Aldersnap

by Marion Molteno

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~ 1 ~

They left in the middle of the night. No notice, just Betty shaking her shoulders and saying, 'Mother says we have to get dressed and come.'

Molly struggled awake. The strangeness made the seriousness of the moment clear. She dressed and followed Betty down the unlit stairs in their grandparents' house to the drawing room. Her mother was bent over suitcases. Her grandmother stood tight-lipped. The front door opened, and her grandfather stood there. No one spoke. Her mother fussed them and the suitcases in to the waiting car, but even her fussing was silent.

No one said where they were going. No mention of Father.

In the car she pressed close to the cold window, staring into the dark. She didn't need to see, she knew it by the shapes of the land she had ridden over so many times. Through Petersfield, passing the turn-off to Aldersnap where her father lay, unaware. Up the downs to Butser Hill, then leaving it behind. Horndean, the closed-shutters house of the Aunts. Portsmouth, streets dark and silent. To the harbour.

And still no one said, Where? Why? Not as they queued in the dull morning light to board, not on the boat as they stood at the rail watching the harbour get smaller, and edged through the straits into the Solent, looking back at Haling Island with

its line of beach huts. Not until they rounded the Isle of Wight, and out to the open sea of the Channel, did her mother say — Guernsey.

Rented rooms where everything was ugly and nothing was theirs. Always poor. Betty was thirteen, Mother's companion, practical, dealing with it all. Molly was eleven, cut out by their closeness, bereft. Of her father. Of Aldersnap. Of the paddock where he would watch her ride, his voice urging as she practised difficult turns, pride in the strident tones that pushed her on.

What did they live on? Her mother had no skills anyone would have paid for. Perhaps her grandparents sent money? There was always that deadening air of thrift and constraint dominating their household, but perhaps —? She longed for the father who had given her the freedom he would have given a son, insisting she be trusted out alone on a horse anywhere on the downs. Longed for the wooded slopes of the Hangars rising steeply behind the farmhouse, to be up on the downs where she could let her pony stretch into the first gallop of the ride. Did she fantasize that he would arrive to rescue her? When did she understand that it was not just the sea that separated them, that they were here because Guernsey was not part of England. English courts had no jurisdiction here.

She had lost it all, her father, a way of life, the sense of who she was. Some part of her was sealed off forever against pain.

Three years on, Betty was to become a doctor. To get a scholarship she would need to be at a better school than the island could provide. Boat journey back, the lost coastline of childhood emerging out of the sea … Train over the downs, people on horses, almost within sight of Aldersnap, but never stopping. Then rooms in north London only slightly bigger than the ones on Guernsey, but surrounded now by a city of possibilities.

Why was it possible to be back? Perhaps Father was dead?

No, he had gone to Canada. Sent by his parents, where he could not bring shame on the family. Was it left to Betty to explain, once she was into her medical studies and could take defence in scientific detachment? Their father had syphilis.

~ 2 ~

She was in her late fifties when I met her, in Cape Town, a lifetime and a continent away. I was nineteen and in love with her eldest son. I was in the university residence, Robert was a year older, still living at home but with the loan of a secondhand Mini that gave us the freedom to move about. They lived in a house on the Cape Flats, a sandy expanse in the shadow of the Constantia mountains, where Molly kept horses and had created out of nothing the lawns and flowering borders of an English garden. I see her still as I saw her that first time he took me home, a woman in rough gardening clothes, hair falling about her face, standing up to greet us as the car pulled up in the drive. A beautiful face, but something pained within it.

She started talking to him the moment we got out of the car, and as if I wasn't there. 'Mum,' he said, 'this is Marion.' She turned to me, smiled, said something I don't remember, and turned back to continue telling him something. Over a meal that evening I was awkward with shyness, in awe of his father, or rather, of his reputation. A brilliant lawyer, with a courageous political history. Speech slurred by wine he made a couple of comments, well-intentioned but not what you'd call conversation. Robert tried to respond, to normalise things. Molly talked, filling the spaces.

For over a year I was in and out of their house at weekends or evenings. In our self-absorbed intimacy Molly was on the periphery, a pained expression in her voice each time we arrived. 'Robert dear, I wish you would tell me when you're going to be late.' Eyebrows raised when we went into his room together. When we emerged she happened to be in the corridor, with some comment to direct to him, like, 'I put Marion's shoes just outside the door.' (Subtext: She should have put them there herself, they bring in mud.)

