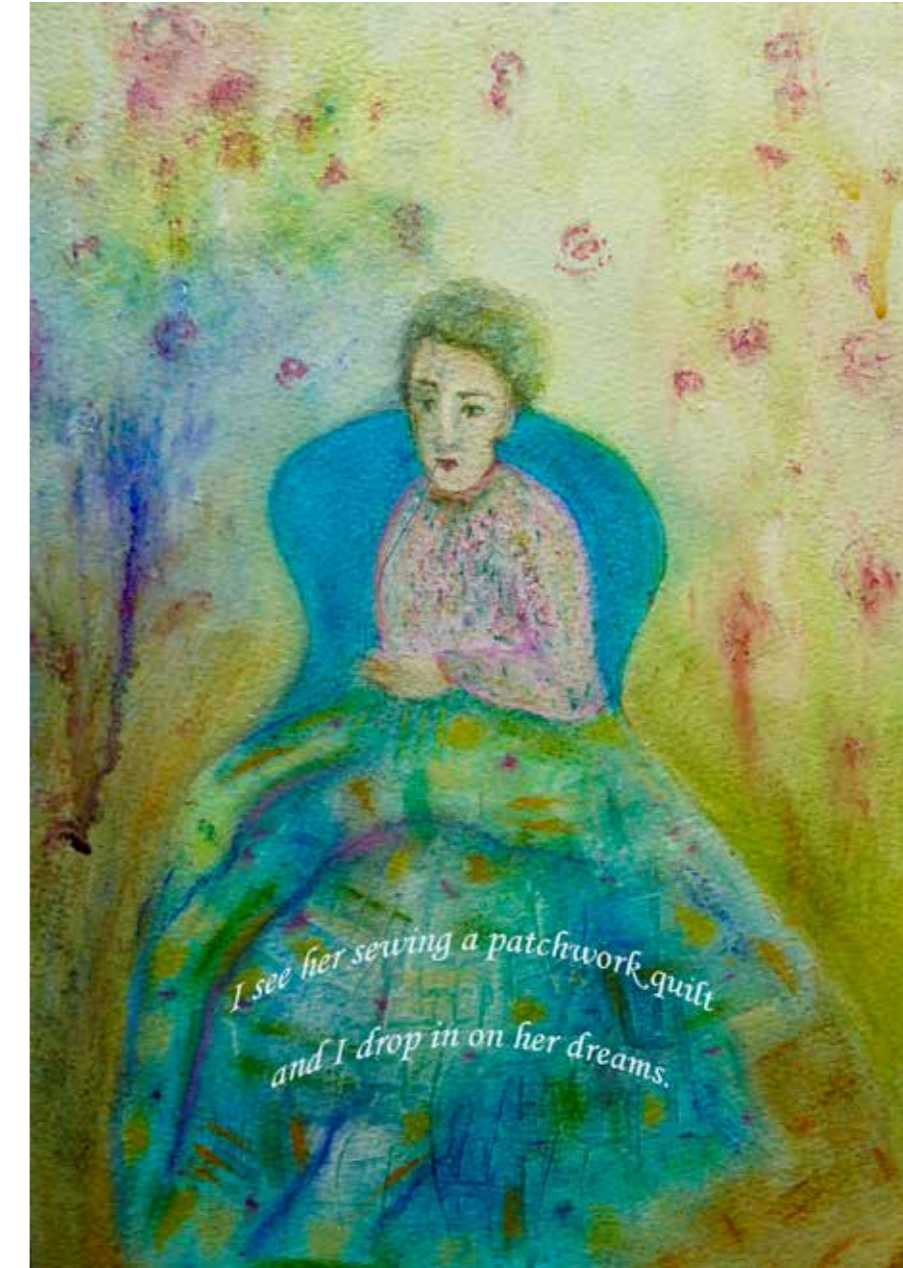




A Song of Invisible Mending

My grandmother used to sit in the blue chair and do her darning, bits of patchwork and invisible mending. Now, when I sink into the worn velour, I drop in on her dreams. From here she used to watch the wind in the tops of the trees. The dappled light would mingle with the kindness and sorrow in her eyes.

