The House of Salt and Paper

By Lauren Thomasse

On the first morning I came back to Sorrento, the bay was a sheet of pewter, and the ferry moved across it like a slow thought. I parked near the foreshore and sat in the car with both hands on the wheel, as if driving were still required. A gull landed on the bonnet, looked me up and down with the familiarity of a neighbour, and screamed once before lifting off again.

There are places that hold your younger self the way a jar holds seawater. You can put the lid on and pretend that it is not sloshing. You can leave it on the shelf for years. But when you come back, you are holding the same jar again and the smell of salt is immediate and undeniable.

I had come for the clearing. Not the kind you do with a spade and a skip bin, though there would be that too. The other kind: the sorting of what remains after a life, the laying-out of objects like evidence, the attempt to make sense of what has been left behind.

Nan called her house the *paper house* because it was full of books, old recipes in clipped corners, letters, magazines folded open to articles she never finished. “Paper is patient,” she used to say. “Paper doesn’t interrupt. Paper doesn’t tell you you’re wrong.” After she died, the paper became my problem.

The key was in the rusty lockbox behind the rainwater tank, where it had always been, beneath a flat stone that never seemed to move, even as years went by. I slid the key into the front door and turned it, and the mechanism clicked with a small, relieved sound. The house breathed out at me: dust and eucalyptus oil and something else underneath, a faint sweetness like old tea leaves.

Inside, it was darker than I remembered. The curtains were drawn. Sunlight leaked through their edges in thin blades, laying down lines across the wooden floor like a score.

I stood a moment, listening for the house to recognise me.

My name is Maeve, and for most of my life I have been the kind of person who leaves. I left Sorrento at eighteen with a duffel bag and a scholarship to Melbourne and the certainty that I could make my own weather. I left later, too - relationships and jobs and flats - always when the air got too close, always when someone expected me to stay put in a story I did not write. I told myself it was independence. It was ambition. It was not wanting to be trapped. But if I were honest, there is a difference between freedom and flight.

Nan's house had trapped no one. It had held people. It had held me, once, after my mother left and my father lost the language of kindness for a while, and the only way he could say anything was through silence. I had come here after school and sit at Nan's kitchen table while she peeled oranges in a long unbroken strip. She would tell me stories that made the world feel coherent again.

"Your mother wasn't built for stillness," Nan said once, not unkindly. "Not everyone is." I remember the way she offered that sentence like it was a towel: something to dry myself with, not something to wrap around my mother's throat.

Now, standing in the dim hallway with my shoes still on, I tried not to think about my mother. I tried not to think about the last message I had received from her, years ago, a single line that had arrived at three in the morning like a stone thrown at my window:

Don't become me.

No hello. No explanation. The number disconnected the next day. People always told me, after that, that it was closure. As if closure is a door you can simply shut.

I walked into the lounge room. The furniture sat under its own white sheets, ghosted. A stack of newspapers leaned against the wall, still tied with twine. On the mantelpiece, Nan's clock had stopped at 2:17, its hands fixed like a pose held too long. I switched on a lamp. The shade threw a warm circle

onto the nearest pile of books, and the titles rose up as if surfacing: *Coastal Plants of Victoria, The Complete Woman's Weekly Cookbook, The Collected Poems of Dorothy Hewett*.

In the kitchen, the table was exactly as I had left it on my last visit, the last time Nan had been alive, though I did not think of it that way then. A teacup still sat near the sink, with a rim of brown. A bowl held three stones, each one smooth and pale, like eggs. Nan had collected stones from the beach the way some people collect apologies. She kept them in bowls, on windowsills, in the pockets of coats she never wore. I touched one of the stones now. It was cool and heavier than it looked.

"Alright," I said to the empty room. "Where do we start?"

The estate agent had given me a list of practical tasks, timelines, a polite paragraph about how quickly the market was moving down here now and how lucky I was. Lucky. As if inheritance is winning. The house needed to be sold. The contents needed to be sorted: keep, donate, toss. Paperwork, council rates, water bills. People spoke to me as if I were a capable adult, and maybe I was, in the way a person can be capable at work while their private life remains a half-packed suitcase.

I took my laptop bag off my shoulder and set it on the table. I pulled out the notebook I had brought for lists, and a pen, and I wrote at the top of the first page:

CLEARING

Underneath it, I wrote:

1. **Papers**
2. **Kitchen**
3. **Bedroom**
4. **Books**
5. **Shed**
6. ...

