The Spare Room

Helen Garner

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Extract

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FIRST, in my spare room, I swivelled the bed on to a north-south axis. Isn't that supposed to align the sleeper with the planet's positive energy flow, or something? She would think so. I made it up nicely with a fresh fitted sheet, the pale pink one, since she had a famous feel for colour, and pink is flattering even to skin that has turned yellowish.

Would she like a flat pillow or a bulky one? Was she allergic to feathers, or even, as a vegetarian, opposed to their use? I would offer choice. I rounded up all the extra pillows in the house, slid each one into a crisply ironed slip, and plumped them in a row across the head of the bed.

I pulled up the wooden venetian and threw open

the window. Air drifted in, smelling leafy, though you couldn't see a leaf unless you forced open the flywire screen and leaned right out. She had been staying for months with her niece Iris, on the eighth floor of an art deco apartment block in Elizabeth Bay whose windows, I imagined, pointed due north over a canopy of massive Sydney figs, towards the blue field of the harbour.

The immediate view from my spare room, until I could get some geraniums happening in a window box, was of the old grey paling fence that separated my place from my daughter Eva's. The sash window faced east, though, and the light bouncing off the weatherboard side of Eva's house kept the room bright till well into the afternoon. Also, it was late October, which in Melbourne is supposed to be spring.

I was worrying about her feet. The floor of her room was bare timber, except for a worn kilim full of rips. What if she snagged one of her long, elegant toes in it? What if she fell? Slippers were among the things she didn't bother with, along with suitcases, bras, deodorants, irons. I rolled up the dangerous kilim and threw it into the back shed. Then I drove

over to a shop opposite Piedimonte's supermarket, where my friend Peggy, who knows about these things, said they sold tribal rugs. Straight away I spotted a pretty one: blossoms of watery green and salmon twining on a mushroom ground. The bloke told me it was Iranian, vegetable dyed. I chose it because it was faded. She would hate me to buy anything specially; to make a fuss.

Would she want to look at herself? It was months since I had last laid eyes on her: all I knew was from our emails. Every time the news sounded bad under her chirpy chatter, I would suggest flying up to Sydney. But she put me off. She was going out to dinner and couldn't change the date, or there wouldn't be a bed for me, or she didn't want me to waste my money. She might take it the wrong way if her room lacked a mirror. Behind the bookshelf in my workroom I found one I'd bought in an Asian import shop at Barkly Square and never used: a tall, narrow, unframed rectangle of glass, its back still equipped top and bottom with strips of double-sided adhesive tape. I selected a discreet spot for it, just inside the door of her room, and pressed it firmly against the plaster.

On the bedside table I fanned out some chord charts to have a crack at on our ukuleles—'Pretty Baby', 'Don't Fence Me In', 'King of the Road'. I arranged the reading lamp on a gracious angle, and placed beside it a mug full of nameless greenery that I'd found near the back shed. Then I went along the corridor to my room at the front of the house and lay on the bed with my boots on. It was four o'clock in the afternoon.

What woke me, ten minutes later, was a horrible two-stage smash, so sickening, so total, that I thought someone had thrown a brick through the side window. I rushed out all trembly and ran along the hall. Nothing moved. The house was quiet. I must have dreamt it. But the edge of the old hall runner, halfway to the kitchen, was weirdly sparkling. I stepped over it and into the spare room. The mirror no longer existed. The wall was bare, and the Iranian rug was thick with the glitter of broken glass.

I swept with the dustpan and brush, I beat with the millet broom, I hoovered in cunning angled strokes. The fragments of mirror were mean-shaped and stubborn, some so minuscule that they were only chips of light. They hid against the rug's scalp, in the

roots of its fur. I got down on my knees and picked them out with my fingernails. When the daylight faded and I had to stop, my sister Connie rang me.

'A mirror broke? In her room?'

I was silent.

Then she said, in a low, urgent voice, 'Don't. Tell. Nicola.'

~

'Three weeks she's staying?' said my friend Leo, the psychiatrist. That Saturday evening I sat in the spartan kitchen of his South Yarra place and watched him cook. He poured the pasta into a strainer and flipped it up and down. 'Why so long?'

