

MR WIGG

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For my mother, Barbara

*The nectarine and curious peach,
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,
Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass.*

‘Thoughts in a Garden’, Andrew Marvell (1621–1678)

Summer



Orchard

Mr Wigg had squandered his life. That's what his son thought. Probably others thought it, too, and maybe they were right. He was neither wealthy nor famous, and the great swathe of property his family once owned had been split up between brothers and sons. He was alone now, which people thought was sad, but he was too old to remarry and lacked the heart.

He leaned on the front verandah railing while the sun came up over the hill, washing everything pink. A moment of tenderness before the heat began to build. Birdsong rushed to fill the space the night left behind. The way Mr Wigg saw it, he'd had a pretty good life: built a home, raised a family. Young folk, who haven't lived through a war, are slow to learn there's more to it all than tearing round and round the paddocks trying to make money.

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He slid on his hat, which drooped so much around the edges now it limited his field of vision, and stepped down into the garden. There was a little moisture on the grass, enough to dampen the toes of his boots. He wandered through each of the standard rose circles that formed the centrepiece for the front garden, breathing in their perfume. They weren't what they used to be. Although they still bloomed, the colours were subdued, their size diminished. He managed the pruning, fertilising, watering, and so on – after all, they were not unlike fruit trees with their hips and flowers – but the roses had been his wife's domain.

It would have been the same if she had been the one left behind; the peaches would have sulked, refusing to give their best. Some of the other trees' little quirks would have escaped her and they'd have started acting up. Answers to problems that arose – scale or collar rot or fruit failing to set – would not have been immediately apparent, requiring belated consultation of books and other growers.

They had had their separate worlds; hers the roses and flowerbeds, the sunken garden and hedges. She had insisted on pruning those bloody hedges herself, by hand, until she was no longer able to grip the clippers.

The lawns, the orchard and most of the vegetable patch were his. She had learned years ago not to interfere or comment, but accept the resulting fruits with praise, just as he had learned to stand back and admire her rare blooms. His wife did not complain about daily armfuls

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of oversized zucchini but found new ways to cook and preserve them. After all, it was all good food and should not go to waste.

Some days they would go off to work after breakfast and not see one another until lunch, although only a cooee apart. They would not enter each other's space unless invited, especially when major work was in progress. As they aged, this occasionally had unfortunate consequences. His wife had lain in the sunken garden for several hours, her arm pinned under a log she had been trying to move from the retaining wall. 'I knew you would come,' she had said, quite calm.

Mr Wigg had fallen from his ladder and called out 'Help!' – with no response. He'd had to drag himself eight hundred yards through the dirt and around to the rose garden, with what turned out to be a fractured tibia, only to find her singing along to the radio.

Mr Wigg's orchard was backlit by the low-angled sun, his trees gilt-edged. The grass along the fence was a little long but not yet browned off. It was coming up to that time of year when the trees offered up their reward for the year's hard labour. The peaches and apricots were bending with fruit, only a few weeks off ripe, and Mr Wigg had already begun plucking off a handful of mulberries as he went past.

The first mouthful of each tree's fruit held the flavour of the soil, the rain, the air and all of the glorious variables of the four seasons of a particular year. At his age, when you

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couldn't afford to look too far ahead, every year's harvest was a gift. That perfect moment, when he held the weight of the fruit in his hand and raised it to his mouth, somehow still contained all of the expectations of the world.

Mulberries

Mr Wigg worked his way around the circumference of the tree, climbing up and down the ladder. The mulberry's heart-shaped leaves scratched his face as he worked, but it was cool in their shade and he soon filled the ice-cream container with ripe berries.

They had planted the mulberry when they were first married, nearly sixty years ago now, as the cornerstone of the orchard. Its dark branches extended over the chook yard, dropping ripe fruit for the hens to peck up. It had also spread to spill fruit on the path around to the house, which had made his wife cross every year. He had hosed the stains away each evening to appease her but there were just as many there again the next morning. Now he left the berries where they lay.

The kids used to climb right up to the top of the tree, disappearing into the leaves, to fetch the darkest and fattest

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fruit. They would return with purple fingers, mouths and feet, like wild creatures, and compare their catch. His wife would cook up a batch of mulberry pies, and churn mulberry ice-cream, and they'd know summer was really upon them.

'All right,' she would say, serving up seconds, 'since we're having such a purple patch.' And their son and daughter would giggle over each other at the table, silly with sugar.

Time had passed slowly in those days. They hadn't been able to imagine the children growing up and moving away, beginning lives of their own.

Mr Wigg popped a particularly fat, dark, berry in his mouth. 'Good crop this year, Mr Mulberry.'

There was, of course, no reply. It would be fair to say that the mulberry tree was a bit aloof. He was physically set apart from the others – position always determined so much about a tree – and their youthful boasting didn't interest him much. They might have sought advice from one who had grown for much longer, seen many more seasons, but that is the way of the young, thinking they know it all. The mulberry, too, might have shared his rumbling thoughts on the meaning of bearing fruit year after year, or stories of some of the remarkable things he had seen. Instead he stayed silent, having learned that younger trees lacked the patience to listen.

