

Empty nester

Beth gazes at Harry in the half-light, tucked beneath the covers. It occurs to her that if she'd woken up and found his side of the bed empty and cool, she might not have felt very much at all.

The house is achingly quiet. Apart from Harry's snoring, there are no sounds. For such a long time, she'd wondered if her children were ever going to leave. It was as if they'd put down roots that had burrowed their way into the foundations of the house. And then, one by one, each of them packed up their clothes and books and electronic devices and left, without a backward glance. Somehow she hadn't seen it coming.

Her friends warned her about the period of adjustment, but she hadn't appreciated just how different it would be. She yearns for their screeching voices and trail of shoes and dirty socks. The house feels too big, and after decades of noise and mess and drama, there's too much time for thinking. Too many pauses in conversations.

Their fridge swells with leftovers, but she and Harry can only eat so much. If the children hadn't moved so far away, she could drop a meal in to them. Although they deny it, she's sure they're living on take-away.

She's spent years persuading her family to keep the Tupperware drawer tidy. But now, when she opens it and finds the containers neatly stacked inside each other in descending size and the lids nestled right beside them, she's almost tempted to create some chaos in the drawer just to provide some familiarity.

Harry says they should embrace their together time. Go out to dinner. Watch movies. Plan a trip. But Beth wonders if they have enough to talk to each other about. Their conversations have become so threaded with talk of their children that without them they might just unravel.

Last week, she pulled a suitcase down from the wardrobe. She wondered what she was doing, even as she was filling with it with underwear, knits and pants and jackets. She didn't take everything in her cupboard. How could she? But she packed as though she were going on an extended holiday, and who's to say how long that could be? She noticed a slight tremor in her hands as she folded a lambs' wool jumper, and she wasn't sure if it was from fear or excitement.

Beth steps out into the backyard, pulling on her gardening gloves. Her dress is pale against the backdrop of agapanthus, which clamour for attention in the garden bed behind her. The clipped grass is crisp beneath her feet.

'Harry!' she calls, looking around the yard.

'Harry,' she calls again more insistently.

'Where's he got to?' she mutters as she bends down to pick up some sticks from a garden bed. She walks towards the small shed tucked behind a frangipani tree at the back of the yard. The door is already open and she steps inside to find Harry leaning over the lawnmower, a spanner in his hand. He stands up quickly when he sees her, pulling out his earplugs.

'What are you up to?'

'Nothing.'

'Well, when you're done with the lawnmower, let's get to work on the yard.'

Beth marches from the shed, and Harry knows this is his cue to put down his tools down and join her outside.

Beth doesn't enjoy gardening. Her friends speak of the joys of feeling the damp earth between their fingers. Of planting tube stock and slowly watching them grow, until they are sturdy shrubs. Harry even enjoys mowing the lawn. Says he finds the noise of the mower relaxing and the aroma of cut grass invigorating. Beth finds it tiresome. But she likes the appearance of flowers and plants, and she feels it's her duty to occasionally tend to them, even if it's more in a managerial capacity.

Harry appears out of the shed pushing a wheelbarrow, piled with secateurs, a rake, pruning sheers and a garden waste bag.

'What are we working on today?' Harry knows there is no 'we' when it comes to gardening, but Beth feels more comfortable with the illusion they're gardening together, and Harry is happy to oblige.

'We need to prune the bougainvillea for starters. It's completely out of control.'

Harry retrieves the stepladder from the shed and sets it up beneath the pergola, which is draped in the insistent vine. She likes the flowers and foliage, but it's a pushy plant that insists on expanding beyond its territory. Beth holds the ladder, while Harry chops wildly at the creeper. Long, vicious stems crash to the ground.

'We should get a gardener,' Beth says, as though for the first time.

'What a waste of money. We're quite capable of maintaining our backyard.' Every few minutes they move the ladder so Harry can continue his work in another area. Soon the pavers below are covered in greenery and pink buds.

'How about you fill the bags with the cuttings, while I make a start on the weeding?' she suggests. Harry's already at work, cutting the stems into smaller pieces and placing them into the mesh sack.

Beth sits on the small limestone wall that runs the length of the side fence. The sun warms her back as she gently pulls out weeds that are sprouting in the flowerbeds, making a small pile beside her.

'Are you hungry? How about I make us some morning tea?' She doesn't wait for him to answer. She stands, slipping off her gloves, and makes her way inside, wishing it wasn't too early for gin and tonics.

Later in the day, she wraps an apron around her and ties the strings at the front. A cardboard box piled high with food sits on the bench, and the familiar aroma of coriander wafts through the kitchen.

She'd been to the market early this morning while Harry slept, arriving when the stallholders were stacking the tables with produce, farm dirt still clinging to the sweet potatoes, plump apples only just plucked from their trees. She likes to shop before the crowds and scruffy entertainers arrive. She takes her time choosing her fruit and vegetables. Whenever Harry shops, he prides himself on the speed with which he does it. But he comes home with misshapen carrots and bruised and lopsided pears. He always forgets to buy something on the list. Sometimes she wonders if he does it deliberately, knowing she'd prefer to do the shopping herself.

