.

Then the accident happened. Again, the sisters gravitated towards one another. Before, Joy bounded out the door and down the valley side to walk on the shore. Now, she would see if Edith fancied a walk. Oh, maybe later, well she could wait. Edith moved cows and surveyed pasture, mended fences and oiled hinges. Beside her always as she worked was the ocean, the sun glinting on the water. Cows calved and steers and heifers were sent away every year, though Edith could hardly bear to part with them. In the house, Joy moved from room to room- sweeping, soaping dishes. She thought of the way her mother had divided her week into unwavering duties, of her head bobbing between the pitching linen at the clothesline. How breakfast was always hot. Joy found milk crates in the pantry full of *Good Housekeeping* magazines and studied them. Bread could be made with only flour, yeast, water and salt. Fancy. She would not have to go to town quite so often. In the late summer she gathered windfall apples raising vinegary fumes and tried cider.

During stormy weather Edith moved the cattle to the back pasture. The sisters fastened the shutters on the house and built up a fire. It did not do to see waves raging at the land and the sea squall coursing at their house with all the invisible force that bent the remaining banksias. Joy prepared cocoa and caramel dumplings. Edith knitted socks and Joy read aloud the jokes in old *Reader's Digests*, *Laughter is the Best Medicine* and *All in a Day's Work*. They seemed fortified. But when they retired to their beds to lie between clean linen, their feet curled around gin jars filled with boiled water, all they could hear was the wind at the walls and wind in the trees. And always, the sound of the sea. These terrifying nights they could not sleep - they felt that surely the house must yield, must be broken open by a falling tree, or else break free from the moorings that held it there.

Sometimes Joy caught sight of Edith from the kitchen window and watched her moving about the sea paddock. What did they know of the other, she thought. What was Edith's favourite colour? Why did she tie a ribbon in her hair one day and not the next? It was like moving through a house at night sensing that you weren't alone. Like the constant noise of breakers there was a part of yourself always near, but constant, reliable and

capable even in its moods. And then she sat down at the breakfast table one morning cool as pie and you start for a moment at her face. Forgetting that she existed outside of yourself with her own will and flesh and not as a Siamese body cleaved into the wilderness with just the other to recognise along the way, and only pallid rows of last year's fruit in the pantry to be really sure of, the metallic curve of a knife resting on the crease in a folded serviette. Their boyfriends moved away and it was almost a relief. Family and friends ceased their regular visits for the sisters seemed repaired, though it was true that their lustre was gone. But this was to be expected, of course, with so great a loss.

When they were children Joy used to go to Edith's bed in the night because the breathing rest of another being goes some way to softening aloneness and troubled thoughts. Now, besides the division of labour on the farm they could not bear to part. The visit of an old friend could be saved by a redemptive murmur from the other. Yet, as they drew always towards each other, small flares of –what? - came up between them. As grown women their talk ran intimately into the night of people and places, frank talk and all the jolly, endless little jokes they had between themselves. But if Edith sat at the kitchen table with a plate of blackberries and drew each fruit absentmindedly between her lips, squinching and chopping her jaw so dark juices ran at the corners it may be that Joy would not speak to her for an hour. Though neither could say exactly why. And at suppertime when Joy took her meal from the stove and sat down to eat, she did not look towards her sister, could listen only in infuriation to the wet sound of her sister eating. But Edith, reading out a story from her magazine softened Joy's mind and they began to talk and suddenly things were jolly. Neither could say when things would be easy between them.

One time Edith ironed her skirt and walked from the house and drove away. Joy watched as the automobile receded down the driveway and took up her magazine with a dreariness inside her. The house was so still without Edith. There was nothing to say to anyone, but there was no one to say it to anyway. Silly! She couldn't even think. At suppertime she burnt a pan of potatoes and knocked her water glass onto the floor with a smash. Why would Edith not return? Joy left the table and went to stand before the sitting room window. The drive had grown dark and empty. How could Edith stay away, she thought, when she knew Joy hated to be left alone at night, hated the solitude and most of all, hated to be without Edith. She felt for the wall behind the fall of curtain. It was dry and cool, solid. When Edith returned late she smelt of cigarettes and her skirt fell in lines across her legs. Joy sat straight in an armchair (hers) and Edith sat down in her customary chair.

And if one day Edith was there, one day Edith was gone just the same. Her bedroom was still and empty. Edith had taken her things. The bed was flat and her overalls hung from a nail on the wall. Joy walked from room to room, as if in a dream. There was a cake on the cooling rack. A dry pile of crockery lay inert beside the sink. A jug of cornflowers set down a scattered wreath of petals onto the sideboard. The rituals she had performed on the dishes, on the bed sheets, on the food: they had not been enough after all, to hold Edith here, in these rooms, to keep her mind here with Joy. She had vanished just the same. Joy took to her armchair and read her magazines through the day and into the night. She prepared odd meals for herself at night – oily sardines on stale bread and plates of radishes and salt – and left the dishes in the kitchen and in piles on the sitting room floor.