Mr Wigg left the ladder where it was for tomorrow and took his container inside, scraping his boots off on the back step. The cracks and lines of his hands were deep purple, and he'd managed to squash a berry into the peak of his hat.

MULBERRIES

He washed up in the laundry, wiping his hands on the scrap of old towel he kept hanging by the sink. It was already hot on the verandah, with a haze building outside. He popped the berries in the fridge and poured himself a glass of cold cordial.

All that thinking about mulberry ice-cream had him fancying a bowl or two. It was too hot to do anything much outside until later, and the churner was still in the pantry somewhere. He gathered together an armload of cream and eggs headed to the kitchen.



Mr Wigg drove in shrinking circles around the back lawn singing 'Close to You' at the top of his lungs, though birds were more inclined to suddenly disappear when he mowed. When he sang, too, for that matter. Late afternoon shadows stretched across the cropped buffalo grass behind him.

They had bought the ride-on when he broke his leg, so his wife could do the mowing. Although she had managed easily, she had been all too happy to give it up again when the leg mended. Cut grass always made her sneeze.

The mower was a marvellous machine, key start and far more manoeuvrable than his old tractor. It even had a roof you could attach to keep off the sun. He lined up his tyres in the last lap's tracks, sailing around and around as he had so many times before. It was never monotonous in the way of ploughing the paddocks, or the dry, itching task of harvest. His son said he put all his energy in the wrong places, but you had to follow what you enjoyed to some extent.

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Mr Wigg had built a little wagon he could attach to the mower to carry prunings and fertiliser: a gardener's dream. It was fun, too, for pulling the grandkids around in, though they had told him his son did not approve. Worried about his driving, he supposed.

With a satisfying last *vroom*, he cut the centre out of his lawn circle and lifted the blades. He shifted into top gear and sped down through the open door of the shed to park the machine with a screech.

The sun was setting over yellowing paddocks. He wandered closer to the fence to take a look. The crop was drying off nicely, thick and tall. He unchained the gate, pushed in a few steps, up to his waist in wheat. He snapped off a hairy head to rub between his hands, bent to blow away the chaff, and cradle the grains. Bit one between his teeth. They were good and full, high in protein.

He hadn't managed to get a top crop off the hundred acres since before the children were born. Things had picked up a little when he and his son had still been running the place – his son had put a lot of work into improving the soil during his first few years – but nothing like this.

Mr Wigg sighed and let the grains drop into the dust. They leased these last paddocks to the neighbours, the O'Briens, for a bit of income: bringing in more in rent than he had ever made cropping them. Those O'Brien boys – a father and his three sons – knew what they were doing, and worked hard. Good people, too. The whole district respected them, didn't begrudge them a single dollar.

MULBERRIES

They put his own efforts to shame. ‘Real farmers,’ his son always said, as if he should have been born into that family. His son had given the O’Briens first option on his farm, but they hadn’t been able to get the finance, some problem with the deeds to one of their places.

If he had worked harder, been a better farmer – and father – things might have all turned out differently, but there was no use wishing for what was already gone. Mr Wigg hooked the chain back around the post and over the bolt and made his way back up to the house.

Strawberries and Cream

Mr Wigg opened the oven door for little Lachlan and helped him slide the cake tin onto the middle shelf.

‘Okay, so now we need to set the timer,’ he said. ‘How long did the recipe say?’

‘Twenty-five minutes,’ Lachlan said. He set about turning the dial around, tongue poking out the corner of his mouth.

‘Very good.’

‘That’s a long time.’ Fiona was sitting on the stool, licking cake mixture from the spatula.

‘Long enough to pick some strawberries and whip some cream.’

‘Bags picking the strawberries,’ Lachlan said. His t-shirt, tie-dyed in pink and red, had him looking rather like a squashed strawberry already.

Fiona frowned. 'You always get to pick things.'

'Do not.'

'We can all pick them together,' said Mr Wigg. He lifted Fiona down from the stool, transferred the spatula to the sink, and wiped her mouth and hands with a damp towel. 'To the strawberry patch!'

Lachlan ran ahead and grabbed an ice-cream container from the pantry. Fiona leapt off the back step and ran after him, her denim flares flapping.

The children applied the 'one for me, one for the bucket' rule very seriously, counting out loud as they plucked off fruit. Mr Wigg followed, picking what they missed from beneath the leaves.

'They're real good this year, Poppy,' Lachlan said.

'Thank you.' Mr Wigg smiled. 'It must have been all that sheep manure you two brought me.' They had bagged it up from under the shearing shed for pocket money. Lachlan's idea, apparently, but Fiona had been willing, armed with her mother's gardening gloves. It was more than he'd ever managed to convince his own children to do when they were small. They had turned up their noses at anything with too much aroma.

Fiona stopped at the end of a row, staring up at the scarecrow as if caught in its gaze. Mr Wigg had used one of his wife's old blouses this year, something a bit brighter to try to keep the pesky starlings away.

'Do you miss Grandma?' she said.

'I sure do.'

'Mummy said she died of a broken heart.'

