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Samarkand

Nan was a bowerbird; she liked small things, pretty things, and shiny things. Except she didn't steal the way bowerbirds stole for their nests. She just collected things and never threw them out. So the secrets of her living room held endless fascination and power for me.

For example, few houses in the subtropics had fireplaces. Nan's did. My Russian grandfather had had a fireplace included in the architectural plans. Had they still lived in the colder south, it would have been a real one. Because they had moved north, he had put in an electric one. It had finely wrought, surprisingly realistic, red and black logs that flickered. I turned the switch on and off and on and off, especially during winter and the rainy season.

The living room had dark beams that crossed the ceiling making squares of the white plaster. On nights when my parents were going to balls or dinner parties and Nan was babysitting me, I would lie on my back in two of the big armchairs pulled together to make a special little bed and I counted the squares as I was falling asleep. If the fireplace was on, its flickering light flowed across the darkened squares.

The room also had a window seat that was built in beneath stained glass, Art Deco windows. Being on the second storey, the windows opened onto the wide front garden. If I heaved the long cushions off the seat so that they leaned up against the wall and stained glass windows, I could, with effort, lift up the window seat. Inside were magazines and newspapers that dated back donkey's years. There were also scrapbooks of news clippings about my mother from before I was born and Nan's photograph albums. There was some order but not a lot, so I was able to take them out and put them back without bothering my grandmother. Nan was not organized like my mother. The only things Nan kept in order, particularly later in life, were her clothes, her sewing things, her paints, and the black, leather-bound albums with their black pages

holding tiny photographs, each identified in white ink with her careful, pretty, Victorian script.

The room had an excellent piano, which my mother told me she had practiced on daily for hours ever since she was a child and then again when she moved back in with her parents while my father was away at the war. My grandfather's mandolin and balalaika sat on top of the piano.

The room was lightly filled with the handmade, light-boned furniture my grandfather had commissioned from Mehler: the case for the grandfather clock he had ordered from Germany in 1930, the fragile hall stand, a delicate telephone table and chair, and a nest of tiny quarter-circle side tables that slipped under a larger round table with slim legs. All were stained rosewood.

"Does the wood come from roses?" I asked my mother once when we were living with Nan for that year after my grandfather died.

"No, darling, it's the stain, something one uses to colour wood, that Mother and Daddy – Granddad and Nan – liked".

A built-in cabinet had French doors whose fine fretwork allowed glimpses of what was inside. I, being the only grandchild around, was shown how to open the cupboard with a small key. I was permitted to unlock the doors at will as long as I took nothing out. I could look as much as I wanted but an adult had to be with me if I wanted to hold anything. In it were things from places far away, further than we had ever driven, further even than the end of the ocean, where we went a lot. Nan grouped things in the cabinet according to no other order than how they looked. The order made sense to me. They were just where they were supposed to be.

By the time we went to live with Nan for that year she was dealing with the financial strictures of probate, initiating fruitless Red Cross attempts to track Granddad's Russian relatives whom he had listed in his will but were now presumed murdered, and learning how to write checks, I was tall enough to reach the middle shelf where Nan kept a small box covered with faded, red-flowered paper. The box had six miniature drawers. I don't remember what was

in every drawer but I remember some. Shells might have been in the others; Nan liked shells. In the bottom left drawer, lying in silent and transparent state on cotton wool, was the fine-boned skeleton of a tiny curved creature.

"Hold it in your open hand, duckie. It's delicate. It's a sea horse".

Being very myopic but having no glasses because no-one yet realized I needed them, I could hold the sea horse close to my eye and see each articulated bone. I loved the curve of its head and opposite curve of its tail. It was the tiniest horse I had ever seen. It was a great and wonderful mystery to me, not to be spoken aloud, that such a tiny horse could swim. Not just swim but swim upright. Not just upright but under water without breathing. Nan never said where the skeleton came from and I didn't really believe there were other little horses in the sea that could do these things, so I assumed Nan and the seahorse shared, if not a history, a secret. I never had courage to ask.

In the middle drawer on the right was a piece of dark blue, sequined netting. My mother said it was the P S de re ziss tonts. At least, that's how I saw the name in my six-year-old mind's eye. I could read and write pretty early having my mother as an interested, patient teacher. However, foreign phrases were not in my spelling range yet.

"It's French, darling", my mother explained. "I'm making a little joke".

