

Sue Cullen

HYMN FOR MOTHER

When I knew it was time to leave the city, a converted church provided the appropriate setting for my retreat from the world. Not wanting other eyes peering at my property, I pulled down the ugly "For Sale" sign that drew the attention of the curious. Locals and strangers alike had been defiling the church since it came on the market, as it puzzled their religious instincts that a church could be converted, in any sense. Now they would ponder even more about why a single, middle-aged man would want to live in one.

Mother would have laughed gently at the irony of my living in a church. We had regularly attended services in the cathedral, but only for the music. The organist enthralled us; the minister bored us. Our Sunday luncheons, mother dressed smartly, fashionably as always, me in suit and tie, were always enlivened by our mocking of the sermons, both the uninspiring content and the tedious mannerisms of the men who delivered them.

No longer accompanied by a sycophantic real estate agent, I was now free to gaze serenely at my church. Built along severely simple lines, it has a pure white exterior immaculately maintained by the previous owners. It is one of those timber churches erected early this century when each denomination in every community believed it must have its own place of worship, as though their god would favour one wooden building over another. Bad roads, slow transport and the social importance of religion ensured their proliferation. Now there are more abandoned churches than clergy dotted throughout the countryside, while the few people who still practise a religion speed past on their way to services in the towns.

Creeping relentlessly towards the building, the bush gives my church an unexpected, welcome air of privacy as well as providing shade. Inside, its only secular owners had perpetuated the open plan usual in churches, catering for mundane matters by setting up a small, necessary kitchen in one corner. More interesting is the one screened area, the bathroom, sited in the baptistery. The round bath seems like a huge font for a daily cleansing ritual, although I shall have only tank water for all my needs. Hughie and a water carrier will provide.

Timber and glass unite perfectly in this building where the simple stained glass windows create patchy visions of colour across the polished floor. These will-o'-the-wisp shapes must have brightened many a service in the days when a congregation worshipped here. Raising my eyes heavenwards, I look up to an

attic bedroom reached by a wooden spiral staircase. A monk by nature, I shall sleep soundly here in my single bed.

Just one solitary pew remains of the dozens that were once been assembled as seating for the farming community. That doesn't matter as I already own all the furniture I need. Nothing but the best will decorate this setting originally designed for divinity. The large oak table with its six carved chairs will take a central position. I shall continue to sit beside the head of the table, leaving that place of honour reserved as always for mother. No longer saved for special occasions but used daily, the Wedgwood dinner service and the silver once owned by my maternal grandmother will be displayed elegantly in the oak china cabinet. My desk, and of course my entire library, will be set up near the high northern windows outside of which huge camphor laurel trees provide perpetual shade. My bed and wardrobe, antique and inseparable, will fit snugly in the attic.

At last in an appropriate setting, my organ will grace the chancel where I shall be able to play as exuberantly as I have always longed to do. For the first time since mother's death, I feel interested in something. While I continued living in her house her presence was strong and disapproving, not at all in keeping with my memories.

She would not have liked to dwell in what she would have called a "god-forsaken rural area." The city, three hours' drive from here, was always our home. But her friends call no more to grace the unit with lively tea parties and talk, and I have no real friends of my own. How can I go to concerts and the theatre alone, self-conscious and conspicuous? Sorrow is a noble state celebrated in heroic literature. Loneliness is just pathetic. There remains no reason to stay in the city, where there exists neither person nor place for me. In a weekend newspaper supplement, the clever advertisement for this church instantly captured my imagination.

Knowing too well what I look like, I shall bring no mirror to my new life. Vanity does not belong in a church. Dressing impeccably has never really disguised my disappointing appearance, obvious to all except mother. I remain a man with the stature of a boy, breast-high to most women who these days take offence at where my eyes can't help resting. Thick spectacles accentuate my dish-water-grey eyes, weakened by an obsession with reading. My thin ration of hair produces a surprisingly large fall of dandruff which has survived every crusade I have waged against it. By turning into a sneer when I try to smile, my slightly twisted mouth has often brought me trouble. All of these characteristics I must have inherited from the father I never saw. They certainly could not have emanated from mother, who was perpetually elegant and graceful. Was it

an example of her poise or her love that she never saw me as less than ideal? To detract even further from my appearance, a haggard, strained look has stolen in over the past months of mourning.

I shall be my own reflection. I can wash, dress, comb my hair without needing a mirror image to guide me in what I've been doing for the past forty-five years. If shaving becomes a problem I shall grow a beard. This will alter my appearance, make me look distinguished or mysterious, at the same time concealing my pimples, volcanoes of pus that have erupted from my skin for decades. A beard, too, will make me feel independent. Mother rarely had to tell me what to do, as I knew instinctively what she expected, but she would not have tolerated a beard.

As all but the possessions I want were sold with mother's house, moving was straight-forward. Nevertheless, the removalist was late. "No wonder they don't use it as a church any more," he complained. "It's miles from anywhere. Who'd want to live out here? The silence is deafening."

