

IN MY MOTHER'S WORDS – a short play

CAST

- ASHLEY In her 30s or 40s (depending on age of mother). She is an energetic busy mother. Her own mother, Barbara, has been living with Ashley and her husband. She is a 'doer' but is often impatient including her mother who is 80 and is getting frailer.
- MARGARET In 70's or 80s. Scottish born, has not had an easy life but has to learnt to make the best of things. Is getting frustrated with her own increasing frailty and senses her reducing importance within her daughter's life.
- SETTING The present at the home of Ashley. We see a table covered with clean but unfolded washing. A couch and coffee table.

Margaret enters. She is well but very frail. She slowly enters with her walker. On this is a mug of tea. She sits down then uses both hands to pick up the mug but her hands are too shaky. She is frustrated and puts it back down. Her daughter, Ashley, enters. She's walking at a brisk pace, talking on the phone. She is wearing gym gear. She stops at the table, phone held to her ear with her shoulder and rummages through a pile of laundry on the table looking for a matching pair of socks. She finds a pair.

Ashley Yes..... Yes.... We think about a week ago. *(listens)* No she's right here. She's been living with us for about a year..... I'll ask her. *(louder)* Mum! It's the insurance company about the burglary. You need to give permission for me to talk to them on your behalf.

Jeanette ***(she yells)*** YES!

Ashley No Mum, you actually need to speak to him. *(Ashley walks over to sit next to Jeanette)*

Jeanette ***(Frustrated, she takes the phone)*** Och. Hello?..... Yes.... Yes... I'm Jeanette Griffiths.... Yes, it was my house.... Yes you can speak to my daughter *(she immediately holds the phone out to Ashley who has been putting on the socks and wasn't quite ready to take the phone).*

Ashley Sorry. Was that enough? ***(beat)*** She's 80.

Jeanette Nothing wrong with being 80.

Ashley ***(moves to hear the phone conversation more clearly)***. No Mum doesn't live there all the time.... She's here with us..... Her house is not ALWAYS empty, she stays there once or twice a week.They got in through the toilet window ***(she drops the phone)***. Bugger! ***(she picks it up)***. Hello... Hello. Damn it! I've lost him. ***She gets up. Whilst this is happening Jeanette has taken a book from under the coffee table. Inside is are sheets of paper which she reads. Ashley continues to fold washing one handed, waits for a phone response.***

Damn! It's gone to message bank. I'll call them later.

Jeanette Do you want to hear about my boring life or not?

Ashley **(Hesitation as Ashley was obviously not planning to chat now)** Ahh.....?

Jeanette I don't know why you bought me this book 'In My Mother's Words'. I'll probably die soon. Then what? You just fill it in yourself.

Ashley You're not going to die Mum. I only gave it to you two weeks ago. We have plenty of time.

Jeanette Forget it. You're always busy.

Ashley **(She looks at her watch)** How long did you want to spend on it?

Jeanette If you have to ask, you obviously don't want to do it.

Ashley Mum you know I go to the gym on a Wednesday.

Jeanette I don't know why you bother going to the gym. It's not really making any difference, is it?

Ashley What do you mean?

Jeanette Well, I mean ... your stomach **(she pointedly looks at Ashley's stomach)**

Ashley My stomach?

Jeanette Yes, well, it's not exactly flat, is it?

Ashley **(she self consciously holds her stomach in)**

Exercise makes me feel better. And besides I could be starving to death on an island and I'd still look like a stick with a flabby stomach. I get that from you Mum. **(pause)** Oh for goodness sake. I'll go to the gym later. Let's do this. **Margaret gives her the book. Ashley looks for a pen. Margaret hands her a pen. Ashley takes it and flicks through a few pages.**

So where are we up to? We've done your grandparents, your father-

Jeanette My mother.

Ashley Yes, here we are - she was slim 5' 4" tall. What was her occupation?

Jeanette She was a waitress at a high class restaurant. She had a smart uniform. That's how I learnt all about good manners. My mother taught me.

(Ashley writes).

You're doing a lot of writing.

Ashley I'm adding the bit about manners.

Jeanette Och! That's not important. And I've told you this before.

Ashley It IS important. But sometimes we forget-

Jeanette You'd think, out of my four children, one of them would actually listen. But no-

Ashley We DO Mum, but that's why they've asked me to write it down, so we can remember. **(Beat).**

So, tell me something different. **She reads the question** What about your most embarrassing moment as a child.?

