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AFFINITY

The old lady lived in a cottage near the top of the mountain. Queensland style, the cottage was built on high stilts. The mango trees grew a little higher up at the edge of her steep, steep garden.

Everything was very old here. The building and its owner, the overgrown garden, the trees.

Flying foxes arrived at dusk, and often too the mountain mists swirled in and dragged eerily through the trees, or came quietly and settled silent and dense, snuffing out the whole scene.

Black and sinister-seeming, the flying foxes looked like broomless witches as they flew, their wide powerful wings working in slow motion until they reached the mango trees, and then swooping and jostling for position, they hung on the branches and the trees sprang to life. Leaves were in turmoil, branches cracked under the weight as hundreds of the creatures gathered to eat the ripening fruit. The heavier mangoes fell and squashed on the ground.

The old lady listened to their arrival and smiled her approval when she heard them.

They seemed in permanent conflict, squarking and arguing, their raucous cries continued far into the night. Some flew off with too heavy a load, and losing hold, the fruit thudded to the ground or landed with a crash on the iron roof of the cottage.

Most people would have cursed their coming but the old lady took perverse delight in their presence. They were something special to her which she did not share. She did not live entirely alone.

Roderick, bachelor grandson, came at night. Housekeeper Beatrice arrived in the mornings in time to take the old lady her breakfast tray — linen cloth and napkin, fine china and the silver teapot, always. "I have never risen for breakfast. I am not strong. I never sleep."

Beatrice cleaned the house, cooked lunch and left dinner to be heated — stove top for soup, oven for casserole. She had learned to parry the shafts fired by the ancient one, who delighted in such mischief.

"I'll be alone this afternoon. The girl with the 'Parish News' came yesterday. I gave her tea. They love to come here and use my nice

things — they are not used to much! She brought a cake. I think I'll go downstairs when you leave."

Bea answered without emotion, "Your family asked you not to go down when you are alone. You could fall."

The old lady replied, delighted to have aroused opposition, "They won't know. They don't know what I do. I sit on the top step and go down that way. Sitting! I have always been adventurous. I like a bit of excitement. When I was a child I was a lovely little thing, but no one could manage me! I was so adventurous. I led them a dance. Mother and Lucy were always happy together in the house but I was out spoiling my pretty clothes."

She changed tactics in her effort to arouse animosity. "I suppose you hope I will tell you to go early this afternoon so you can play cards with your friends?"

Beatrice stood. "I won't leave until I finish my work. I don't play cards. My friends play on Tuesday evening."

"I thought you said you played every afternoon! Christians don't play cards!"

The laugh that followed made Beatrice think of the flying foxes.

With her helper out of the way, the old lady went down the flight of wooden steps and retrieved her walking stick from its safe hiding place. She crossed the cobbled area to the stone steps. There were three. She turned left and there were three more and then she was on the path that was cut into the side of the hill below the mango trees. She looked to see what was blooming in the overgrown garden. Reversing the walking stick, she used the curved handle to hook and drag at any plant within reach. "I used to prune and weed, but now I can't, but I use my hook to get at them!" She inspected the moss on the high bank and the lichen covering the stones. She thrust her stick into any hole she found (too bad for any spider!) and speared the rotting fruit, pushing it over the side of the path to roll down the steep slope to the clump of lantana below the cottage. "I suppose the seeds will sprout there and it will be hard for them to cut out the trees when they grow up. But I don't have to worry. Flying foxes! They spoil all the fruit and knock it down. I never find a good mango. I wouldn't eat it if I did. I don't like mangoes!"

Continuing on through the wet leaves that covered the path, she reached the old garden seat and from there she gazed down far into the valley and over to the blue mountains. She could see quite well and what

she couldn't see she could imagine. (There were angels descending from the clouds and boats on a shining sea beyond the horizon.)

She noticed that her pale blue slippers were covered in mud. "I'll have to hide these so they don't know where I've been," she thought.

"That smell! The flying foxes leave the rotting fruit and their droppings splashed about everywhere, even on my path and steps sometimes. 'Shit' my daughter-in-law said — a rude word — modern talk. I wouldn't use that word. Shit!" and her laughter once again resembled the sound of the flying foxes.

Daydreaming now, she remembered the gardener of her childhood home. "He'd have soon cleaned up this mess. I loved the garden. Mother and Lucy were so close, but I played with the boys. She loved Lucy best."

"When I was engaged to George she took us girls to England and the continent. She said George had no prospects, but I didn't care. He was older but he was clever and handsome."

"When we were in Rome there were rude statues but I didn't know, I sat just under one. Some men laughed and I was so embarrassed."

"Lucy's baby died in Australia and she had to go home and I had mother to myself then."

"I married George anyway, but I hated being poor. I had two boys. They always fought and quarrelled. George died and so did mother so then I wasn't poor, but the boys were too much. I was always frail. I had to send them to stay in the country. That was a long time ago." The cool night air sent her back to the shelter of the cottage.

Grandson Roderick returned, like the flying foxes, at dusk. He carried wood and lit the fire. They talked as he heated and served the meal and carefully washed and dried the dishes. At 7.30 the old lady went to her room. "I'm more comfortable in my warm bed. I won't stay up for his sake. I have my Bible and the Parish News."

Roderick went to his room then and shut the door. "He does his stamps and he likes to read. I hear his music. It isn't loud. I really enjoy that. I played the piano. I don't like Bach."

"My bed is soft, very soft pillows and I like white sheets. My blankets must be very light and blue. The curtains are very tightly drawn — I can't bear a chink of light — I wouldn't sleep at all."

"The music has stopped too soon. He doesn't know I can hear it, I haven't told him."

“When he runs a hot shower I open my door and ask, ‘Have you forgotten to turn off the tap, dear?’ Hot water costs so much.”

“Now in bed I listen to the flying foxes in the trees so near my room. I’m pleased to have them there. I shall be sorry when the fruit is finished. I shall miss the creatures. It will be so quiet, so still. I only wish that I could fly off too, on wide black wings.”