The ellipsis sat there like an open mouth.

I began with the most dangerous category: papers. Nan had kept everything. Receipts from the eighties. Old calendars with appointments for people who were dead now. Letters, so many letters, in envelopes softened by handling. She never had an email. She had not trusted anything you could not fold.

In the first drawer of the sideboard, I found postcards: sunsets and koalas and the Opera House, messages written in Nan's looping hand. Most were addressed to me, sent when I was away at uni. I had kept some. I had not realised there were more.

Maeve, one read. **The bay is the colour of a teaspoon today. Come home when you can. The kettle is on. Love, Nan.**

I put the postcards in a pile called *keep*.

In the second drawer, under a stack of old bank statements, I found a thin notebook with a blue cover. It was the kind you buy at a newsagent. The pages were filled with Nan's handwriting, but this was not recipes or lists. It was a record: dates, times, small observations.

At the top of one page she had written:

TIDES / THINGS THAT RETURN

I smiled despite myself. Typical Nan. Making poetry out of the ordinary.

Then I read.

> **12 Jan — Mae cried in sleep again. Said "Mum" like it was a question. Gave her warm milk. Sang.**
>
> **21 Jan — Mae asked why her mother doesn't ring. Told her: some people are on a long walk.**
>
> **5 Feb — R. came by. Left an envelope. Didn't come in.**
>
> R.

My mother's name was Rowan.

I felt the jar of seawater tip.

I turned pages carefully, as if the paper could bruise.

There were dozens of entries like that: small, precise. Notes about me. Notes about my father. Notes about the weather, the way the wind changed, what the neighbours said in the supermarket. But woven through them, like a darker thread, were entries about Rowan.

14 Mar — Rowan called. Said she is in Geelong. Said she is sorry. Asked after Mae. I said Mae is growing. Rowan cried.

19 Apr — Rowan sent money. Left no return address.

2 Jun — Saw Rowan at the end of the street. She watched the house for a long time. Didn't knock.

My throat tightened in a way that made swallowing painful.

I had spent years telling myself that I did not care. I had trained the thought into muscle: Rowan left; it is done; move on. But here was proof that she had not vanished into thin air. She had hovered. She had watched. She had sent money. She had cried, at least once, according to Nan, who did not embellish.

I flipped further.

7 Aug — Rowan asked to meet. Said she has something to give. Told her: if you want to see Maeve, you do it properly. No shadows. She agreed. Friday at the paperbark. 4pm.

The paperbark.

There was a tree down near the beach, a twisted paperbark that peeled like old wallpaper. Nan and I used to sit under it with chips and fizzy drink and watch the boats.

Friday at 4pm.

There was no year on the entry. Just the date. 7 Aug.

My pulse began to pick up.

I searched for what came next.

11 Aug — Rowan didn't come. Mae waited. Mae pretended she didn't.

The entry was short. The ink pressed hard into the page, as if Nan's hand had been angry.

I stared at the words until they blurred.

Mae waited.

Mae pretended she didn't.

I closed the notebook and pressed my palm on the cover, grounding myself. The kitchen was suddenly too quiet, as if the house were listening along with me.

The kettle. The bay. The paperbark.

What did you want to give, Rowan?

I opened the notebook again. Turned pages quickly now, impatient, greedy. Near the back, an envelope was tucked into the fold of the cover. Brown paper, unsealed, with my name written on it.

Maeve.

Just that. No surname, no address. Like she had been certain this would find me. My hands were shaking when I slid a finger under the flap. Inside was a smaller piece of paper, folded twice. And a key. A key, old and brass, with a tag attached. On the tag, in Nan's hand:

SHED / FALSE WALL

My breath came out in a laugh that was not a laugh at all. Of course. Of course Nan had a false wall in the shed. She had been a woman of practical magic, the kind that comes from having lived through enough to know what needs hiding. I stood up so fast the chair legs scraped. The sound echoed in the small kitchen like an admonishment.

The shed was out the back, past the lemon tree Nan had planted and kept alive through sheer stubbornness. The grass was high. Spiders had built their thin, shining scaffolds between the fence posts. The air smelled warm and green.

I crossed the yard and reached for the shed door. It stuck at first. I had to put my shoulder into it, and when it opened, the smell of old tools and damp timber hit me. Dust motes rose in the slanting light.