She kept all her bits and pieces handy on coffee tables at either side of the armchair. Her world was contained here and this soft vessel carried her away to crystal waters. It was her ark. When she set sail on one of her voyages, my heart always wanted to follow but soon she floated out of sight and I'd have to wait patiently for her to return. I felt like a woman I once saw in a painting, wearing an apron and standing on a doorstep, looking down the long lane to a lone figure with a familiar gait, slowly reappearing in the far distance.





Now I'm sinking into that deep blue again and remembering when I found shreds of an embroidered handkerchief snagged up in the hawthorn bush in Gran's back garden. She watched from the kitchen window while I disentangled the fragments, trying not to scratch my hands. I took a piece in to her and she got a bit tearful. It had the words *'To Mother'*, with red rosebuds and a smear of blood from my finger.

Earlier, I'd been washing up and peeping through the steamy window myself, as she busied herself in the yard, removing moss from a small, white statue of Saint Christopher and chatting to the cat. I couldn't tell what she was saying but I imagined it had something to do with hope and Spring being on its way. She came in and said: *"Oh, it's so cold in the shade but it's warm in the sun!"* She'd been standing with one foot in each. *"Get the kettle on, there's a good girl."*



I never really knew my Grandad, although I do remember the wooden doll he made me, with red lips and yellow wool for hair. Towards the end, Gran began to talk more about her first husband, when she'd been one half of 'Eddie and Ray'. This was a revelation to me. Apparently Ray made chutney, lining the jars up neatly on a shelf in the shed, next to his rifle. He pickled green walnuts once but nobody ate them, they just sat in dusty jars, like something out of an abandoned laboratory.

Ray took to smoking a pipe and kept matches and a penknife in his jacket pocket. There was usually a mouth organ in his inside pocket, in case a quick tune was required. Once they lit a fire on a beach and he played '*There's A Long, Long Trail A-Winding*'. In her eyes, those fractured days would often dance in slow motion, scented with lily of the valley.





Ray was in the trenches, lobbing enemy hand-grenades back where they came from, when one exploded. Gran was in smithereens and she carried that loss around for another sixty years, right through her second marriage to Grandad and out the other side, passing it on down the family like an heirloom, like a silent game of 'pass the parcel', only with the parcel getting bigger and heavier.

The last time Ray came home on leave, they'd quarrelled because she thought he was making eyes at a girl. It was something and nothing. She kept telling herself it was only that Ruby after all and she's no better than she ought to be. Yet the parting words she spat out at Ray ricocheted forever around every hallway she ever set foot in. He had slammed the front door on his way out and then just vanished.



I think that 'Ray' may have been the last sound she ever breathed. She kept the telegramme, the medal and the letter from the King in a gold cardboard box at the bottom of the busiest cupboard in the house. She both treasured it and pretended that it didn't exist because she never really believed, not really, that he wasn't coming home.