Nan walked by, looked in to see what we were doing, and said that the sequined netting was a Relic.

"What's a Relic?"

"Something old and valuable and still around – like me". Nan laughed her short, Cornish laugh.

"What's it relicked from?"

"It's not 'relic'ed from' darling. A way to ask that would be: 'Why is it a relic?' my mother said. She corrected my grammar with as much dedication, frequency, and calm as she did her errors when she practiced scales or fuges or things. She couldn't continue until the correction was made.

"It's a relic because it's what remains from one of the costumes Nan created for me when I was training in classical ballet".

"Took two months to get that stuff from France", Nan added from the double glass doors that separated the living room from the dining room. "Then a month to make it".

Years ago, before I came along and before my parents got married, Nan had turned her sewing skills, endless patience, and frustrated artistry into designing and sewing costumes for my mother. Nan said my mother was a serious and advanced ballet student. My mother said she couldn't arch her foot sufficiently so she stopped and taught ballet and played music for the institute instead.

"I think Grandad liked my music better than my dancing", my mother added as Nan went off to the kitchen. "I was more serious about music. I practised for hours and took all the Trinity College exams. My dance seemed frivolous to him, I think – or probably he could see I wasn't as good at it as I seemed to be at music. Although he certainly enjoyed ballet. We had the Russian ballet company here for evenings when they toured Australia. Grandad would want me to play something serious for them or they'd ask me to play while they sang. Nan used to play by ear. Grandad taught her Russian melodies and she would accompany him when he played the balalaika or mandolin but when we had visitors, they both wanted me to play".

Later, Nan would give me the old dance costumes she had made for my dress-up box. One of my favourites was The Flame. Long pieces of red crepe flowed in diagonals from my prepubescent hips and dragged on the ground. I would swirl until I was dizzy and flop to the grass under the overgrown date palms my grandfather was no longer around to tame. Then I would climb the frangipani tree to lie, I thought gracefully, with my sun-blonded hair and flames flowing down from the branch. Nan would take photographs of me, which she would later colour and 'touch up' to her aesthetic content.

But long before I grew big enough to drape the costumes on me and lie in the frangipani tree, this blue-sequined costume existed no longer. All that remained was this Relic. I had to imagine the rest. Each blue sequin shone like a moon and then went dark as I moved my hand.

"It was a beautiful costume", my mother said. "The whole thing was midnight blue". She gently picked up the bit of sequined netting from my small hand and put it back in the box. I knew my mother loved midnight blue. She wore perfume that came in a midnight blue bottle. I had filled my nose with its fragrance, my imagination with its name – "Evening in Paris" – and my eyes with the intensity of the tiny blue bottle, which was especially wonderful if I held it up to the light. My mother's engagement ring was the same blue. I thought of the colour as her.

Nan walked back in with one of her many cups of tea and biscuits. She put the teacup down on a side table. I could tell her feet were hurting her. She had to wear shoes she had made by hand for a lot of money down south. She said that in Her Day girls would buy boots one size too small so their feet would look prettier. Now, when her shoes and heavy stockings were off, her toes lay one on top of each other like pegs that had fallen off the clothes line. Nan sat down with relief in one of the mushroom-coloured armchairs between the cabinet and the French doors.

I opened the middle drawer on the right. Something deep blue was in it sitting on white cotton.

"What's this, Nan?"

"That's from Samarkand. From the temple". My grandmother took a bite of her sweet biscuit and stirred the two heaped teaspoons of sugar she always put in her tea. She was using the kitchen china today, blue and brown, and a discoloured silver teaspoon. Picked up the newspapers Nan had pushed with her stockinged leg off the footstool when she put her feet up, my mother lined up the edges of the pages, folded them in half and laid the paper neatly on the edge of the worn Persian rug just by the footstool.

"Granddad brought it with him".

"What's a tempull?"

"T-E-M-P-L-E", my mother said automatically, sensing from how I'd pronounced the new word that my spelling would be inventive. "A temple is a place where people go to worship a god or gods they believe in. Like the church you and Daddy attend".

"Then what's 'summer can'?"

" 'Samarkand', Meg", my grandmother answered and had a sip of tea. "She's forgotten the house", Nan said to my mother who had just re-entered through the French doors with her own cup of tea and a biscuit.

I didn't understand what Nan meant.