'She's booked in to do a course of alternative treatment down here. Some outfit in the city. They've fast-tracked her. She's supposed to present herself there first thing Monday morning.'

'What sort of treatment?'

'I was loath to ask. She talks about peroxide drips, awful stuff. She's already been getting big doses of vitamin C in Sydney. Eighty thousand units, she said. Intravenous. With something

called glutathione. Whatever that is.'

He stood very still with the dripping colander in his hand. He seemed to be controlling himself: I had never before noticed the veins in his temples, under the curly white hair. 'It's bullshit, Helen.'

We started to eat. Leo let a shrink's silence fall, as he forked in food. His terrier, black and white, squatted by his chair and gazed up at him with helpless love.

'It is bullshit, is it?' I said. 'That's my instinct. Get this. When the bowel tumour showed up on the scan, she asked the oncologist to hold off treatment for a while. So she could take a lot of aloe vera. He said, "Nicola. If aloe vera could shrink tumours, every oncologist in the world would be prescribing it." But she believes in things. She's got one of those magnetic mats on the floor behind her couch. She says, "Lie on the mat, Hel. It'll heal your osteoporosis."'

Leo didn't laugh. He looked at me with his triangular brown eyes and said, 'And do you lie on it?'

'Sure. It's restful. She rents it from a shop.'

'So chemo didn't work.'

'She walked around carrying a bag of it plugged

into the back of her hand. She's had surgery. She had radiation. They've told her they can't do any more for her. It's in her bones, and her liver. They said to go home. She spent five days at a Petrea King workshop. I'd heard good things about that, but she said it wasn't her style. Then she went to someone she called a healer. He said she had to have her molars out—that the cancer was caused by heavy metals leaking out of her fillings.'

Leo put his head in his hands. I kept eating.

'Why is she coming to you?'

'She says I saved her life. She was about to send a lot of money to a biochemist up in the Hunter Valley.'

'A biochemist?'

'A kinesiologist told her this bloke's had a lot of success with cancer. So she phoned him up. He said he wouldn't need to see her. Just have a look at her blood picture. She was supposed to send him four grand and he'd post her the exact right herbs to target the cancers. "Essence of cabbage juice" was mentioned.'

I let out a high-pitched giggle. Leo looked at me steadily, without expression.

'And he told her she shouldn't worry if she heard unfavourable things about him, because he had enemies. People who were out to get him. I was trying to be tactful, so I asked her, "How did you feel, when he told you that?" She said, "I took it as a guarantee of integrity."'

My cheeks were hot. I knew I must be gabbling.

'I was scared she'd accuse me of crushing her last hope. So I went behind her back and called a journalist I know. He ran a check. Turns out the so-called biochemist's a well-known conman. He makes the most outlandish claims. Before he went into alternative health he'd spent years in gaol for armed robbery. I rang her just in time. She had the cheque book in her hand.'

It took me a moment to calm down. Leo waited. His kitchen was bare, and peaceful. I wondered if any of his patients had ever been invited into it. Outside the sliding glass doors an old concrete laundry trough sat on the paving, sprouting basil. The rest of the tiny yard was taken up by his car.

'You work with cancer patients,' I said. 'Does this sound bad?'

He shrugged. 'Pretty bad. Stage four.'

'How many stages are there?'

'Four.'

The bowl was empty. I put down my fork. 'What am I supposed to do?'

He put his hand on the dog's head and drew back its ears so that its eyes turned to high slits. 'Maybe that's why she's coming to stay. Maybe she wants you to be the one.'

'What one?'

'The one to tell her she's going to die.'

We listened to an old Chick Corea CD, and talked about our families and what we'd been reading. When it was late, he walked me to my car. The dog trotted at his heel. As I drove away up Punt Road I saw them dart across at the lights and plunge into the big dark gardens.

~

Rain fell in the night, quiet and kind. I woke at six with a sense of something looming, the same anxiety I felt before a writing deadline: the inescapable requirement to find something new in myself. Nicola would arrive today. I lay there under the shadow.

But I planted two new geraniums in a window box and hooked it on to the side fence outside her room. The bud-points, furled inside their leaves, reminded me of sharpened lead pencils. Their redness arrested my gaze before it hit the ugly palings.

