

Margaret Birtwhistle

THE REAPER'S DAUGHTER

The phone started ringing. Jean was up to her elbows in shortbread mix. She looked around the kitchen at the mess, finally grabbed a tea towel and vigorously wiped away at her hands, spraying more bits of cooking mix in all directions in the process.

It was Eleanor.

"Hello Mum," said Jean in surprise, quickly looking at the clock. It was 11.30 p.m. How strange, normally she wouldn't dream of ringing at this time of night.

"Jenny, dear, I do hope I didn't wake you, but it's Dad, you see. . . ," her voice trailed off.

"Yes, what?" asked Jean, "What's wrong?"

"Your father's been taken bad, dear. He's in hospital."

"Yes, what happened, Mum?" Oh, do get on with it, thought Jean with rising anxiety and exasperation. "What's wrong with Dad?"

"Well, he's unconscious."

Oh my God, thought Jean. Well, it's no good pumping Eleanor for information, she'll tell me nothing, at least not directly.

"I'll come at once, Mum. Where're you ringing from?"

"I'm at the hospital, dear," said Eleanor.

"O.K., I'll be as quick as I can," said Jean. She knew exactly where to go; there was only one hospital in that farming district.

She hurried back into the kitchen. Her cat was on the bench top sampling the shortbread.

"Get down, Lila, what a pest you are. How many times do I have to tell you the bench top is verboten!" she exclaimed, turfing her off. She distractedly scraped everything together into some semblance of order. She didn't know quite what to do or what to take with her in her initial shock and indecision. Anyway, she threw a few essentials into a bag, patted Lila's head and strode to the front door.

"You take care now, I'll be back soon," she said to the cat, not really knowing when she would be back and thinking that she'd ring the neighbours to look after Lila if necessary.

She flung her bag before her into the car and in her haste caught her head on the edge of the rear view mirror. That hurt, she thought,

rubbing at her head while she started the car and tried to re-position the mirror. Calm down, better late than dead on time, she thought; an old adage quoted by her ex-husband, Michael.

As she drove, she had time to wonder what had happened to her father, Geoff. Poor old Dad, she thought, he works so hard and does everything for Eleanor. Why him? Why not her?

Eleanor had never done anything for herself, never even had to pay a bill in her life. She didn't know the value of money, or how to budget and whatever money she had, she spent on cigarettes, bingo or some frivolous item she thought was "a bargain" and was never used.

They sent her straight to intensive care. Her anxiety heightened as she walked along the shiny corridors. She still didn't know what had happened. She tiptoed up to Geoff's bed. He was surrounded by a frightening array of apparatus and looked somehow shrunken, small and lost. She didn't notice the doctor and nurse who looked up at her entrance. All she saw was her father's ashen face and bluish lips. There were dressings over his upper body with the bedclothes pulled up only to his waist. She gently touched his hand. He opened his eyes and his face lit up.

"Hullo, Dad. What happened to you, what've you been up to to get yourself into such a mess?" Jean asked, trying to control her rising emotion. The nurse touched her arm and drew her away.

"You haven't been told?" she asked Jean.

"No!" she whispered, choking back the tears. "Where's Eleanor, where's my mother?"

"She's gone home" answered the nurse.

"What, gone home!" said Jean incredulously. Yes, she thought, that figures. Eleanor is only concerned with Eleanor.

"Your father was unconscious when he was admitted," the nurse explained. "He's had a massive stroke. He has only just regained consciousness. He's also badly burned, and in shock, of course". Jean swallowed hard, unable to speak. The nurse looked at her with concern.

"Why don't you ring your mother?" she suggested and turned back to her work.

There was no answer. Where is she, thought Jean? Where could she be at this time of night? I wonder if she went to a friend's place. Oh Eleanor! You vague old thing, you should be here, here. Where are you? Jean hung up and went back to Geoff. His face was blank this time. The nurse and doctor looked at each other and then at Jean. She

sank into a chair and took her father's hand. She felt suddenly so very, very weary and helpless. The doctor and nurse moved quietly around her, sometimes talking to each other. She hardly noticed them.

The swinging doors startled Jean. It was Eleanor. Geoff was unconscious again. Eleanor was unconscious of Geoff; her thoughts could have been on the next Church mother's meeting for all Jean knew. Jean decided that now was probably a good time to tackle her mother. It dawned on her that she hadn't eaten for hours so she suggested a trip to the hospital canteen to buy them both some food.

* * * * *

"He was out ploughing tonight, you know dear," said Eleanor, wrapping her hands around her coffee cup. "Using the lights on the tractor. He wanted to get the wheat in before the weather changed. Such good stuff he had last year, too, you know, won a prize for it, he did, dear."

"Yes, I know, Mum," said Jean. "But what happened?"

"Well, dear, you know the rest. He got down from the tractor to fiddle with the coupling gear, and then had a stroke."

"How did you find him?" asked Jean.

"Well, actually, Mike found him. He could see the lights of the tractor from his place and noticed that they hadn't moved for some time, so he went over and found your Dad under the tractor. He must have fallen there; the engine burned him."

Jean felt sick. Poor Dad, what a horrible thing to happen to him. It would just have to be Mike who found him. She didn't want him dragged back into her life at a time like this, just when she felt she'd come to terms with her divorce. She couldn't swallow the acrid coffee or plastic-looking sandwich she'd bought.

"I'm going back to Dad," she told Eleanor.

"Alright dear, I'll be there shortly," replied her mother, popping another cup cake into her mouth.