She turned to me. "Samarkand is a city a long way away from here. Grandad worked on repairing a famous temple there when he was young. He did all kinds of things to earn the money to get from Russia to the Black Sea and buy a ticket to Australia. Working on the temple was just one of the things he did. He could do anything with his hands. Luce, the map and the article out of the window seat".

My mother sighed, set aside her tea, and went over to the window seat. She lifted off the cushions, which had turned multicoloured when the late afternoon light shone through the stained glass, and stacked them neatly in an armchair. She opened up the lid and drew out a faded map and something from a magazine. She brought them over to Nan. I sat on Nan's lap with my back to her front. My mother laid the map over our legs; my bare legs were dangling on either side of Nan's silk lap. The map had a red ink line wandering across big bits of it that were different colours. It was clipped to a yellowing newspaper article. Both the map and the newspaper were glued onto thin board.

"There's the name, darling. See how it's spelled? You can remember if you break it into three words: 'Sam'. That's Dr. Goldstein's first name. 'Ark'.

Remember about Noah and all the animals? Then you just have an 'and' at the end".

I didn't like the idea of a black sea so I tried not to think about it other than to decide that my grandfather must have been brave to sail on a black sea. I thought about Samarkand. I looked at the picture of the temple in the yellowing news article. I pictured my grandfather standing beside the temple with a hammer in his hand because he had been banging bits that had fallen off the temple back on.

"You can take it out", Nan said between sips. I slipped off her lap, went over to the cabinet, and carefully pulled out the little drawer, holding it with both hands.

"What is it?"

"Mosaic".

Another word. No matter how many Roman and Greek floors I would later see, whenever I would hear 'mosaic' I would always see this small piece of intense blue porcelain.

"Granddad picked up this piece from the scrap heap. They didn't need it. He brought it all the way across the sea to Australia. Then later, after we moved up here and your mother was growing up, we bought land down at the beach and built the house. He called it 'Samarkand'. You used to go there all the time. Don't you remember it?"

"I think so".

"You remember Granddad, don't you?" Nan adjusted her silk skirt so it wasn't pulling on her stockings any more and looked over at my mother.

I could see my grandfather's smile. I could feel strong legs supporting me as I sat on his lap. I could felt a firm, flat belly laughing. I could see a Band-Aid on his forehead when I was standing on a chair in the dining room opposite him, ready to jump into his lap. I asked him why he had a Band-Aid. He said he had bumped himself cutting fronds off one of the palms. Now that the palms were overgrown and too thick, fronds dropped sometimes. I could remember a big

storm one night when my parents were out and I was staying with Nan and him. Granddad held me up so I could see out the windows in the dining room. We saw lightning and heard thunder. Then he slid me down to the floor, took my hand, and led me past the big dining table to the end of the windows. He held aside the heavy, floorlength gold curtains and showed me a black box on the wall. He told me that the box put the lightning where it couldn't hurt us. I never went near that box. I could remember pulling silk tassels on his camel-hair dressing gown when we went to see him in the hospital. That was before he didn't come home again. I kept undoing the knot and he kept doing it up so I could undo it again. He was supposed to come home but something went wrong.

"Yes".

I put the box on Nan's silk lap and carefully picked up the piece of mosaic with three fingers from each hand. I didn't want to drop it.

"When can we go to the house? 'To Sam-Ark-And'?"

"We can't any more. We can drive by but we can't go in. Granddad sold it shortly before he went into the hospital. He thought it wasn't getting enough use". Nan picked one of my long hairs off the arm of her chair and wound it around her slim forefinger.

I sat on Nan's lap again, holding the piece of mosaic in one hand and putting my other hand over it, peeking at it through my stubby fingers.

My mother took a sip of her tea and added, "Granddad used to say, 'I can't believe I own a bit of Australia'. He owned quite a lot of land – commercial buildings – but this house and 'Samarkand' meant most to him. He built them with the best materials. He always used the best. We used to go there often. Daddy and I even lived there for a while when I was expecting you".

I thought she must have been expecting me the way she expected me home from school. I couldn't think where I would have been. Probably with my Grandadrents.

"Let me up, Meg", Nan said. I gave her the mosaic, hopped off her lap, and tried to jump exactly on the line of little circles on the Persian carpet. Like hopscotch. Nan put the mosaic back in the little drawer, put it on the side table, and went to the window seat. She rummaged around and eventually pulled out one of the many photograph albums. She sat down and leafed through it carefully until she found a page of photographs. She beckoned me away from the dots on the carpet and bade me sit on the arm of the chair beside her.