Ignoring the possibly intended insult, I just smiled. I was paying for his strength and his truck, not his opinions. Determined that nothing would be scratched, I officiated from the portico while he and his sinewy son carried in the furniture. A few profanities escaped the father as they struggled to the attic with the bedroom furniture, but no damage was done. The organ was delivered separately the next day by experts who knew how to maintain a respectful silence.

Hardly had I settled in when a curious neighbour (sent by his wife) called, accompanied by a sturdy kelpie that smelt like slightly rancid bacon. Not wanting anyone to defile my hallowed church, I intercepted the farmer outside. Unaware of his own aroma of sweat and cattle-dung he stared at the well-dressed townsman, fresh and pure from an early morning baptismal. Although I had discarded coat and tie I still looked like someone setting out for the office.

"Where're you from?" he asked after the obligatory handshake, firm and hearty. I told him in one word.

Waiting for a prompt he whistled to his dog, stared at the white picket fence for inspiration, and waited. I thoughtfully, silently followed his gaze. After a minute or two, he bravely tried again.

"Going to live here on your own then?" Of that, too, I was quickly able to assure him. Silence punctuated by the assertive singing of magpies took over.

At last he ventured uncomfortably, "Other couple didn't last long."

When I remained non-committal on that, he accepted that he had met his match in laconic style and began to mutter about getting back to his cattle. It must have surprised him when I now spoke. In a few brief sentences I arranged to have milk, butter and eggs delivered regularly. Relieved to have something to report, he thought that his wife would like the idea of selling produce. Next I suggested that his son might mow my lawn, for pocket money. Farmers always have sons. Business concluded, I turned reverentially to enter my church, while the farmer looked as if he'd been let out of Sunday school. The story of the new arrival would guarantee him an audience for weeks to come.

Word must have spread quickly for no-one else paid a visit. I now have an established routine as sacrosanct as a programme of church services. My produce is always delivered early in the morning by a frightened or incurious schoolboy. As he quietly approaches the porch and bends to lay down the food, he looks like a primitive propitiating a strange god. Like a god, I prefer to remain invisible, leaving money in return for food and privacy. Every few weeks in summer the schoolboy takes his revenge on the silence by shattering it for an hour or two with a motor mower.

For other provisions, each month I make the half hour drive to the nearest town. Living with mother was sweet and simple, but I am amazed at how little I need now. Mother hadn't been rich, just comfortably well off, but with my superannuation, my frugal needs and a few well-placed investments I shall never have to work again. Freed from the public service positions which I had endured since leaving school, I am luxuriating in early retirement like a bishop.

There is no vestige of restlessness to unsettle me. With mother I had already explored the world. My earliest memories are of concerts, art galleries, and endless comfortable days at home, absorbed in a carefully chosen library. I was a sickly boy. If I showed any signs of becoming ill, mother allowed me to stay at home, where I learnt more than I ever did at the detested school of conformists and bullies. Years later, mother and I travelled Europe together, exploring the places we already knew from our reading.

Music and books are now my life. When I sit down to play Bach, it does not matter where the rest of the world is. My music fills the church, spilling outside to harmonise with the sounds of the country. Butcher birds burst into splendid choruses to accompany me. In the city I was not able to play so loudly or with such abandon, because of the neighbours. I sometimes find myself unselfconsciously singing the hymns I remember from church. As well as my own voice I can hear mother's accompaniment, as strong as always.

At these times mother stands before me like a vision, as lovely as I remember her from my childhood, not wrinkled and dry as in her last days. The soft stuff of her blue dress, borne in by the wind, brushes my cheek imperceptibly. Country smells disappear as the faint scent of her perfume wafts through the open window. As it was she who always encouraged me to play music, her approving smile is familiar. By the time I stop playing and she silently disappears I am exhausted, content to spend the next few hours engrossed in Plato and Aristotle. Mother does not return then, for she never learnt to read Greek.

Only the nights are depressing, enclosing me with unfamiliar darkness, shadows, sounds and loneliness. It is as though the place were haunted, although it does not seem right that a church, even a deconsecrated one, should be the victim of devilish incursions. Mornings insist that I heard possums, straying cattle, tawny frogmouths, wind, rain on the tin roof. In bed, I know this is not so. Never in the city did the wind sing like mother, mournful and appealing. Whereas my daytime visions of mother are comforting, at night her distorted face persists whether my eyes are open or closed.

Although I had not liked to look at her in those last days, it is her troubled face I see, overcome by age and illness. This was the face that I had not been able to live with, that I had gently destroyed as I believed she would have wanted me to. The doctor had said that she could not live long anyway.

Mother taught me to appreciate beauty and to avoid ugliness. Through her I learnt to ignore the taunts of rough schoolboys and unkind adults who jeered because I seemed different. Without a word, she made me realise that I did not need the young women who spurned me, none of whom could compare in elegance with her. Her wisdom, too, taught that pain and suffering are not beautiful. It was not necessary for either of us to endure them.

Sometimes I feel sad that mother cannot be with me. The thought of having her buried in my churchyard is tempting, but unfortunately it has never been used as a cemetery. I realise that it is better to be silent, to be content to see her lovingly during the day, to let her accuse me every night. Realising that I still venerate her, in time she will forgive me. Then I shall be completely at peace in my church, with her blessing.