

DIANE WISDOM

The Family Tree

It's nearly fifty years since we parted, and who knows how many years since she died, but tonight, finally, I feel I have laid Alberta Pitcher to rest—although my reason for coming back to Barton had nothing to do with her; what I came home for was my father's funeral.

Father had left instructions about the funeral with his solicitor and Mr Soames had arranged everything. There had been nothing for me to do but to turn up this morning and take my place in the front row of the chapel. Dry-eyed and feeling oddly detached, at the appropriate times I stood, then sat, then stood again, then knelt and bowed my head while the archaic words washed over me. The chapel's sound system gave the minister's voice a jarring, robotic quality:

*Eternal rest grant unto him,
O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.
May he rest in peace.*

Yes, I told myself, I can at least wish him that. I had no thought of Alberta—not then. And why would I? Until this evening I have not thought of her in nearly fifty years.

I suppose you would say I'm a solitary sort of person, although I prefer to think of myself as self-sufficient, happy in my own company. But in the brief months of that childhood summer, Alberta Pitcher and I had the most intense friendship—the sort of special bond that two little girls can sometimes share. Yet in the end we had

parted with such bitterness: my last words to her had been spoken in anger. I can feel again the knot of rage twisting in my stomach, the hot tears scalding my cheeks. I was a child then, with a child's understanding—and a child's certainty: she had no right to say those things to me. But I didn't have the words to challenge her; I could only storm at her, red-faced, furious:

"It's not true; take it back—it's not true!"

Her quiet composure was too powerful, her own certainty shaking mine; I had no answer. I responded in the only way I knew: "I hate you! *I hate you!* I never want to see you again!"

And I shut her out of my life forever—or so I thought then. But now, all these years later, her words seem to reverberate in the air around me once more.

I had planned to go straight back to London after the funeral, although when it came to it I was strangely reluctant to leave, and I hesitated outside the chapel. *There's nothing for me here now*, I thought, but I was troubled by a sense of something unfinished. All at once, I was aware of Mr Soames standing at a distance, as if waiting for me.

"My condolences again, Miss Peters," he said in his prim, fussy way. "A sad day. Yes, a sad day." He was holding a large envelope.

"No hurry, no hurry at all, but when you feel...*able*...just a few forms to fill in for the probate. All a formality, of course, everything comes to you—although these things do take their time, you know." He gave a simpering smile. "But of course you may have the keys to the house now. You must come and go as you please, and if I can be of *any* assistance..."

For a moment I entertained the forlorn thought the envelope might contain some last message from my father, an attempt to reach out to me after all the years of distance, but there was merely a sheaf of legal papers, and the front door key.

Until that moment I'd had no intention of going to the house. If I'd thought of it at all, it was with a vague idea of putting it with an agent to be sold as soon as practicable. I had no wish for any of it. But now, with the key in my hand, it occurred to me that there would be things that couldn't be left to a house clearance firm to

dispose of—things I would need to look over for myself; and with this thought I was suddenly seized by the notion of there being *something* there, in his house which might help to fill the spaces that had opened up between us over the years.

The key was stiff in the lock, almost as if it was resisting me. When I'd left Barton for London I had left my own key behind and the place had quickly ceased to feel like home so that whenever I had come back I had felt more like a visitor in my parents' house. But now as I pushed the door open and looked around me the years seemed to fall away and I almost called out *Mum, Dad, I'm home!*

The air was musty, stale-smelling. Silence pressed all around me. I had thought that being here might bring my father close—but I wasn't prepared for such a strong sense of his presence. Without even thinking about it my steps led me to his study and holding my breath, I hesitated before opening the door. Part of me expected to see him there still, sitting at the heavy mahogany desk. All my life, whenever I've thought of him, it's always in this room I've pictured him. Now, standing in the doorway, I felt like a child again. Acutely aware that he hated to be disturbed at his work, I could almost hear that familiar sigh of annoyance, almost see the way he would push his glasses to the end of his nose and frown over the top of them, as if astounded to find anyone—least of all this solemn little girl—daring to interrupt his peace.

'He's not here.' I told myself. 'He's gone.'

And I stepped over the threshold into the room.

Late afternoon sunshine slanted through the panes of the French windows, scattering long diamonds of brightness across the faded red carpet. Motes of dust, stirred by the opening door, eddied in the sleepy golden air, mingling with the ghost of the smell of his tobacco. This room had always seemed strangely separate from the rest of the house—as if it existed in its own time and space. As a child I'd believed it was under an enchantment—like the turret room in a castle in a fairy story. It held a fascination for me, and my father's mysterious desk with its little box-like drawers and cubby holes filled with notebooks and papers, was at the heart of its magic.