"See?" She pointed at the page with her slim hand.

The small, deckled edged, black and white photographs were of a sturdy child with a big smile wearing a straw hat, overalls, and a long, thick tumble of brown hair falling over her overalls. She was playing with a hose in the front yard. A handsome man with laughy eyes and thick curly hair and wearing in a light shirt and long pants was sitting on a wicker chair behind the child. The ocean was just behind a low fence.

"Who's that?" I asked. Nan took her last sip of tea. The biscuit had long gone.

"You and Grandad. At 'Samarkand' ".

"Nan! That's not me! I've got plaits! And Granddad had a Band-Aid".

Nan put her empty teacup back on the side table, rose with difficulty, indicated to my mother to put the album, map, and article back in the window seat, and took the mosaic back to the cabinet.

I followed her over to the cabinet, reached up with my nail bitten fingers, and carefully opened the top right drawer. In it was a matchbox with an odd cross on it.

"That's a swastika. I kept it from a train when Nan and Grandad and I were traveling through Germany in 1938", my mother explained as she looked over from where she was lining up the window seat cushions. "You can take it out but be careful with it, darling. It's probably worth something now. The people who made it did bad things. Many people never saw their families again because of them. When we were travelling through Germany, we saw bad

messages in windows. They were written by the people who made the matchbox. I was only eighteen. I was naive. I just thought they all had lovely uniforms, especially the girls and boys singing as they went marching and hiking. I didn't know anything about them. Granddad knew though. He must have been concerned about our travelling right then but he didn't say anything. I don't think he wanted Nan and me to worry".

Nan got up and moved over to the piano. On the top shelf, there were two long, hand-coloured photographs. She reached up and took down both of them. They had always been there. They were the longest pictures I'd ever seen – about the length of my whole arm. She let me hold one end of the first picture with her. It was of a city with mountains in the back. It was hand coloured.

"We bought this when your mother and Granddad and I were in Lucerne". Nan said, running her finger along the top of the frame where some dust had accumulated. She wiped it onto her lace handkerchief. "We went up Mount Pilatus. Nan and I were going to stay at the lake while he went to see his family. He'd been trying to get permission to go to Russia since long before we left Australia. They wouldn't let him in. He never saw his family again. So he stayed on with us in Switzerland. This second one is from the top of Mount Pilatus. It shows the names of mountains".

That night, I had my bath in the olive green bathtub with the gargoyle – another amazing feature of my grandparent's house – and then my mother put me to bed. I was sleeping in her childhood room.

I lay there for a while until I could hear my parents talking in low voices in their bedroom, which was at the other end of the house, down the hall, through the dining room, and past the steps. My mother had told me that when my grandfather was unwell, he would use that bedroom. I could hear that they were upset. Since we came to live here, they often sounded upset when they thought I was asleep. I would sometimes climb down out of my bed, which was high for me and creep down the hall, across the dining room, past the curtain and black box, and past the steps so I could hear what they were saying. But I

could never quite hear. I didn't realize it then but my grandfather had built the house so well that this was why it was harder to hear. That room had no other walls that adjoined the house. The other walls, each with big windows, overlooked the big back garden with the great palms and fern grotto. Their windows and mine both opened onto the back garden so sometimes I could hear them better than they knew just from my bedroom.

Nan was falling asleep over an American magazine in the room opposite mine. I slid down out of bed, tiptoed past her bedroom, through the dining room (being careful not to look in the direction of the curtain hiding the black box), and into the living room. Nan was already a little deaf so I wasn't too worried about her hearing me. The moon was shining through where I knew the stained glass was in the window. It made patterns on the dark rug. Standing on Nan's footstool, I could reach the key to the cabinet on the mantlepiece. I quietly unlocked the cabinet and pulled out the middle drawer on the right.

The mosaic lay there glinting softly in the moonlight.

I thought about Grandad and his forehead with the bump and the Band-Aid. I thought about pulling his tassel in the hospital. I had to look up at him but was tall enough to pull the tassle. He had been smiling down at me and laughing. He had a laugh that made me giggle; it was only for me my mother said. I thought about the photographs Nan had said were Granddad and me.

Then I thought about the matchbox with the swass-ticket on it and the black box that my grandfather had told me meant no-one could get hurt. Now there were two things I could never go near: the big black box and the little red box. If you didn't have a black box, you might die or never see your family again. The red box somehow meant you might die or never see your family again.