Late at night Joy left the house and went down the valley and far along the clifftop in her thin dress past sleeping farmhouses. Beside her the sea welled up and rushed at the land again and again. Bushes tore at her stockings and scratched at her legs and arms, and the wind entered her skin and rubbed coolly into her bones but her cheeks flushed and she was not cold. In a peculiar way, it was a relief that Edith had gone as well. It seemed easier, somehow, to be cast away like this- for she was truly alone now. The night, too, had relinquished its fearfulness and Joy saw that outside of a lighted room the sky is luminous. Yet, there was terrible sorrow in her bones as well. She began to go to the house only at dawn to sleep on the hearth rug or beside the wood pile on the porch, or under her grandmother's quilts in the orchard. She left the doors and windows open and the curtains fell outside and drifts of leaves entered to rustle through the rooms. The wind blew straight off the ocean and set the insides of the house moving.

One morning Joy entered the valley as the sun was rising pink and grey behind the hill. She came near the house and saw cattle grazing in the garden around the house, softly calling to one another as she approached. These were the few cows Edith had left her to make a manageable income from, and Joy had opened all the gates so the cows could move freely from one paddock to another. As she stood amongst her sister's cows she was struck by how large they were beside the path and under the clothesline. How vast were their flanks and by their strange, dumb faces when they looked at her, that their breath and piss should steam at this hour. She took her hand and held it against a warm and heaving side. So this had been Edith's day, then, as she moved about the paddocks beside the dark sea. Dear, good Edith and her faithful love for so many years.

It was like a winter garden inside the house. Joy washed herself under the tap, drawing a comb back through her wet hair. She carefully took a pair of clean underclothes from

inside the dresser and stepped into them as her feet left the pall of leaves. She took a dress from the wardrobe and fastened the buttons down her front and tied the waist. Then she took up the broom and moved it up and down the hall and through the rooms and swept the dirt and leaves and papers into a dustpan and flung them from the door. But first she picked the vivid leaves from the pan and she filled a tall glass jar with those fallen leaves and set them on the mantelpiece in the sitting room. And so there was a return to housekeeping. Edith would return one day, perhaps, or she would not. Yet she was in this world, somewhere, now, taking tea at a table, maybe, her hands by the cup, smiling and laughing with someone. Maybe she was happy.

Joy cleared and shored the house slowly. She spent artful hours making and preserving- her hands over skeins of wool or taking rind from citron, or stripping grease from cloth. She dried sprays of fragrant herbs and crushed the leaves into pill boxes. She knitted socks and blanket squares and tea cosies. She painted the house green all over and white all through. Walking along the clifftop those nights after Edith had gone- how many times she must have gone near to the edge, how easily could she have walked on only to feel the land fail below her feet. The days were calm and steady as Joy set to her work. It is a sorrow, alright, to live alone in a house by the open sea, but it has to be endured. Only in the twilight did Joy lay down her work and carry a fishing reel down to the shore to stand before the ice-blue folding waves.

Then one day Edith returned down the drive with her bags and boxes. She set them beside her bed and went to take the overalls from their nail on the wall. For a minute she knelt before the window with the glass raised over her head and salty air on her face and in her hair. Joy took two cups and two saucers from the sideboard and set them down to pour hot tea, and they sat together at the table for a time. Presently they walked through the paddocks and then down, along the shore. By and by the days closed over once more, though there was an alertness to each day now - a vigourous, sinewy peace with their separation a dry scar at the close.

After supper Edith might walk outside for air and pause at the opening where her grandmother felled the line of banksia trees long ago. Darkness has fallen. Perhaps the wind, though cold, is edged with coming spring. On one side in the house lit like a lighthouse her sister moves about the rooms - sweeping the floor, watering the herbs upon the kitchen windowsill, kneading the bread for tomorrow. The watching sister stands for a while, touched by the diligence with which the other attends to these small tasks, her slow, methodical grace. After a time she turns away from the house and ventures a little towards

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the blackness of the sea. She listens through the quiet for the white noise of the breakers, gazing outwards towards the inky cavern of sea and sky. Far out near the horizon there might be the faint light of a ship. The sister watches it move slowly forward and she may think, suddenly, of her parents, of the thinness of a metal hull against deep and unpredictable waters. And maybe she would give a small shiver and turn towards the house.