And he was the magician wielding the key that unlocked its secrets.

Sometimes I was allowed to sit with him—a special privilege. I knew that I must be quiet and not disturb him while he worked. The only sounds were the ponderous ticking of the mantel clock, slowing time to its own pace, and the scratching of his pen. Once I asked him what he was writing. He looked up, seeming surprised at the interruption. I'm sure he had forgotten I was there.

He laid down his pen: "I'm researching our family history Julie, working on our family tree."

I was mystified. 'History' meant 'olden days': Romans and Pharaohs, Kings and Queens, and battles—not families and trees. How could he spend so much time writing about a tree? And which tree *was* our family tree, anyway?

"But..."

"Sshhh now, I'm concentrating." He took up his pen again.

I turned the puzzle over in my mind until I decided I had the answer. I wasn't sure what it had to do with history but of all the trees in our garden there was one that seemed more special than the rest: that must be the one—our family tree. In spring its graceful branches were covered in a foam of blossom; in autumn its leaves blazed scarlet and gold. Other parts of the garden might be neglected but around this tree the soil was always tended, flowers always bloomed. I remember one cold autumn day my mother had allowed me to help her plant a rose bush alongside it, hovering over me to make sure I did it right while my father watched. Then we had all stood there together, admiring my handiwork with a solemn sense of ceremony.

"But when will the flowers come?" I wanted to know. My hands bore painful scratches from the thorns on those unpromising bare stems. I looked to my mother for an answer, then caught my breath in astonishment—was that a tear running down her cheek? Her hand flew to her face and it was gone so quickly that afterwards I thought I must have imagined it.

"In the summer. You have to be patient. Just wait till the summer."

"Let's go in now," my father said. "It's cold."

I ran ahead of them, and it was only when I got to the door that I realised they were still standing by the tree. As I watched they both

reached out to touch its slender trunk before turning and walking slowly back up the garden. This *had* to be our family tree. And even after my father had patiently explained to me what a family tree really was, I still clung to the belief that this tree had a special significance, that it held the answer to a question I didn't know how to frame.

The tree is much bigger now of course. I looked out at it from my seat at my father's desk. The leaves were falling, lying in bright drifts on the ground. In the last year the garden had become too much for him to manage; weeds and brambles were taking hold—it needed a lot of work. But that was a job for another day. There seemed enough to deal with in his desk: piles of bank statements, bills and receipts. So much to sort out, and I really didn't have the heart for it today.

I had hoped that by sitting here, in his place, I might somehow... *find him*; that something among the personal papers, notebooks and diaries crammed into the drawers and cubby holes would provide a clue—would in some way reveal him to me. Even that he might have left some kind of message for me—but no. It was too late. No chance to know him now. There had always been that distance between us. Even at Mum's funeral last year he had stood stiff and unresponsive when I'd tried to wrap him in my arms. Ridiculous to look for something to bring him close to me now.

I rifled through an old diary. The entries—dry, matter-of-fact—recorded the weather, a dental appointment, a reminder to book the car in for a service. Nothing here of the man and the pages of neat, cramped writing were beginning to depress me. I moved to put the diary back in its place, and that's when the photo slipped from between the pages and fluttered to the floor. Curious, I picked it up. It was me, aged about eight or nine, but I felt I was looking at a stranger. I studied this other me, trying to feel some connection with this plain, solid child with her straight, mousy hair. Why was I standing so oddly, looking to one side, half smiling, with one arm bent and my elbow sticking out? I flipped the photo over. My father had written on the back: *Summer 1963—Julie and 'friend'*. Friend?... but there was only me in the picture....

I studied it more closely, and then—*it must have been a trick of the light!*—as if the photograph was still in its bath of developing fluid, the image slowly sharpening and coming into focus...I thought I could see a shadowy figure begin to materialise beside me. My heart thumping, I slapped the photo face down on the desk. But then I knew. My breathing steadied and a feeling of warmth washed over me. I turned the photo over again: there was no ghostly figure. Of course not—how could there be? Just me. And yet the image is bright and clear, burned into my mind: I can see her standing there beside me, her arm linked through mine: *Alberta Pitcher*, my secret friend; my *imaginary* friend. Of course my father had known about her all the time.

Tears start to my eyes. Waves of memory are pulling me back to that summer. For those few short weeks, Alberta had been the most important person in my life: my constant companion, confidante, consoler, my ally. And it was all because of the family tree; without that she would never have existed—at least, not with that name and the personality that was so bound up in it. Because her name, at least, was *not* imaginary. I did not invent it; I discovered it on a gravestone.