Making sure that my fingers and hands didn't even touch the top drawer in which the red box lay, I managed to take out the piece of mosaic from the middle drawer. It was bluer in the moonlight. Midnight blue. I picked it up, put it down on the side table beside my grandmother's chair, closed the drawer,

carefully locked the door, climbed up on the footstool again, replaced the key, picked up the piece in both hands, tiptoed back to bed and put it under my pillow.

The next morning, when I was getting ready for school, dawdling as usual, I wrapped the mosaic in one of my handkerchiefs, then stole a safety pin from Nan's sewing room. I wrapped the handkerchief around the mosaic and pinned it into the pocket of my uniform's ironed blue blouse. The tunic I wore over the blouse hid the pocket. I sat in the back where the clever and obedient students were told to sit. I kept feeling my pocket all through Writing and Sums and the other boring classes. I pretended I was sick at lunchtime so I didn't have to go out, run around in the gravel playground, play hopscotch, or play knuckles with the other children. I liked playing hopscotch and knuckles but I was afraid I would lose the mosaic. Because I was one of the Good students, my teacher believed me. I managed to pretend that I was just unwell enough to stay in the classroom but not so unwell that she considered doing anything more serious.

At the end of the day, I packed my school bag, a heavy brown horror. I put the remains of my lunch and a scruffy exercise book in which I had to do homework into the bag. I had a spot at the end on the bottom shelf for my bag, next to the verandah railing.

I stuck my school hat on and walked to the front gates. I felt my pocket again, happy to be alone with my secret.

There was nothing in my pocket except for the safety pin, which was undone. I felt sick inside all the way to my socks.

I ran back to our classroom. The teacher was sitting at her desk supervising two boys who were kept in for detention and were having to do lines. She looked annoyed when I came back, beckoned me in. I asked her in a whisper if I could please look under my seat because I had lost my hanky.

"Quickly now or I'll keep you in too for carelessness".

I looked under the desk. No matter how hard I stared at the black iron curves of the desk legs, no handkerchief appeared. I opened my desk. It had

some crayons, a pencil with the end broken, a dead fly, some marbles – my favourite ones with the swirls – and my slate board but no handkerchief. I stuck the marbles in my pocket so they wouldn't get confiscated and left. I went out on the verandah and looked all over including my spot where I kept my school bag. Nothing.

Tears insisted on spurting from my eyes and I grabbed a bit of newspaper to wipe them; the toilets were too far to go.

Ned McWatters was sitting below the verandah. I hated Ned. He was three years older, red headed, big for his age, and mean. His father was a steam roller driver and had disappeared last year. Then his mother ran off leaving Ned and Johno with his uncle. Some people said his father fell under a steam roller. Others said his mother ran his father over with the steamroller and then was killed in goal. Someone else said his parents were struck by lightning. Someone else said his father had another family out in the bush and his mother ran away with another steam roller driver. Someone in fifth grade said Ned must have been named after Ned Kelly the bushranger but someone else who was in Ned's class said he was named after a donkey. Ned hit the boy who said he was named after a donkey. Anyway, Ned had been even meaner since his parents disappeared and he and Johno went to live with his uncle and aunt.

"Have you seen a hanky?" I asked him knowing it was a terrible mistake to even talk to him. Once he'd cornered two of us in the girls' toilet and held up a big cockroach in front of us. Its legs were still moving a little but it had whitish stuff oozing out of it. He'd just killed it. Ned was horrible.

"Nup", he said and spat on the ground.

"Please?"

"Say 'Please Sir' the way we do to old Dodd".

"Please – Sir".

"Nup".

"You have, haven't you. You're fibbing. You're pretending you haven't".

"Big words, big words. PreTENDing! Think you're clever don'tcha".

"It's my mother's hanky".

"How much will you give me if I did see it?"

I thought quickly. I had no money. "I have a really nice big marble you could have". He looked more interested.

"Lemmee see".

I dug one of the marbles out of my deep uniform pocket and offered it to him. He took it with his filthy fingers and turned it around in the sun in front of my eyes. I could see his fingerprints all over it. He reached into his back pocket, pulled something out and let it drop to the ground just behind where he was sitting. I ran over so I could see what it was. It was the handkerchief. It was lying on a piece white bread from someone's lunch. I went to pick it up but Ned pushed me out of the way and snatched it.