Jeanette **(She thinks)** Mum was sick in hospital and I was waiting for Auntie Anne who was late. I had to go to the toilet but there were none so I just wee'd where I stood. It ran down my leg. I was 8 years old.

Ashley So your Mum was sick for a long time.

Jeanette Yes. It was her heart. When she came out of hospital she slept in my room.

Ashley Where did you sleep?

Jeanette In the lounge. **(Beat)** I got used to it. **(Beat)** Pop and I had dinner next to her bed each night.

Ashley How old were you when she died?

Jeanette 15

Ashley Wow! So it was just you and Grandad. That would have been hard.

Jeanette Och! You don't know what the word 'hard' means. Your generation don't know how easy you have it. I don't know why I'm bothering with this.

Ashley Because we want to know Mum, while we have a chance.

Jeanette You mean before I die? I'm not ready to kick the bucket yet.

Ashley I know that. Come on Mum. Tell me what happened.... When your Mum died.

Jeanette **(Gives a loud sigh)** I remember they put me in a room by myself.

Ashley Who?

Jeanette The family. The day Mum died. They didn't want me to be part of the conversations but I could hear them, whispering. I had to sit in that room by myself for hours.

Ashley Oh **(Ashley is listening, not writing)**.

Jeanette I just sat and stared at the wall. Waiting for someone to let me out.

(pause)

And then at the funeral, I was standing next to my father. He looked so sad so I put my hand in his. He flicked it away.

Ashley Oh Mum **(beat – awkward pause as Ashley finds difficulty in sharing feelings with her Mother)**

Wasn't there anyone you could speak to?

Jeanette No. **(pause)** Then they asked me to cook dinner. They said it was good to be busy.

Ashley Most of us don't cope well with giving comfort when there's a death in the family. Remember when Dad died. The four of us couldn't agree how to tell you.

Jeanette Well you should have just done that, tell me.

Ashley You were in hospital sick with pneumonia. We didn't want to make you sadder. We thought we'd lose you too.

Jeanette Being left out was worse. You should have told me straight away.

Ashley I'm sorry Mum.

Jeanette Are you going to write something?

Ashley No, I'll remember that. **(She looks at her notebook)**

Let's talk about something else – what was your 'best time ever'?

(Jeanette thinks)

Ashley Mum?

Jeanette I'm thinking **(she continues to think)** My first holiday when I went on an aeroplane. I went to Germany with my fiancée,

Ashley Dad

Jeanette No, my ex-fiancée.

Ashley **(Her hand is poised in the air, waiting. This is the first time that her Mother has ever mentioned she had an 'ex-fiancée')**. And his name would be?

Jeanette Gordon Islop.

Ashley **(She writes)** Gordon Islop. I didn't know you had a fiancée before Dad. Were you happy with Dad?

Jeanette Of course I was, in the beginning. It was harder when we came to Australia. His sisters weren't there to guide him.

Ashley He needed guidance?

Jeanette Yes, with the drinking he did. It got worse when we came here. **(Hesitation as Ashley again is not writing)**. Life was different then. You lot have everything and still complain there's not enough time. Look at all that washing piled up. You've managed to turn your own lounge into a laundry.

Ashley You could help.

Jeanette I'm 80.

Ashley You can still fold washing. **(Pause as she tries to settle herself)** We're just trying to make your life better. **(Pause)** So here's a question - how have I changed your life?

Jeanette Who?

Ashley Me. How have I changed your life?

Jeanette **(Thinks)** You? Well that's a silly question. I don't know **(Thinks more. It's getting uncomfortable)**.

Ashley Mum?

Jeanette I don't know.

Ashley Well you've been living with us for almost a year now. How about that?

Jeanette Oh yes **(awkward silence)**.

Ashley So has your life been better for you since your fall. **(beat)**

Jeanette **(Pleased she's come up with an answer)** Security!

Ashley **(beat)** Security.

Jeanette Yes that's it. **(beat)**

Ashley That's it? Not that you're getting beautiful food, or we do your washing or our lovely personalities? **(Trying to be light and positive)**

Jeanette **(Beat)** No. Just security. **(Ashley disappointed, writes 'security')**.

Ashley Peter looks after you well though, doesn't he?

Jeanette Yes. You married a kind man. He brings me a cup of tea in the morning. **(beat)** He has a lot of tea towels though. Thirty four!