Inside, everything was in its place: the workbench, the jars of nails and screws, the coil of rope. Nan had never thrown out a length of string in her life.

Against the far wall was a stack of flattened cardboard boxes, tied with the same careful twine as the newspapers inside the house. I moved them aside, my fingers prickling with dust and anticipation. The shed wall behind them looked ordinary enough at first: weathered timber, nails dark with age. But when I pressed, the panel gave slightly, like a loose tooth.

The key slid into the small, almost invisible lock without resistance. I turned it. The false wall swung inward with a muted sigh.

Inside was a narrow cavity, just wide enough for a person to crouch. A bulb hung from a cord, and when I pulled it, the light flickered once before settling. The space smelled different from the rest of the shed. Less damp, more intimate. Like breath held.

There was a box on the floor. A milk crate, reinforced with tape. On top of it lay a folder and a cassette tape in a clear plastic case, the kind you hardly see anymore. The label was written in block letters, not Nan's looping script.

ROWAN

For Maeve

I sat back on my heels, the concrete cold through my jeans. The world narrowed to the size of that name. My mother's handwriting was firmer than I remembered, as if she had learned how to anchor herself to the page.

The folder contained drawings. Dozens of them. Charcoal and pencil sketches of the Sorrento foreshore, the ferry at different times of day, the paperbark tree from every angle. And me. Me at various ages, sometimes recognisable, sometimes only implied: a girl hunched over a book, a teenager walking away with a bag slung too large over her shoulder. The lines were careful, almost reverent. She had been watching, yes, but she had also been seeing.

At the bottom of the folder was a letter.

Maeve,

I don't know how to do this in person. I never learned how to arrive without breaking something. Your Nan said words can wait longer than people, so I am trusting the paper.

I am sorry I left you. Not in the abstract way people apologise for weather or gravity, but in the specific way a mother should not leave her child to learn absence as a first language. I was afraid of stillness. I was afraid that if I stayed, I would disappear. I didn't understand that leaving does the same thing, just slower.

I wanted to give you something I could finish. Something that didn't require you to forgive me or understand me. Just proof that I was here, even when I wasn't.

Nan told me if I wanted to see you, I had to do it properly. I tried. I failed. I am sorry for that too.

If you are reading this, it means she trusted you with the truth. That is the highest compliment she knew how to give.

You don't owe me anything. Not a meeting, not a thought, not a feeling. I hope you have a life that fits you.

Love, Rowan

My eyes burned, but the tears came slowly, as if they were deciding whether to commit. I folded the letter back into the folder and reached for the cassette tape. There was an old tape player on a shelf, half-buried under a tarp. Nan had kept it for the radio cricket, back when she listened. I wiped the dust from its buttons and pressed play.

For a moment there was only hiss. Then a breath. Then my mother's voice, older than I remembered, steadier.

"Hello, Maeve," she said, softly. "If you're listening to this, I've done what I always do. I've left without finishing the sentence. So, this is me trying again."

She spoke about ordinary things. The way the light hit the bay in winter. How Nan made toast too dark but buttered it generously. She spoke about me, but not in the way I feared. No claims, no demands. Just observations. Pride held at a distance, like something fragile.

“I used to think staying was the same as being trapped,” she said. “I know now that staying is a skill. One I didn’t have then. I hope you do.”

The tape clicked off with a final whirr. The shed returned to its quiet.

I sat there for a long time. When I stood, my legs trembled, but I was steady. That felt like something.

Over the next few days, I cleared the house properly. I sorted the paper, kept what mattered, let go of what did not. I found more of Nan in the margins of books, in the backs of cupboards, in the way she had folded tea towels so their edges aligned. I found myself talking to her as I worked, updating her on my progress, as if she were simply in the next room.

On my last afternoon, before locking up for the real estate photos, I walked down to the beach. The paperbark tree was still there, bark curling away from itself in pale strips. I sat beneath it and took one of Nan’s stones from my pocket. I had started carrying it without thinking.

The bay was calm. The ferry moved steadily across the water, belonging to neither side for long.

I did not wait for anyone. I did not pretend not to.

When I stood to leave, I placed the stone at the base of the tree, adding it to a small, accidental collection left by others who had needed to mark something wordless. Then I walked back up the path, the house visible through the trees, solid and ordinary and full of paper.

Some jars you open. Some you set down gently, knowing the water inside will always remember the sea.