"Please".

"Please SIR".

"Please SIR".

He threw the handkerchief at me.

I reached to grab it because I knew it would fall heavily with the mosaic in it and then the mosaic would break and I might as well be dead. But the handkerchief floated in the slight breeze. I could tell instantly there was no mosaic.

"I didn't want it anyway. I was just going to use it to tie up cockies and let them out in the lav".

"Where's the – thing – that was in it?"

"What thing?"

"The coloured thing. The blue thing".

"Dunno".

"Where'd you find the hanky?"

"Give me another marble".

"I've only got three. Tell me where you got it. I already gave you one".

"Aren't we clever! We can count!"

"Where?"

"If you give me another one, I might tell you. Won't promise".

I handed over another marble. He didn't even look at it. He just put it in the dirty grey pocket of his school pants.

"Where?"

"Didn't promise".

"Where?"

"Maybe. Just maybe under the verandah".

"Where under the verandah?"

He said nothing.

I raced down the stairs nearly slipping on the remains of someone's jam roll and, making sure to keep my bag with me because Ned had been known to take stuff out of people's bags or to put horrible stuff in, I started feeling around in the dirt. My fingertips encountered lots of gritty things – half-eaten, boiled eggs with gravel on them, old crayons pitted with gravel, a smelly grey sock with a hole. No mosaic.

"Ned. You've got to tell. Did you see a bit of blue stuff where you found the hanky?"

"Don't answer questions unless I'm paid. Especially questions from cockroaches. You're a cockroach. A cocky. A wooden peg. Meg the Peg. You're just a second grader".

"Here". I handed over my last marble. It was my favourite: blue and white swirls and the biggest of the three. They were all my father's when he was growing up and this one was my favourite. He gave them to me when I started school. I loved them.

"Nup".

"But I gave you my marble!"

"I said I'd answer your question. I answered your question, Cocky Pegleg".

I sat down in the dust and cried heartily. Now I had not only lost the mosaic but three marbles, one of which was my father's. Ned continued to sit

there looking out over the playing field and throwing stones at the birds. He was a good shot. He even hit a crow. It flew off squawking angrily. I finally got up, blew my nose on the dusty hanky, brushed myself off with tear-soaked hands, thereby spreading the grime I had accreted, picked up my school bag, and walked slowly towards the gate.

I was a few yards away when I felt a sting on my leg. It really hurt. I looked down. I thought I must have been stung by a bee but I saw a scratch on my muddy leg and a little blood oozing. I would need a Band-Aid when I got home. If I ever went home. I began to imagine how I could run away but couldn't work out how to do it. I knew Ned must have thrown a stone at me and hit his mark. I hated him. I heard him laugh. I was getting ready to go back and swing my school bag at him I was so mad. Then I heard him say, "Pegleg Meg can't even see what's right there!"

I put my bag down to pick up a handful of gravel to throw in his general direction but glimpsed something larger in the gravel. It must have been the stone Johno used. I picked it up so I could use it instead and saw that, despite the dirt covering it, it was the mosaic. There was a spot of blood on the corner where it had hit me. I started to cry again and forgot to throw any gravel at Ned. He said bad words to me all the way out the school gate.

My mother was shocked when she opened the door. I was a mess. "What happened darling?"

"Ned said bad things to me and I got dirty".

"He's a horrid little boy. I'm so sorry. He's a bully. But I heard his family's been having trouble so perhaps that's why he was a meanie. Let's get you into the bath and wash the school off you right now. I'll run the bath".

While she was making the green gargoyle spurt hot water, I ran to my room. I unwrapped the mosaic from of the handkerchief and slid them under the bedspread and sheets right at the bottom of my bed. I pulled off my grubby uniform and socks, dropped them on the polished floor, threw my hat on the

dressing table that had been my mother's and went in to the bathroom in my white underpants.

"Sweetheart, you have a little cut".

"He threw – something – at me".

"He should be reported".

"NO!"

"Why? He should be reported to Mr. Dodds. Bad words are wrong but throwing things is dangerous". She took a green washcloth off the rail. My towel lived next to Nan's where Granddaddy's used to be, my mother said.

"Please Mummy. Don't tell Mr. Dodds. It was my fault sort of. I shouldn't have talked to Ned. If you tell Mr. Dodds, then Ned'll tell a big fib about me. He always tells fibs. Then Mr. Dodds will feel sorry for Ned because of his father and believe him and I'll get kept in".