Ashley Thirty four.

Jeanette Yes, I counted them. Why does he need so many?

Ashley I don't know. He's a chef Mum. He likes tea towels. He gets given tea towels.

Jeanette Yes, he must collect them. But that's a lot of tea towels to wash. My grandmother would be turning in her grave to see such waste. You remember Granny Ryan. **(Stops and notices Ashley has not been writing)**. You're not writing anything. What's the point of doing this if you're not going to write it down.

Ashley I'm waiting for you to say something positive. **(pause)**

Jeanette I am being positive.

Ashley No, you're just complaining about teatowels.

Jeanette Well I remember we had an allotment and Granny Ryan used to cook up the Ayrshire potatoes in a big pot at the allotment. **(Ashley is busy writing again)**. They were delicious. 'Dig for Victory' was the slogan. Don't waste the ground – grow your own food.' We didn't waste things in those days.

Ashley Speaking of 'waste', I found all those cheap gifts you and your friends insist on buying each other – IN THE BIN!

Jeanette It's the thought that counts when I get the present. But then I realise I don't want it so I throw it out.

Ashley That candle I bought you was amongst them. You threw it out!

Jeanette Oh. Was it cheap too?

Ashley No it wasn't!

Jeanette Well, I'm just trying to declutter.... So you'll have less work to do when I die.

Ashley You are not about to die! Stop saying that. **(beat)** That was an expensive candle.

Jeanette You sold the wine decanter I gave you at your garage sale. I saw it. **(Uncomfortable pause. Ashley puts on her gym shoes obviously cross. Jeanette just watches. Then Ashley takes a breath. She has had these pointless arguments before. She picks up the pen).**

Ashley I don't use it anymore, but it wasn't wasted, it went to a good home.

Jeanette How do you know it was a good home?

Ashley She seemed a nice lady and she really liked the decanter. She will look after it.

Jeanette How do you know-

Ashley Let's talk about the allotment. I remember we had an allotment.

Jeanette Yes, we did.

Ashley I fell in a barrel of water.

Jeanette Yes, you were only 6 years old. You climbed on a box and fell right in. Then you stood up and cried and cried. It was very cold.

Ashley I remember.

Jeanette You were always quite sensitive. You stayed rolled up in that blanket all the way home.

Ashley nods. Jeanette leans over to try to pick up her tea. Her hand still shakes.

Jeanette Och! Damn it!

Ashley reacts to try to take the cup, puts her hands over Jeanette's then quickly removes them. They don't often touch. Ashley carefully takes the cup.

Ashley It's too full for you. I'll go and pour some out. **(she gets up)**

Jeanette It doesn't matter, it'll be cold now.

Ashley Then I'll make you a fresh cup.

Jeanette No need. You're too busy

Ashley No. I'm not. It's alright.

Jeanette Good. I need to go to the Post Office to pay a bill.

Ashley We can do it online. I've told you Mum

Jeanette We'll go to the post office. It won't take long.

Ashley It'll take an hour. It always does.

Jeanette You'll be 80 one day you know.

Ashley Yes Mum. I just can't do everything today.

Jeanette Then we'll go to the post office tomorrow.

Ashley *(sighs)* Alright.

Jeanette We could have lunch at that new café. Fay says they make lovely scones with real cream. Not that stuff they squirt out of a bottle.

Ashley I'm not sure-

Jeanette And the tables aren't squashed together so I can fit my walker in. And Fay also tells me it's not too loud. So we can have a proper conversation. *(beat)* Shall we do that? *(looking very hopeful)*.

Ashley *(beat)* Alright Mum. Let's go there tomorrow.

Jeanette Lovely!

Ashley exits. Jeanette waits then picks up Ashley's notes. She looks over her shoulder making sure Ashley is out of sight then starts reading the notes. Ashley quietly comes back, watching her mother read her notes. She smiles.

Ashley ***(direct to audience, Jeanette continues to read)***

And so I leave Mum concentrating on my notes, realising I have agreed to an outing with Mum that I'm going to have trouble fitting in. But I know having something to look forward to, Mum is happy, for now. Her own frailties forgotten for the moment. She's reading my notes carefully. Revealing more in her face right now than she ever would directly to me. Look, she's actually smiling. Oh Mum.... It'll be alright, we're going to have a nice lunch tomorrow.

The end

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