In those pre-internet days, my father's research into the family history sometimes involved expeditions to local churchyards to trace the names of long-dead members of the family. On that particular day, just as he was setting off, my mother had one of her headaches and needed to lie down.

"Take Julie with you," she said. "She can help—she'll enjoy that."

Oh, how I would have loved to help him—to have been part of what absorbed him so, to win his approval—just to have his attention—to feel *important*. But I could have predicted his answer:

"Well I'm not sure there's anything she can do to *help*...but I suppose she can come along if she promises not to get in the way..."

He held my hand along the main road—*because of the traffic*, he said. My feelings veered between embarrassment at having my hand held at the mature age of nine and the desire to prolong this rare contact with him. I was aware that I was cared for, protected; always well wrapped up against the cold; constantly told not to run too fast, climb too high, go too near the edge; shielded from all

possible hurts. I believed...*believe*...he loved me—but I'm not sure I ever *felt* it. His love was never voiced, never seemed to translate into anything as warm as affection. It seemed more like a kind of anxiety—as if I was *too* precious: some fragile thing that must always be held at a distance. And I suppose it was because of this reserve of his I too became self-contained: the sort of child who could reliably be expected to provide her own entertainment—even in the most unpromising surroundings. So when we reached the little church and he told me to be a good girl and play quietly...

“...and don't go outside the gate!” I wandered—content enough—about the churchyard.

We'd been to St Mary's before: its grounds were neglected and overgrown, the ancient gravestones lurching at tipsy angles amongst tall ox-eye daisies and rank, straggling grass. That afternoon the heat was oppressive. The whirring of crickets filled the shimmering air, making my head throb, and I was drawn to a shady corner where swags of ivy were draped—cool, mysterious, secret—over the old stone wall. And it was here I found Alberta, half-hidden from view. Perhaps she too had been told she mustn't make a noise, mustn't get in the way?

Unlike her neighbours, no angels kept watch over her. The simple stone above her resting place did not record that she was anyone's beloved wife, mother, daughter, sister. No dates were visible to indicate when she'd lived or how old she was. In letters clouded over with moss and lichen, blurred by the passing of countless years, there was simply her wonderful name:

Alberta Pitcher, and the letters RIP.

I traced the shape of the letters with my finger, tried out the sound of them—in a whisper at first, but then louder:

Alberta Pitcher!

It was a strong name, a strange name; unusual and yet somehow familiar—a good name. What had she been like? She must be a child, I reasoned—after all, the headstone was so small. Although not as small as those of the poor sad infants, whose inscriptions told me they had 'gone to sleep in the arms of Jesus'.

Alberta...I whispered it again. Something about her name called to me. I wished I knew what she looked like, who she was...but

suddenly it didn't matter; she was mine to invent. The letters on her headstone, I knew, meant 'Rest in Peace', but I had no compunction about disturbing that rest: I wanted to know her, to bring her to life. And so I conjured her up, to fit my needs—and her own, singular name.

As if casting a spell I stood, eyes closed, invoking her spirit, willing her to appear. The thought of summoning up a ghost didn't alarm me, and when her image began to take shape in my mind, there was nothing of the graveyard about her.

Let her be everything I'm not! Let her have wild red hair, all curls and tangles! Let her eyes flash bright—and green!—sparkling with anger or laughter. Let her be clever. Let her be brave, adventurous...let her be LOUD! Let her run faster, jump higher, be stronger than anyone! Give her a face that's all sharp angles, chin jutting out...and...obhhh—yes!...let her have FRECKLES! I could see her clearly now. Let her never be afraid of anything; let her hug me so tightly I can't breathe; let her link arms with me and be my friend forever; let her be mine and no one else's; let her BE!

And there she was, as if I had always known her, feet planted squarely on the ground, hands on hips, smiling, laughing. My friend—no, better, my *sister*—the sister I'd always wanted. By the time my father came looking for me I felt she had always been part of my life. She would be someone to share all my thoughts with, all my dreams, my hurts, my joys. I could talk to her about anything—she would always listen, always understand, always be on my side. She was mine alone: no one else could see her, no one else would know about her—or so I thought.