We had a bath. I talked too much out of fear and relief. My mother listened endlessly, treating all my stories as important. This usually would have pleased me but in this case I knew that I was not telling her the most important story so I felt lonely and sadder and sadder. Finally, as she was washing my back with the green washcloth, I started to cry in earnest.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Nothing".

"Meg, there's something!"

I thought quickly. "Ned really scared me and I got my uniform dirty but then I thought about him never seeing his family again and – ". I got no further.

Dinner was subdued. I wore my Band-Aid with pride and asked my mother if she could put one going the other way as well. Nan was silently angry with Ned. I could do no wrong in her eyes. My father wasn't home from work yet.

I didn't know how I was going to stay awake until everyone was in bed. I pretended to be asleep when my father tiptoed in, kissed my forehead, and touched the littlest short soft hair that grew near my temples. He sighed and left tiptoed out. Finally, everyone was in bed. I fell asleep before I heard my parents

stop talking. A clap of thunder woke me in the dark and soon it started to rain heavily. I was glad Granddaddy had put the black box in. I pulled the hanky and the piece of mosaic up from the bottom of the bed with my toes. I took the mosaic from between my toes. It was so dirty. I spat on the mosaic and kept wiping and wiping with the hanky. I couldn't see much in the dark except when the lightning flashed. After a lot of wiping, I decided it just had to be clean.

Under cover of the sound of the summer storm, I sneaked into the living room. I climbed up again, got the key, opened the cabinet, put the mosaic back, locked the cabinet, climbed up on the footstool, put the key back with the top turned left just the way it had been when I got it the night before, and got down again, heart pounding.

I was terrified about the mosaic. I couldn't remember if the side with the point went on the right or on the left. I hoped I had got the bit of blood off. I felt slightly sick and elated with fear of someone noticing. No-one did, although my father noticed with sadness that I had lost some of the marbles he had managed to keep for thirty years without losing them.

One day, when my mother was down at the clothes line and my grandmother was sewing, I checked to make sure the mosaic was there. It was. There was a tiny pink smudge on the side where it was unglazed. I knew it was my blood.

In later years, when we went for holidays at rentals houses and motels by the beach, we would drive slowly by 'Samarkand' once during our time away.

My grandfather had chosen a piece of land with a wide sweep of powdery white sand in front. Only a long stand of Norfolk pines and a small access road lay between the house and the beach and ocean.

The second owner changed the name of the house to 'Samersand' and put the metal name on the left of the front door instead of the right.

"The name doesn't make sense", my mother commented sadly. "If they had to change it, why didn't they at least make it 'Summersand'?"

"Your mother's father was quite stern but he was a good man. He was honest and fair. After he did well, he helped a lot of men start their own business", my father would tell me each time we drove slowly past the house where I had been conceived and had grown inside my mother. "We never knew that until the funeral and they came. It's a pity you didn't know him better. He wasn't easy on me but he loved you. I never saw him laugh the way he did with you. He'd let you do anything". We would stop at the corner just before the house so we could look at it discreetly.

"He built it with the best materials but wanted it modest. The wood's jarra. West Australian. Only used for furniture now. He insisted on copper pipes. He knew anything else would erode in the salt air. Do it well the first time and you don't have to do it twice. I did agree with him on that. Pity he sold it but he thought it wasn't used often enough".

We would drive on in silence.

'Samarkand' had survived the years well. My grandfather had not left his family of intellectuals, later murdered, and worked his way from Russia to the Black Sea through all the red points on that map in the window seat without knowing what endured and what did not.

Once, after Nan died, we wrote a letter to the owner of 'Samerkand' saying we'd like to buy it back if she ever sold. She wrote back and promised to tell us. Last time I drove by, alone, a forty-storey high rise was there. The view my grandfather had chosen, however, was unchangeable: an uninterrupted view of the Pacific, which, on a cloudless day, was midnight blue.

My mother kept the long pictures from above the piano, the mosaic with the smudge on the side, the matchbox, the blue sequins, one 'Midnight in Paris' bottle, and the seahorse in a Swiss chocolate box she and my father kept from a later trip. She kept lots of other things too.

They are mine now. I don't let people touch them.

Julia Waterford King, like many of her ancestors, writes, paints, and travels extensively; she loves quiet spaces, waves, and beauty.
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