

Storm In Teacup

Mairi Neil

Teacups rattled and teaspoons protested as Ina shuffled from the kitchen grasping the tray like a life raft. Jean sat holding her breath. Last Wednesday, when she offered to take the tray, Ina snapped, 'I can do it,' before adding, 'I'm not ready for a nursing home.'

'Oh, Ina, helping you carry a heavy tea-tray because of your arthritis doesn't mean I want you in a home.'

'Not you,' Ina was contrite, 'but Jennifer does.'

Ina's daughter, Jennifer often came up in the conversation when Jean and Ina were together - more often in the past month, since a bitter divorce brought Jennifer from overseas to again live with her mother.

There were little hints at first, but last week, Ina confessed she feared Jennifer wanted her out of the way, so she could have the house to herself. Jean didn't know what to think. She never missed a Wednesday afternoon visit with Ina during their twenty years of friendship, but Jennifer lived in England all that time and since her return, a face to face meeting elusive. Over the years, Ina shared the infrequent postcards and rare telephone calls received at Christmas and on her birthday.

Jean gained the impression of a mother and daughter whose relationship was fractured with little warmth between them. Jennifer and her new husband left for England shortly after Ina's husband died. Jennifer had doted on her father. Jean suspected the pair often ganged up on amenable Ina to get their own way, and when Jennifer left, she made it known an Australia without her father held no deep ties.

The tea-tray clattered to the table interrupting Jean's reverie.

Tea sloshed from the floral teapot's spout as milk splashed from a dainty china jug. Ina said, 'I know you don't want to speak ill of my daughter.'

'I've never met her Ina, so can't judge.'

'Trust me on this Jean,' Ina's intake of breath matched the armchair's sigh as she plopped down. Grey eyes glistened with tears, arthritic hands trembled as she dabbed at the spilled liquid with a serviette. Jean reached out and squeezed her friend's arm, 'Of course, I trust you, we've been friends for a long time...'

'You're more than a friend Jean,' interrupted Ina, 'you're the daughter I always wanted.'

Jennifer's voice rasped from the doorway, 'Am I interrupting something important?'

More than the teacups were shaken that afternoon.