

“Five dollars for the delphiniums, most of the others are three dollars a stem”. I am standing in front of a bright array of late summer flowers in a florist in downtown Chapel Hill, North Carolina. “I’ll just get one of every purple one”. “Where you from, honey?” the sales assistant drawls as she wraps up my purple bouquet. “Australia” I’m used to the routine. “Well now how in the world did you find yourself in Chapel Hill?!” she laughs. I tell her the brief version, pay and walk out the door.

I pull into the driveway of the purple house. The shutters are dark purple and every railing is a pale shade of violet. It’s not uncommon in this neighbourhood to paint your shutters in various colours, but there was never any doubt that this one would be purple. I take the flowers inside and watch as my purple clad grandmother’s face lights up at my arrival. Yesterday I had bought some little (mostly purple) plants to put out in her front yard. My grandmother can’t hold herself up without a walking frame anymore but she says she’ll watch me plant them. She’s good today; she is happy and alert and less confused than I’ve seen her in a long time. Before long she can’t contain herself and asks me to help her onto the ground so she can help me weed. She tells me it reminds her of being young. We replace the weeds with brightly coloured plants and talk about how pretty it will be once they grow bigger.

That night I help her to bed. She kisses me and tells me she loves me and that life is better when I’m around. That’s the silver lining of being from far away; I get these concentrated visits with her at her best. I lie in bed and read and reflect on how lucky I am to get this time with her, and how wonderful it was to watch her pull the little weeds so delicately out of the stubborn ground. Her frail and shaking hands filled with a newfound strength.

In the morning I wake up to her voice. She’s on the phone and she sounds agitated. “There’s a stranger in my house!” A pause. “I don’t know who it is but she’s in the spare room. You need to come and get her out!”

Yesterday’s garden is erased and has been replaced with the fear of the unknown; a stranger, who was once her granddaughter, sleeping in her house.