There were times when she and I were alone and began tentatively to make our own connection. I was doing a beginners course in French. She had once taught French, and offered to help me. We read *La Porte Étroite,* I remember. Molly was in her element discussing the philosophical ideas behind it. I understood almost nothing of it, and it wasn't just the French. She was always busy, running a small-holding with stables and a paddock for three horses, but sometimes we would both be in the garden on a Sunday. I might be reading near to where she was bent down planting, while Robert was inside working on an essay. She was obviously glad to have someone to talk to, wanted to make real contact but didn't quite know how to make it happen. She talked ideas, books, her garden, something she had been saying to someone else today, the film society she was involved in (multi-racial, which for the time and place was radical) — but it was almost talking to herself, never with the to-and-fro of other people's conversation. Her train of thought moved tangentially from one thing to another, changing topic in mid-sentence. I didn't follow the transitions but gradually I got drawn in by the picture of a life that emerged, and by my own slow-growing compassion.

Whatever had been the relationship earlier between her and Robert's father, he was now no company. I could see he was also vulnerable, a slightly built man whose clothes hung loosely on him, with momentary flashes of warmth or humour. Talking politics with Robert he came alive, but he was already far gone under the alcohol addiction with which he fended off depression. I assumed that in the working day he managed to control it, but I only saw him in the evenings when he was slumped in an armchair over a glass of wine that he tried to make last, then shambling off to his room.

Robert talked about his childhood with warmth, and his mother was always central to the picture. She had taken him riding from before he could walk, sitting in front of her on her horse. As soon as he could ride independently they went off through the vineyards and into the mountains, imprinting in him the deep response to landscape that he has carried through life. She got him and his younger brother picking the strawberries she grew. She discussed his homework with him, chose his library books, took him to the theatre. He had been her companion, and now I had taken over, and he was about to leave. The 'Robert, dear' comments were a way of trying to hold him. She seemed not to understand that they pushed him away.

I wanted everyone to love everyone, as people newly in love do. With the easy assumptions of youth I thought I understood her, and that all I had to do was be nice, and let it wash over me when she said things in that raised-eyebrows tone. But something kept her remote, an emotional defensiveness that seemed at odds with her lively interest in people and ideas. It's not as if she didn't talk personally, but fragments about that lost idyll on the South Downs were dropped in almost as passing references, as if hoping someone might catch the child she had been, and keep it safe. Her stories missed out Guernsey, landed in London, and were always in some form about her determination to regain the independence that had been taken from her. About how she cycled miles each day to the North London Collegiate, as once she had ridden alone over the downs. About striving — for a scholarship, then at Cambridge, learning French, German, proving herself to a father who would never know. Never quite escaping the family shame … About the young man who wanted to marry her, but his family had to be told, and they insisted he end the relationship.

Her first job, teaching in Wimbledon, but she needed to get further away. She saw an advertisement for teachers in schools for young ladies in the ex-colonies. On the boat she met a young lawyer who was going through a divorce. Within a year they had married. His family were not pleased. And that was the end of teaching; no married women allowed.

~ 3 ~

We lived for our first years of married life in Zambia, 2,000 miles from Cape Town and on the other side of a hostile border. Robert was politically exiled and could not return. He was writing home every fortnight, trying to right a relationship that he wished had not come unstuck. She replied rarely, but at length. Emotionally. Regret that it had taken her so long to write. So much to be said, difficult in letters, and over such distance.

His father died. Robert heard by accident, from the condolences of a friend who naturally assumed that he knew. We had no phone, but how was it possible she had not written to tell him? Or did she think she had?

We moved to England, and Robert urged her to come and visit. She had not been back since she had left forty years earlier, had virtually lost touch with her sister Betty. She was nervous to return to things so definitively left behind, but in the end she came.

She stayed two months. That was longer than Robert had been thinking of. We were both working, the girls at school. She had an image of herself as an independent traveller but didn't seem confident to go anywhere on her own, and we didn't want to leave her at home, knowing no one. We made what accommodations we could to her need for company.