Bessie came in from next door, squeezing through the gap in the fence while I was making a sandwich for lunch. She demonstrated a new hairclip application that kept her fringe still when she jumped up and down. Her nose was running and I kept wiping it on kitchen paper. The TV was on.

'Is that Saddam Hussein?' she said. 'What did he do, Nanna, to make him a baddie?'

I explained what a tyrant was. We began to philosophise. She pointed out that many people in the world were very poor. Then, tucking into the bowl of yoghurt and nuts that I placed before her, she observed that days differ from one another.

'Some are happy,' she said, 'but others are bad. I don't know why. Can I come to the airport with you? I want to tell Nicola I'm five-and-a-half. I think she'll be very surprised.'

~

We parked in plenty of time. The sun was out and the air was mild: we remarked gaily on the spring. As we marched hand in hand towards the Virgin Blue gate lounge, a crowd came surging out of it: Nicola's plane must have landed early. I broke into a trot, hauling Bessie behind me and scanning the approaching travellers for a tall, striding woman with prematurely white hair. We were almost on top of her before I recognised her. She was tottering along in the press of people, staggering like a crone, dwarfed by a confused young man who was carrying her Indian cloth bag over his shoulder. Bessie got a tighter grip on my hand.

'Hello darlings!' said Nicola. She was trying for insouciance, but her voice was hoarse, only a thread. 'This is my new friend Gavin. He's been so helpful!'

Gavin handed me the bag, murmured a farewell, and made for the exit. I took hold of Nicola's arm and steered her towards a row of hard chairs. She collapsed on to the first one. Bessie pressed closer to my other side, staring across me at Nicola with a look of fascinated panic.

'OK,' I said brightly. 'Let's sit here for a second and collect ourselves.'

But Nicola couldn't sit up straight. Her back was bowed right over, her neck straining as if under a heavy load. She was stripped of flesh, shuddering from head to foot like someone who has been out beyond the break too long in winter surf.

'Bessie,' I said. 'Listen to me, sweetheart. See that lady over there, behind the counter? Past the toilets? I want you to walk up to her and tell her we need a wheelchair. Right away. Will you be a big girl and do that?'

She stared at me. 'What if they don't have wheelchairs at airports?'

'Bess. I need you to help us.'

Nicola turned on her a smile that would have once been beautiful and warm, but was now a rictus.

'But I don't want to go without you,' said Bessie on a high note.

'All right. You stay here with Nicola, and I'll go.'

'Nanna.' She gripped me with both hands.

'We have to get a wheelchair. Go to that lady and ask her. Otherwise I don't know how we'll get out of here.'

I pushed her away from me. She set out along

the carpeted hall with stiff, formal steps. I saw her rise on to her toes and try to show herself above the counter's edge. I saw the uniformed woman bend to hear her, glance up to follow her pointing finger, and turn to shout an order.

~

We got home to a house that still thought spring had come: all the windows up, the rooms flooded with mild, muggy air. Nicola hobbled down the hall on my arm while Bessie ran in front with her bag. We led her into the spare room and she sat shivering on the edge of the bed. I banged down the window and switched on the oil heater. No, thank you—she didn't want to drink, or eat, or wash, or go to the toilet. She was silent. Her head hung forward, as if a tiny fascinating scene were being enacted on her lap. I ran to the kitchen and put the kettle on for a hot water bottle. Bessie dawdled at the back door.

'Go home, sweetheart. I can't play with you now. Go home.'

She scowled at me and stumped off across the vegetable patch to the gap in the fence, where she

hesitated, glaring at me over her shoulder, long enough for me to see her pearly skin, the vital lustre of her pouting lower lip.