Beth wipes down the bench top until it gleams, and then pulls out a large silver, mixing bowl from the cupboard beneath it. She opens the pantry and slides out a shelf heavy with glass jars of sugar, flour and cocoa. Smaller jars are filled with baking powder and cornflour and bicarbonate of soda. She'd made labels for each of them with her labelling machine, and every time she looked at this shelf she feels a warm glow. There's something reassuring about its order and symmetry.

The recipe book lies open on the bench, the page gritty and smudged with years of use. She doesn't need to read the instructions. She's made this cake countless times over the years, but she likes the process of taking it down from the shelf, feeling the rough paper beneath her fingers and checking off the ingredients as she sifts them into the bowl. When the kids were younger, they helped her bake, standing on a stool to reach. She hovered nervously behind them as they held the electric beaters, reminding them not to stick their fingers anywhere near the spinning tops.

Today, Beth bakes alone. Faint sounds of Fleetwood Mac wafted from the living room, *You can go your own way, Go your own way.*

Tonight, Mon, her youngest, is coming for dinner. Beth wants to make it special. She doesn't come over as much as Beth would like, and it's never quite as pleasant as she imagines it will be. Beth tip-toes around her daughter, cautious about commenting on her clothes or hair. She knows to never mention her weight, but she does look so thin. She's not taking care of herself. Harry breezes in and wraps himself around his daughter without even a hint of restraint. Mon didn't even make a prickly response when he asked her if she was seeing someone.

Mon has always been closer to Harry, even as a toddler. Beth had tried so hard, but maybe that was the problem. She's always been one of those fiercely independent girls, and Beth was never quite sure where that left her. Hovering awkwardly on the sidelines, waiting for an opportunity to provide advice or show support.

Harry had always wanted their children to surf. Thought it was something that would bring him and kids together. And a hobby they would have for life. But, if there's one thing Beth has learnt as a parent, it's that children tend to do the opposite of what you hope they'll do. She wishes she'd known that twenty five years ago. It would have saved her a whole lot of wasted energy and anguish.

The boys never showed any interest in surfing, and neither did Mon until she was ten and one of her friends took it up. Mon cautiously asked Harry if he'd take her for a lesson. He couldn't get down to the beach fast enough. He borrowed a board from his brother and the two of them spent hours practising, first on the sand and then in the whitewash. He came home beaming, and Mon reluctantly agreed it hadn't been terrible.

Harry was away for work the following weekend, and Beth decided she would take Mon down to the beach to practise what she'd learnt with her father. Beth wanted to be a part of this new hobby. Mon was sceptical, given that Beth only made it into the water once or twice a year, and only when there was no swell and the temperature was high. But Beth reassured her she'd watched plenty of surfing, and that she knew the basics. She didn't mention she'd never stood on a board.

Monica practised in the shallows, under Beth's watchful eye. But, before long, she became bored and wanted to venture further out. The water was choppy, but Mon said she wouldn't go far. Beth planted herself right by the water's edge, nervously watching her daughter paddle out. The waves weren't large, and Mon had assured her she knew how to handle herself. Every time a wave rolled in, Beth shuddered as her daughter, still lying flat on her board, rose up and over it. Other surfers sat, legs straddled over their boards, ready to leap up into standing position

when the right wave presented itself. Mon appeared to be clinging to the board. She looked tiny out there. Too small. Like a bath toy bobbing about.

Beth took a few steps out. She imagined swimming away through the cold water with strong, deliberate strokes. She waved at Mon. And then she saw a wall of water rolling in. She tried to call out, but her voice was lost in the breeze. Mon faced the shore, and she was oblivious to the wave until it started to break on her. Her board flipped up into the air, and Beth saw her disappear into the churning froth. For the next few seconds, Beth couldn't move or breathe or think.

Now she looks back on it, Mon was probably only underwater for a few seconds, but it felt like much longer. Beth froze. Eventually one of the surfers reached down, hauled her up on to his board and paddled her in. Mon was shaken, but completely unharmed. But she didn't want to surf after that. Harry couldn't forgive Beth. He was devastated that Mon didn't want to surf again. She doubt Mon even remembers it, but she often thinks back on how helpless she felt that day. She wonders if Harry still blames her.

As Beth sets the table, she thinks of her suitcase upstairs and she feels a wave of excitement and a prickling guilt. It occurs to her that perhaps she doesn't intend to leave, but she feels better knowing she has a bag packed at the ready. Even with the windows wide open, the air in her home feels stale, and she likes to imagine being somewhere else. Night after night, when she sits across from Harry over dinner, she feels heavy in her chair. Her mind wanders as he tells her about his day. The difficult client he met. The young man with the pierced nose he spoke to at the service station. She'd heard it all before. Different days, different stories, but same, same, same.

'And how was your day, hon?' Beth feels a weight in her belly.

'Fine. It was fine.' Always fine.

She'll have a lovely dinner with Mon and Harry, and quietly suffer her daughter's coldness and distance. She'll serve dessert and they will all comment on the fluffiness of the cake as though they have never eaten sponge before. Later, she and Harry will clean the kitchen and they will talk about lucky they are. She knows the script.

Beth doesn't want to leave Harry or her home. She'd just like a break from whatever this is. She wants to stretch and strain, and do something surprising. Perhaps even extraordinary. Her suitcase is ready, just in case she has somewhere to go.