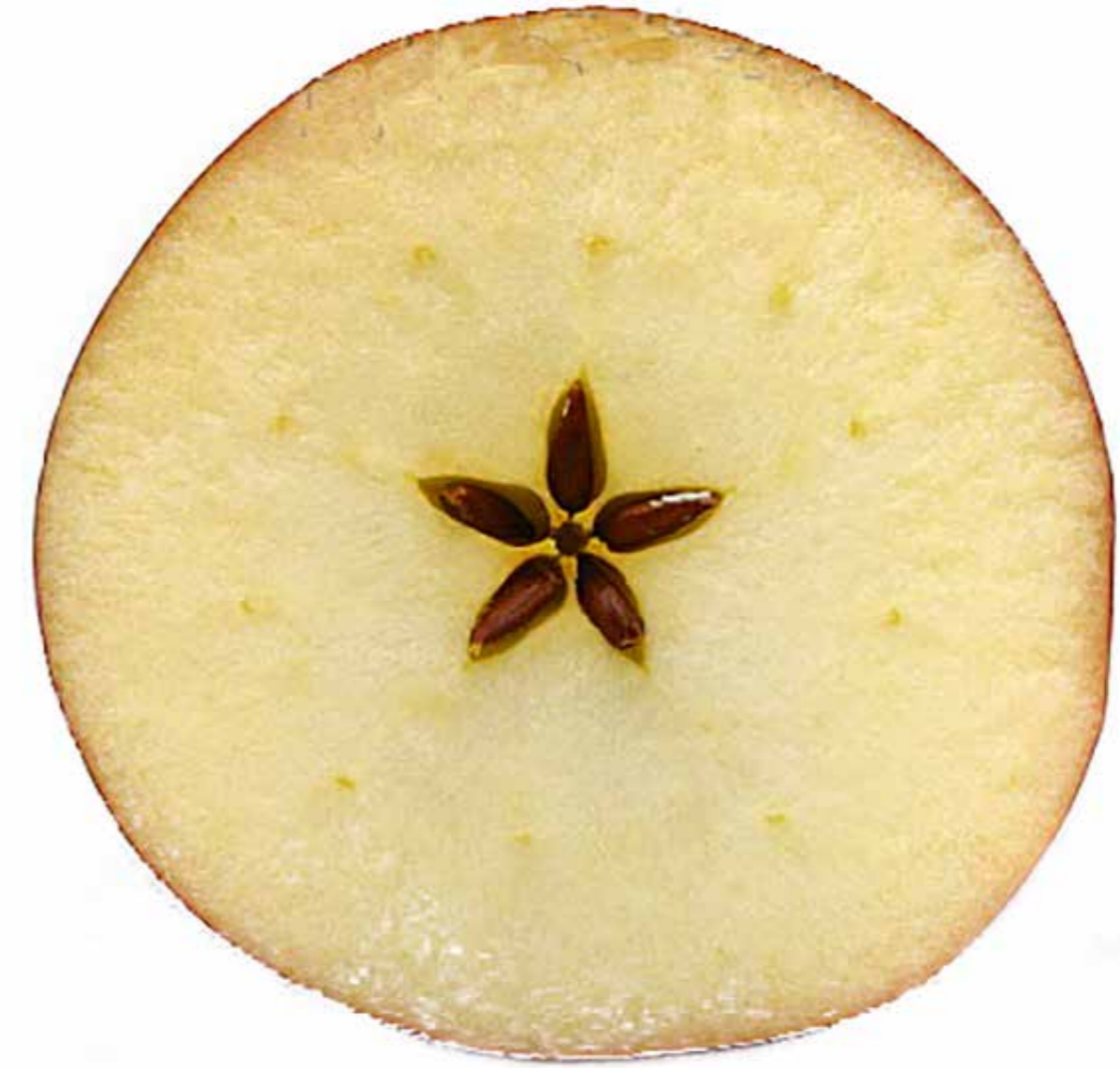
A few times, after the telegramme arrived, she'd fetch her best coat from the wardrobe and walk to the station to meet him from the train, standing on the platform on her own for hours. Eventually, she'd walk back home the long way round, through the park, then brush down her coat and hang it up before going to make tea with the best china and rounding off the afternoon by playing '*Santa Lucia*' on the piano.





She stayed up all night once, making me a dress. To me, it wasn't just a dress, it was THE dress. No frills or ribbons or bows. No lace. Just words, going in every direction. And diagrams. I don't know where she got the material. I never saw any like it before or since. The whole dress was covered in writing. Recipes, actually. Recipes of things to make from apples and pictures of apple pies and suchlike.

One of the drawings showed an apple cut in half, across ways and in the centre, in the core, was a five-pointed star. A star of apple pips. It fascinated me, that. People would come up to me and read the back of my skirt or my bodice or my sleeve, having to turn their heads at funny angles. I wore it till it faded and frayed; till the words dissolved; till there was no bloom left on the apples' cheeks; till I burst out of it.