From that moment she was always there with me. Sitting at the silent dinner table with my parents, I glowed with the secret knowledge that she sat beside me; I could feel her hand squeezing mine. My head was full of our silent conversations, the joyous sound of her laughter. I stopped haunting my father's study, relinquishing the struggle for his attention: I had Alberta now. Her imagination knew no limits. I would fall asleep each night only to dream of the stories she told me—fairy tale adventures of shipwrecks and pirates, princes and princesses, unicorns and wizards. At school she

sat close at my side, whispering in my ear. She could be deliciously mischievous: she made up rude names for the teachers, giggled when my classmates called out a wrong answer or were told off for misbehaving. She said things I wouldn't have dared say myself, outrageous things that filled me with guilty delight...all until her final words that is: those same words which are sounding in my mind again now.

It had been the last day of the summer holiday. I was waiting in an agony of impatience for my father to take me swimming. Had he forgotten his promise? An image of him floats into my mind now—shuffling papers on his desk—barely glancing up to murmur: “We’ll go another time, Julie. I need to finish writing this up. I’ve discovered some new information; this book was a real find.”

He was looking at a small volume with a faded green cloth cover and tiny print on yellowed pages.

“It’s given me a very important piece of the puzzle: it’s all about Wilfred Peters—he was your great, great, *great* grandfather—isn’t that exciting?”

Disappointment settled in my chest like a stone. I didn’t reply, and he didn’t seem to notice. He turned back to his desk, to his notes, to his book, withdrawing into his own thoughts again.

And that’s when Alberta said it. The terrible, unthinkable thing—the thing I could never forgive: “Your daddy spends all his time thinking about dead people! He doesn’t care about *you*. I don’t think he loves you at all!”

That book, those piles of papers are here in his desk still. He had kept everything: all the notebooks, the old documents; all the copies of certificates—births, deaths and marriages. I don’t think he ever finished writing his history, but here, in the bottom drawer, tied round with a blue ribbon, I discover a rolled sheet of parchment-like paper. I pull at the bow and uncurl the stiff manuscript. And there it is: embellished with scrolls and curlicues, in beautiful calligraphy so unlike his normal hand—the family tree. Generations of ancestors, long dead, tracing down to the final entry—my own name:

Julie Peters b. May 1954

...with a space at the bottom of the page for the children I never

had. So much work, so much care had gone into this, yet he had never shown it to me. I feel a stab of guilt, remembering my childish determination to show no interest in it...but then I freeze, my attention caught. The ticking of the clock seems suddenly louder. I stare at the page. Below my parents' names...along a line, to the left of my name...I don't understand...what can this mean?

Anne Peters: b. October 1957—d. November 1957.

But that would mean...a sister? No. That's impossible. Not true! I would have known—surely? How could I have not known? I push the chair back, heart pounding, trying to make sense of the words.

Do you remember now?

I hold my breath. It's Alberta's voice. Older, softer than I recall...sadder...but still familiar. And, like one of those dreams that threatens to slip away in the morning even as you try to catch hold of it, disjointed strands of memory come back to me: a cry in the night...the cold grey glimmer of dawn through a gap in the curtains...an unaccountable sense of dread...my bare feet on freezing lino...tiptoeing along the landing to my parents' room...the two of them, standing beside the cot, clinging to each other...cradling between them a silent bundle, white blankets trailing...the sound of weeping as, in that moment, they gave in to a grief that I was never to be allowed to know about.

I carefully smooth out the curling corners of the scroll, my fingers searching for some imprint of my father, some essence of the man who had hidden his sorrow through the long years. He had sought refuge in books and archives, in dusty records and long-forgotten names and dates, turning away from the living and looking to the dead. I wish I could explain it all to the child that I was—could help her understand. And I wish I could talk again with him. But it's too late to bridge the distance between us, although perhaps I understand him now—a little, anyway.

I've lost track of how long I've been sitting here, deep in thought. I feel dazed; I'm cold and my back is stiff. I go to the kitchen, make coffee and take a mug out into the garden. I have a feeling Alberta will be there, waiting for me in the shadows under the arching branches of the tree—*Anne's tree*, of course—I see that now. I crook

THE FAMILY TREE

my elbow so Alberta can tuck her arm in mine in the same old way, and she whispers, close, in my ear:

Not just Anne's tree—it's your tree too—your family's tree.

Warmth floods through me. Yes, that's right: it is my family's tree—it belongs to all of us. As the last few leaves drift down around me, the memories—so long suppressed—are slowly falling into place. Standing in the fading twilight of the garden, the half-remembered words come back to me, running through my head like a refrain, and I say them again. For my father—and for Alberta:

O Lord, let perpetual light shine upon them; may they rest in peace.

I have no belief in God, or the hereafter—and I am certain the dead are beyond all knowledge of anything—and yet still I feel that *somehow* they can hear me; and that thought brings peace to *me*.