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Lachlan threw a strawberry, which barely missed his sister's head. 'Fiona!'

She turned, a strand of blonde hair wisping across her face. 'What?'

Lachlan frowned and shook his head.

'Your grandmother died of cancer,' Mr Wigg said. 'She was sick for a long time.'

'Oh,' Fiona said.

'I think we have plenty of strawberries now,' Mr Wigg said. 'Who's going to help me whip the cream?'



Mr Wigg washed up while Lachlan dried and Fiona put away what she could reach. The cake cooled on the wire rack.

'Smells *good*,' she said. 'It makes me hungry.'

'Not long now, sweetie.'

Lachlan hung up the tea towel. 'Did you grow strawberries up at the old farm, Poppy?'

'Sure did,' he said. 'The vegetable gardens were out the back of the kitchen and the strawberry patch was right down the bottom, near the road. One time, the cook sent me down to pick the strawberries, only about Fiona's age I would have been, when a big team of drovers came along. They were pushing a mixed herd of cattle, horses and . . . ostriches!'

Fiona and Lachlan giggled. '*Poppy*.'

Mr Wigg shrugged. 'It's true,' he said. 'There must have been two hundred of them, black and white as a newspaper,

with their long necks bobbing along like this.' He stuck his head out and tucked it in.

'Don't we have emus, not ostriches?' Lachlan said.

'Yes, but ladies used to wear ostrich plumes in their hats; it was all the rage,' Mr Wigg said. 'So someone must have been farming them. Anyway, the horses and cattle were acting like it was any other day, and the ostriches were just walking alongside them. They all seemed to be getting along rather well, actually. Chatting about the weather and so on. But one of them fixed its beady eyes on my basket of strawberries and I didn't dare move. They are quite big close up. Or they seemed so when I was your size, anyway.'

'Why didn't they fly away?' Fiona said.

Lachlan laughed. 'Ostriches can't fly, stupid. They run.'

'I knew that,' she said.

'Which is faster, Poppy, a horse or an ostrich?' Lachlan said.

'Huh. That would be close, I think. Maybe an ostrich,' he said. 'Unless it was a racehorse.'

'Then why didn't they run away?' Fiona said.

'That is a very good question.' Mr Wigg drained the sink and put the rest of the dishes away. 'And I don't know the answer, I'm afraid. Perhaps they were on invisible leashes,' he said. 'Lachlan, you can hull the strawberries, then slice each one in half.' He handed Fiona a clean spatula. 'You can put on the cream.'

'Yay,' she said.

Mr Wigg lifted the sponge onto its side and gently cut it in half with the bread knife. He placed the bottom half on

a white plate, cut side up, and the other back on the rack. 'Off you go,' he said.

Fiona spread the cream over the cake, wielding the spatula like a trowel. Mr Wigg helped her even it out right to the edges. She lifted the spatula towards her mouth.

'Ah! Don't lick it yet,' he said. 'We've still got to put more on top.'

Lachlan placed the strawberries, one at a time, until it was evenly covered.

'Very good.' Mr Wigg lowered the other cake half, the cream gluing it down. 'And now we just do the same again,' he said. 'Only neater.' He spread the cream and then stood back. 'You probably don't remember, but your grandmother made a mean sponge cake. She preferred to use passionfruit instead of strawberries though.'

'I think strawberries look better,' Lachlan said. He and Fiona took turns placing strawberries around the cake's edge.

Mr Wigg smiled. 'Let's see how it tastes.' He cut three large slices, transferred them to plates and handed out forks. They sat at the kitchen table, chewing and nodding. 'What do you think?'

'Yum!' they said in perfect time.

'It's lovely and light,' Mr Wigg said. 'Not bad at all.'

'Thank you, Poppy,' Lachlan said.

The three of them put their forks down and sighed. Fiona picked at the crumbs around her plate. 'I love cooking,' she said.

'Eating, you mean,' Lachlan said.

Mr Wigg heard the front gate and got up.

'Daddy!' Fiona climbed off her chair and ran to the back door. 'We made sponge cake!'

'So I see.' He wiped a smear of cream from her nose.

'They did most of it themselves,' Mr Wigg said.

'Really? Maybe they can start doing the cooking at home.'

Lachlan and Fiona pulled the same 'like that's going to happen' face and Mr Wigg sneaked them a wink.

'You have to try some,' Fiona said.

'We've got to keep going, love,' Mr Wigg's son said. 'There's someone coming back to have another look at the place.'

Fiona's head dropped.

Mr Wigg put the rest of the cake in a Tupperware container and pressed on the lid. He'd seen the red ute, with its black and white South Australian plates, nosing around the day before, which had given him a strange feeling in his stomach.

'C'mon,' Lachlan said. 'Dad can have some for dessert tonight.'

'A second look, you say?' Mr Wigg handed over the container.

'I'm pretty sure they're going to make an offer. They want to put in a vineyard.'

'Grapes? Well . . .' Mr Wigg wiggled his toes over the edge of the step, yellow nails curling over their ends again already.

His son signed. 'I just want it over now, Dad,' he said. 'C'mon, kids.'