



Source: AP, 'Kuwaiti parliament ousts ailing emir', *The Age online*, 25/01/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [home](#), [disease](#), [death](#)
Writer/s: [Helen Townsend](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

I love the house. Five big gum trees, a soft green lawn, an overgrown garden, French windows, pots of orchids. There's also cracked concrete and ugly aluminium sliding doors which once seemed the answer to the painting problem. Succulents hanging onto life. A single greenish leaf at the end of something dead. The house will be sold soon, probably pulled down for a mansion with marble en suites. It is my mother's house and I still think she's in there somewhere, with her trail of tissues, exhausted, but perky. And before that, washing up, her face at the kitchen window.

One child waters the pots. One puts out the rubbish. One rakes the leaves up. I make an inventory of the possessions. In each of us, there is a slight resistance to the activities of the others. But we don't fight. Good, middle aged children with grey hair.

The possessions. The ones I care most about come from my grandparents and my great grandmother. My mother was sometimes embarrassed by them. But she couldn't let them go. Neither can I. They swirl through my head. I dream of patterns on plates, faded initials on a silver fork, the apostle teaspoons, the brass handle on the sideboard. My brother tells me they are just things.

Her dead body was bruised from lack of oxygen, dotted by stigmata, like a mediaeval martyr. I remember my daughter's shock at seeing the body. I see the coffin sliding into the flames. I know she is dead and gone. But I still feel she will come back.

She told my sister that my father's ashes were in the top cupboard. He'd disappeared into dementia four years before death. I understand now why she clung to him, referring to his sweet nature, when in reality he was an old man, with no mind.

She'd given him the sweet nature in a bid to keep him. Likewise, now she's dead, she's a lot less difficult. I cried when she was alive—at grief for her decline, irritation at her stubbornness, fear at her recklessness. She's more convenient now, but less real. That's why I care about the shell on the hall table and the blue Chinese plate. They conjure up those feelings I can't put names to.

I have a photo of her with my daughter. My children were my offering to her. She loved them, unambiguously, more easily than she had loved me.

At her funeral, I quoted from Job. 'Naked I came out of my mother's womb and naked I shall return thither. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' I had read it to her, pushed it at her. I wanted her to acknowledge that elemental beginning of our relationship, the true heart of motherhood. But she kept pushing it back. And I kept pushing it at her, like the battles we used to have with mashed peas, back and forth across the Bunnykins plate.

'I'm on my last legs,' she said, 'but I'm not giving up.' It took courage, and an ability to deny reality. Sometimes it was more than irritating. Puffing, panting, sicker and sicker, she saw every play, attended every social event, refused medication, and forced us into uncomfortable,

dishonest exchanges.

She often refused to listen. One day, after I'd visited her, just out of hospital, I rushed back into the house.

'I thought you were going to die,' I told her. 'I want to tell you how much I love you.' I knelt down near her chair and burst into tears.

'I'm alright,' she said stiffly.

Sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, death was mentioned obliquely. 'Paddy can have the brass Chinese box.'

When she finally accepted she was going to die, she was not pleased about it. 'I'll show my children how to die,' she said. 'Not that they'll take any notice.' But we did. She was impressive. But I don't think she thought it was the end, even though she didn't believe in an afterlife. She just couldn't see the world without her in it.

'T. S. Eliot for the funeral,' she said.

*When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.*

'Yellow roses on the coffin,' she said. 'The one outside the dining room window.'

Some days, she was deadly white. Other days, she was blue, patches of red, skin bruising and breaking. But her light side was there. It had always been part of her, a sort of exuberance, and now, as she was dying, it came to the fore.

'I'm going to die today,' she said one morning, 'in the coming hours.' But then she cancelled. 'I like living too much. It's all off.'

But it wasn't. Memories of her parents, her childhood. List of possessions, which my sister had to take down. Chairs, silver, china, brass. Perhaps it was what her own mother and grandmother had done, the legacy.

Her brother rang that night. 'Do you want me to come?' he asked.

'Heavens no dear,' she said. 'I'll see you next Monday. I want you all to fly up. Business class. On me.' Her tone was playful.

'Next Monday?'

'The wake, dear,' she explained. 'On the back verandah.'

The wake was the following week, on the back verandah.

I remember her in the house. I remember her with my children. I remember the drama of the coming hours. I remember our difficulties, too painful to discuss.

I think of her, symbolically, the lopped off matriarch of a large family tree. The rose and the fire.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Townsend.