In the spare room the oil was dripping and clicking inside the heater. I crouched in front of Nicola and pulled off her soft cloth shoes. Her bare feet were mottled, and icy to the touch; her ankles were laced with a pattern of blue veins. I hauled the jeans off her. She never wore knickers and she wasn't wearing any now. I opened the bag. The few garments she had stuffed into it—a wool spencer, a faded pink flannelette nightgown, a large hemp T-shirt—were grubby and neglected, full of holes, like the possessions of a refugee. *No one's looking after her. She's already lost.*

'Come on,' I said. 'Let's get this nightie on to you.' Like a child she raised both arms. I drew off her worn-out cashmere jumper and rag of a singlet. I thought I was keeping up a nonchalant pace, but when I saw the portacath bulging like an inverted bottle-top under the skin near her collarbone I must have missed a beat, for she began to whisper and croak: 'Sorry, Hel. Ghastly. So sorry.'

Uttering comforting, hopeful sounds, I fed each

of her arms into a sleeve and pulled the threadbare nightdress down to cover her. I got her under the doona. She couldn't find a position to lie in that didn't hurt.

When the two hot water bottles were ready I brought in a second doona, my thick winter one. I wrapped her, I swaddled her, I lay behind her spoon-wise and cuddled her in my arms. Shudders like electric shocks kept running down her body. Nothing could warm her.

But the heater gained command of the room. In a while she seemed to relax, and doze. I began to sweat. I eased back off the bed, turned the venetian blind to dark, and tiptoed out of the room.

How long had she been this bad? Why hadn't someone warned me? But who? She was a free woman, without husband or children. No one was in charge. I got a vegetable soup simmering in case she woke up hungry, and then I looked up her niece Iris in the Sydney phone book, and called her. A wheelchair? Oh no—this was *way* new. Could it have been just the strain of the flight? Oh God. We should absolutely stay in touch—here was her email address. Iris and her boyfriend Gab could come down, but not till the

weekend after next—the school she was teaching at wouldn't give her any more time off. If it all turned out to be too much for me, they would take her home.

Too much for me? My pride was stung. I was supposed to be useful in a crisis.

Something rustled at the back door. Bessie slid into the kitchen, beaming, in a floor-length flounced skirt and fringed shawl.

'No, sweetheart—sorry. Not now.'

Her smile faded. 'But I've got a new dance to show you.'

'Nicola's asleep. She needs a very quiet house because she's terribly sick.'

She stared at me, sharply interested. 'Is Nicola going to die?'

'Probably.'

'Tonight?'

'No.'

She began to twist the doorknob, writhing and grizzling. 'I need you to play with me. I'm bored.'

'Don't push it, Bess. You heard what I said.'

'If you don't let me come in, I won't be able to stop whining.'

'Run home. Come back in the morning when she wakes up.'

'It's not even night-time yet!'

'She's asleep.'

'If you don't let me in, I'll whine more. I'll go berserk and do it even worse.'

I shoved back my chair. Its legs screeched on the boards and she bolted. Her flamenco heels went clicketing across the brick paving and she vanished behind the rocket bed.

I stopped on the back veranda. Further down the yard, beyond the shoulder-high broad beans with their black-and-white flowers, a small butternut pumpkin sat on the shed windowsill in what remained of the afternoon's sun. It had rested there, forgotten by both our houses, for months. If it hadn't dried out I could put it into the soup. I waited till I heard Bessie slam her back door, then I sneaked out and grabbed the pumpkin from the windowsill. It was suspiciously light. I stood it on the chopping board and pushed the point of the heavy knife through its faded yellow skin. Pouf. The blade sank through it. The pumpkin fell into two halves. The flesh was pale and fibrous, hardly more substantial than dust.

I hacked it into chunks and shoved them into the compost bin.

The night, when it came, was long. I woke many times. Once I heard the soft patter of rain. I parted the blind slats. A single light burned in the upper flat across the street: my comrade, that wakeful stranger. Towards four I crept along the hall and stood outside Nicola's closed door. Her breathing was slow and regular, but coarse and very loud.

I thought about the rattle that came out of my sister Madeleine's throat ten minutes before she died. 'Listen,' I said to her son who was sitting red-eyed by her bed with his elbows resting on his knees. 'She's rattling. She'll die soon.'

'Nah,' he said, 'it's just a bit of phlegm she's too weak to cough up.'

In the kitchen I switched on a lamp. There was a banana on the bench. Someone had started to peel it, eaten half, and lost interest. The rest of it lay abandoned in its loose, spotty skin.