I suppose it's too much to ask that she actually care about Dad after all these years, thought Jean.

Geoff was still unconscious, looking even more shrunken and defenceless than before.

"I don't think he'll make the night," the sister muttered to herself, shooting a quick glance at the doctor and then at Jean. Jean thought

she saw her father's lips tighten and his jaw jut out in that old familiar mannerism he had when he was determined to do something. Had she imagined it? Could he have heard what the nurse said? thought Jean. Surely not.

"I'm sorry Jean," the doctor turned to her, "There's not much we can do at present."

"Just make him comfortable, make him comfortable. Do the best you can, please," she whispered. She stood there feeling numb. The nurse looked at Geoff and then tested his pulse. "He's gone", she said.

Jean had never seen anyone die before. She put her hand out to touch his face, but it wasn't his face any more. It was just a mask.

She curled back her fingers in dismay.

* * * * *

The funeral director showed her through to the display room.

"Thank you, I'll just take a look around and let you know later," Jean told him. To her relief, he withdrew, shutting the door behind him. Oh, these are horrid, she thought, all covered with ornate handles and filigree bits and bobs. He wouldn't have liked any of these — not one. He'd been a practical, capable person — a battler. He'd also been a lovely caring and sensitive man. She could picture his farm and thought how it reflected his personality. He'd created not only a viable concern out of it, but also a harmoniously beautiful landscape of clean, sweeping paddocks with stands of the most glorious trees, growing straight and tall.

Jean walked up and down the rows and started to laugh involuntarily. What a farce, what a farce, she thought. On God, am I getting hysterical, she wondered, and tried to control herself.

She walked briskly out the door and confronted the director. "I just want a plain box," she said firmly, "That's all. Could you show me what you've got, please."

* * * * *

The first bits of crumbly soil rattled on the wood. He made a living out of the earth and it seemed fitting to Jean that he was back with the earth.

"He's gone now," she thought. "At least he knew I was there at the end. He was so pleased to see me."

She turned to follow Eleanor off to the car. She wondered if the impact of what had happened had struck her mother yet. She suspected that Eleanor couldn't cope without Geoff. She was just so dependent. Or was she?

"Now Mum," said Jean, "This money, here, is to pay for the electricity bill. That comes in every three months and the gas every two. The phone bill also is quarterly. Are you listening Mum?"

It felt like she was browbeating a child and resented her mother for needing it. Still, she had to make sure Eleanor started to get some idea of how to manage.

"Yes, dear, I don't think I know what this is," she replied.

"It's a rate notice, there's plenty of money to cover that and it doesn't have to be paid for some months. The thing to do is to set aside what you think you'll need to cover the bills each month and then you'll never be short," explained Jean. However, she didn't have much confidence in her mother's ability. She was in no doubt that she'd get lots of distraught phone calls after her mother had smoked away the phone bill money or some such thing.

Before, it had been Mike who was so impractical. He'd expected Jean to look after all their affairs and pick up the tab when his "dead cert" schemes had failed. Now she was lumbered with another liability just after she'd managed to get her life together.

She loved her mother, but sometimes she could just shake her. Anyway, she thought, I cannot stay here and hold Eleanor's hand for the rest of her life, she must help herself, and she has a few good friends, not to mention all the nosey "do gooders" in the township.

* * * * *

Lila was there at the gate looking small and lost. Jean scooped her up and carried her to the house, making a fuss of her. The kitchen was just as she left it. She sat and stared at the mess she'd made four days ago. Was it only four days? Why did she always feel like baking in the middle of the night?

He'd died just like they do in the movies. It'd been as quiet and gentle as that. His eyes had glazed over and he'd simply stopped breathing. Why did he have to die now? Why Geoff? Why poor old Dad?

What different type of grief she felt this time in comparison to her divorce. The grief of divorce had been one of conflicting emotions; of

pain and anger, of self doubt, humiliation and cold rejection. She felt it was the rejection that had hurt most, producing a deep, fundamental pain that had pierced right to the core of her being. Also it was so protracted. Michael was still around. Each encounter opened all the old wounds and created some new ones besides, leaving her feeling confused and devastated over and over again.

On the other hand, she thought, although she found her father's death very hard to accept, she felt no rejection nor self doubt. She did, however, feel angry that it had to be him; that it was final and she was helpless to hold back its inevitability or reverse its consequence. It couldn't make her hurt again in the same way though. She knew he'd always loved her and she him. Nothing could change that. She hugged that feeling of warmth to herself as she sat in her kitchen amongst the debris.

Lila was mewling and looking pointedly at her bowl on the floor. Jean sighed and got up to feed her. Life goes on, she thought. Nothing stops: the people, the traffic, the hustle and bustle, Lila's little catty needs. But Jean felt as if her world had stopped.

As she watched Lila eat the gelatinous dollops in her dish she thought, ironically, that death is, in comparison to divorce, socially acceptable, in fact something to be advertised in the newspapers. That's rather macabre, she mused. No doubt she'd get lots of phone calls, cards, condolences, warmth and support — real or fake. She wouldn't get people offering to cook her casseroles, as they had for Mike in his crisis. After all, she was a woman and expected to be able to look after herself, at least in that regard. Why people were so concerned about men and not women under such circumstances, she couldn't imagine! The need was there, just the same.

Lila hopped up onto Jean's lap and rubbed her head affectionately against Jean's arm, purring gently. As she stroked the soft, warm fur, Jean felt her need well up inside her. She started to cry for the first time and felt as if she'd never stop. He was so pleased to see me, she thought, so pleased.