She wanted to connect with our daughters but seemed not to know how. They were too old to be read to, and she was too unused to children. With the younger one she found a wavelength playing cards, but otherwise her attempts felt like a rerun of my first encounters with her. She would tell them off unnecessarily about trifles, then refer the matter to me — 'I really don't want to interfere, but …' When Robert came home it was, 'Robert dear, I tried to tell them, but they didn't listen, and I do think consistency with children is *so* important, don't you?'

He would try to shrug it off, then something she said would irritate beyond bearing. He would snap and retreat, feeling complicated. We live in a small flat, so escape could only be to our bedroom, which felt pointedly rude. It was easier for me, she wasn't my mother, I didn't have any emotional history with her, but even my charity wore thin.

The two months ended. She went back to Cape Town. Robert went back to his fortnightly diary-letters, to which she seldom replied.

After that she was with us for two months almost every summer. Each time before she came Robert would be full of memories of their childhood companionship, and wanting to make up for lost years. He took days off to take her on day trips — she was at her best when she had him to herself. I took her with me a few times to the community centre where I worked. But it was never enough. There was a lifetime's hole that could never be filled.

Did she and Robert ever talk about the things she felt letters were no good for? I think he tried; I don't think it was easy. And each time after she went back, it was the same.

Memories of those summers with her are dotted through our family photos, places we went on holiday, taking her with us. For the rest the girls were busy with their activities, Robert often overwhelmed with problems at work, and we both had a household to run. I had school holidays so I spent more time with her than he could. She talked much as she had done in the garden in Cape Town, stories that came back always to the years between school and marriage. The student vacations when she had gone touring with a university drama group, playing in small country towns. A night in Gomshall when they slept in a barn because there was no other accommodation; and telling it, she would laugh at what her grandmother would have said, the one who had made childhood visits to that house a misery with her rigid rules. Being an *au pair* in France, in the house of a doctor who had dubious intentions towards this young English girl. Summer of 1933, this time in Germany, and because her family name, Goldsmith, translated as Goldschmidt, the agency placed her with a wealthy Jewish family. She took the children for their daily walk in the park while the adults never left the house, waiting for the madness outside to pass. Another summer travelling with a friend in Greece, spending a night in a village where an old woman taught her how to wash all over with only a bucket of water. 'And a very useful skill it was too,' she said. I wondered if she ever had occasion to use it again.

And back, back, to Aldersnap, to riding up the Hangars, alone on a horse at ten, and over the downs to visit her father's parents. '*So* different from the other grandparents, my dear, so warm and welcoming. My father insisted I should be trusted to go on my own.'

The same story, in the same words, year after year.

Her adored father — how did that story end? She never said, so it's from Robert that I know. He was eventually brought back to be nursed by his unmarried sisters through the last stages of his forbidden-to-be-mentioned illness. So she saw him once more, when she was a young woman, visiting the Aunts. A broken man glimpsed through a half-open door to a dark room.

There were signs, if it hadn't all been so gradual. One summer I realised she had given up reading. She often called Robert 'Donald', his father's name. Conversations would go off-piste if I referred to things she didn't remember. There were little notes in her room, remind-

ing her of things. She held on to the image of herself as an independent traveller, but tacitly accepted she couldn't do it alone any more, so Robert booked her on a Saga coach tour along the Danube. When he met her afterwards at Heathrow, the tour guide was frazzled. Molly had wandered off from the group several times, and once got lost, delaying them for several hours.

Molly's narrative was quite different. 'The others in the group weren't interested in exploring,' she said.

Sometimes it takes someone else to bring home to you the changes. Our daughter, May, once brought out a box of buttons, got Molly to sit next to her and said, 'Let's sort them.' From the kitchen I watched them making piles, by colour, then by shape, harmoniously occupied. It took that to make me realise, she's at her best in the present tense. The next day I took her to the Tate. Art galleries had not featured in her travel stories but it turned out to be one of our best shared moments. Standing in front of each painting she could react to it appreciatively, no reference needed to anything else.

When friends came to the house she perked up at a new possible audience, and her stories broadened out. She described travelling in China, where she had never been. And riding a camel in Egypt. The telling was all confidence.

'A camel is a bit uncomfortable,' she laughed. 'Not at all like being on a horse.'

~ *4* ~

We took her back to Aldersnap, the last time she was with us. She was eighty-one, bent over with osteoporosis, short of breath but determined still not to let anything stop her. Her mind wandered much of the time in a mist, then emerged for moments, unexpectedly lucid.