She loved apples, did Gran. She stored them under her bed, spread out in a cardboard box with newspaper. She had three trees at the bottom of the garden - one for cookers, a Cox's Orange Pippin and a Worcester Pearmain. She taught me how to test for ripeness. *"The apple knows when it's ready,"* she said. *"It just lets go. Cup your hands underneath - gently now - and see if it drops in."*

In my mind's eye, I'm lying once more in her creaking hammock, listening to the bees, watching the shimmering leaves and waiting for an apple to bend down the branch, brush its skin against mine and hand itself over; waiting to hear her gently wavering voice, floating from the open window on the breeze:

*"On an evening that's so serene, that doesn't need anything,  
that doesn't lack anything. Santa Lucia. Santa Lucia."*





The hammock is swinging, the hour is chiming and soon I'm drifting away, as if in a creaking boat, floating on an emerald pool, gliding in and out of shafts of warm sunlight. A sudden swell tips the boat upside-down. I go under, flailing. Then I'm swimming and wading upstream, coming face to face with fishes, making their way down to the sea. Waves of angst are sweeping over the world, thundering through the waters, rushing the little fishes along. I can feel the surges rippling through the middle of my body. The fishes flap past and everything feels slippery and dizzy. I'm thinking that I mustn't let myself be swept away, not now.

I reach dry land and it's hot. There are three trees, all bent the same way - a walnut, a fig and a pear. Shiny leaves reach out, like fat fingers on generous hands. I find myself washed up into the roots of the walnut tree, amongst all the bones.





A group of women in bright silks and bare feet have gathered beneath the tree, in the cool shade. Their laughter reaches up to tremble the branches, where droplets of water hang over their heads. They don't appear to notice me travelling through the roots and into the trunk, nor leaning out from the upper branches.

Nobody gathers beneath the pear tree and the fig tree looks on knowingly. I scan the landscape from my vantage point, tracing the glistening river to where steam kisses the surface of the water. The river has divided into two tributaries and then two more, the streams racing away to the far horizons. A bird perches above my head, clinging to a slender twig that vibrates as its wings flutter and twitch. The tiny bird is alive in a divine dwelling-place, boiling over with brave and fervent song. The women in their bright colours circle the tree and begin to sing in unison:





*“Carry me a house on your shoulders. I saw one woven from painted twigs, tied with coloured rags and sprigs of heathers and feathers, all strung with bells and sweets, being carried through the streets on a polished wooden raft, like a homemade hovercraft.”*

*“Carry me a house on your shoulders, for I have just abandoned mine, leaving clothes on the washing line, as it was built of grief and gall and had no ceiling nor a wall; no window, floor or door, just some downward spiral stairs, strewn with protests, pleas and prayers.”*





*“Carry me a house on your shoulders. I’ll rest in midair and languish, freed from any anguish but held aloft where all is soft, out of reach of wayward words and level with the nests of birds, where promises are strung like beads and scattered far, like wind born seeds.”*

*“Carry me a house on your shoulders and make it out of reeds that sway, while whistling with the Milky Way. Now, on an evening that’s so serene, with skies of gold and aquamarine, where all that was broken, lost and torn is being restored, revived, reborn ~ carry me a house, please carry me. ”*





As the women begin to walk away, one of them turns to smile. She has the air of my grandmother, a bit like she looked in that sepia photograph taken at the fairground. Again, I remember watching her through the steamy kitchen window. I peep at her now in a different mist and she looks ancient, with the sorrow gone from her eyes.

The women trail off towards the four rivers and she hurries after them. They're still chanting and the sun and the wind are intent on listening. Suddenly it dawns on me that these women are a long line of grandmothers, all come to visit and now disappearing into the distance, with their shimmering silks dissolving in the last of the heat. I wake up. It's going dark. Their song carries on, infusing the twilight, echoing into eventide and percolating through the night. It is an ancient song, like a hymn and a lullaby, a song of invisible mending.



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