We nosed the car through the lanes beyond Petersfield, looking up to the Hangars where seventy years earlier she used to ride. We stopped at each farm gate, looked at the name, drove on a little further, tried another. Molly sat peacefully, letting it happen.

She knew from the moment we found the right lane that she was back again, but how she had got there and why was a puzzle. Once again we explained. She said, 'Well, it's very nice of you to have brought me, dear,' but still looked confused. It was painful for Robert, thinking of her long-ago pain, and that now we were here she could feel neither pleasure nor regret. From the back seat I touched the back of his neck.

The house was on a flat valley floor, looking south to a line of downs. Along the driveway were old barns and stables, now with a miscellany of mechanical equipment. We parked just before a circle of grass with a mulberry tree that was certainly way older than Molly, huge and spreading, laden with sensuous purple fruit, the fallen berries carpeting the grass beneath. Robert and I were excited as children, longing to reach up and taste but knowing our hands and mouths would be stained with guilt. I turned to see if Molly was reacting. Her back was curved almost to a right angle, seeing mostly what was at her feet. She had not noticed the tree. Her eyes lifted towards the stables. Again that puzzled look.

We knocked at the door. A young woman answered. Busy, her manner said. We explained, apologised for coming unannounced. Inviting us in didn't seem an option. After an awkward moment she said, 'If you go round the house, there's a door from the living room that opens onto the lawn. You'll find my grandmother there. She has lived in the house a long time.' She disappeared inside again.

We walked around the house. There was not much left of the farm, just a couple of fields and beyond that the motorway, heading for the coast. We moved at Molly's pace. Every now and then she would stop and yank her body backwards so that her eyes faced forwards rather than down, and without apparent surprise would discover the paddock where her horse used to graze, the line of downs which she used to cross on horseback, heading towards the sea.

We got near the corner of the house. She said, suddenly lucid, 'There's a door just round there. That's where we come out to the garden.'

And there it was. An old woman was sitting in an armchair near the open doorway. 'Come in, come in,' she called — her granddaughter had evidently told her who

we were. We shepherded Molly in. She looked around vaguely, without recognition. She started for the door again. Robert gave an apologetic murmur and followed her back into the garden.

I sat down with the old woman. She was excited, something she had to tell.

'My father-in-law bought the farm soon after I was married,' she said. 'I was nervous to come in, for they said the last owner was a strange man. A strange name too, Fleet. Fleet Goldsmith. He was emigrating and had sold the house with all its furniture. You never saw such confusion, things scattered around, piled up, dust everywhere. My mother-in-law said, It's like there's been ghosts living here.'

They started cleaning. The dining room was her first job. It was dismally empty, dust thick on every surface. Her eyes settled on the table. In the dust a finger had scrawled the words, *Fleet is gone.*

'It was like he was still there, writing it. The nearest I've ever got to seeing a ghost. And stranger still, because I had seen him once before. The moment I heard the name of the farm, I knew.'

She was a child when she saw him, and he a father with two young daughters, about her own age. They were on the beach at Haling Island, where her family had a beach hut. Two huts away from theirs she had watched him hammering a wooden name-board above the door of a hut. The name on the board was *Aldersnap*.

Molly and Robert came back in from the garden.

'There's a flower she likes,' Robert said. 'We wondered if you know what it's called.'

The old woman got up slowly from her chair and we all trooped out, to look at the pale blue flowers waving on tall stems. Some had already gone to seed, round seed heads in a surround like a net.

'Love-in-a-mist,' said the old woman. 'There's always been some growing just there, as long as I can remember. Here, have some seeds.'

Molly took the seeds, but already the small flare of recognition had faded. She was pleased but looked puzzled as to what they were, how they had got into her hand. Love in a mist.

‘Molly,’ I said, ‘this woman says she saw you when you were a child, you and your family. At your hut on the beach.’

‘A hut at the beach?’ asked Molly. ‘Good heavens no. I thought I told you, we lived on a farm.’

She was holding on to the seeds as we said goodbye and walked slowly back to the car. She held them still on the long drive home. There was no way of knowing whether it was simply that they were in her hand or whether she understood, even momentarily, where they had come from.

When we got back home and I helped her out of the car I saw that they had dropped onto the floor. I rescued them, and saved them till the next spring. I planted them in our pocket-sized London garden, where Molly had sat for hours each summer she came to us.