

Karen Phillips

The Gift

“Hi, Mum. Dad’s getting married.” Elly runs through the back door, swings herself up onto the bench¹.

“Who brought you home?” I ask, buying time while I absorb this piece of news that Ron didn’t think to mention when I spoke to him a couple of weeks ago.

5 “Amelia. Dad’s still milking. What’ll you give them for a present?”

“I don’t know. When’s the wedding?”

“Soon, I think.”

“How many times have I asked you not to sit on the bench?”

Elly slides down, turns her bubble gum over in her mouth. “So, what will you give them?”

10 “I need to think about it.” What’s the etiquette regarding this? Does the ex-wife buy a present for the next wife?

“Amelia’s painted the back-door pink. It’s her favourite colour.”

“Pink? What did Dad say about that?”

“He likes it. Better than boring old brown.”

15 I remember the mud-tide² that crept up the door as everyone kicked their gumboots off so that they collapsed at odd angles on the old wooden floorboards like wounded bodies on a battlefield.

“Amelia’s got this rack where we all put our boots.”

“Even Dad?”

20 “Of course. Her gumboots are pink with black spots.”

“Pink’s a nice, cheerful colour,” I say in the non-judgemental voice recommended by experts when your child talks about the new woman in your ex-husband’s life.

“Dad and Amelia are going to Bali for their honeymoon.”

“Bali?” [...]

25 She lifts the lid off the pot on the stove. “What’s this? It looks disgusting.”

“Soup.”

“Amelia’s cooking salmon for Dad tonight.”

“You should have stayed there for dinner then.”

Elly slams the lid back onto the pot. “Why are you so grumpy? I don’t even like salmon.”

30 Elly told me that Ron met Amelia at the health food shop where his doctor sent him to buy something for the cracks on his hands – testimony³ to our cold, wet winters. Shortly afterwards, Elly reported that Amelia was growing flowers in my old vegetable garden. “All colours, Mum. You’d like them. She makes different creams with them.”

35 The farm’s a hard taskmaster⁴ for someone on their own, but I didn’t expect Ron to find my replacement quite so quickly, and somehow I thought he would choose a stronger, less tired version of me. Instead, he’s chosen Amelia of the pink back door and expensive salmon dinners. Amelia who never goes near the milking shed, says Elly. No one warns you that divorce turns you into a spy. Quizzing the kids about the time they spent on the farm with their father was a no-no according to the “surviving divorce” books I was reading back then, but I mentally

¹ (her) køkkenbord

² rand af mudder

³ bevis

⁴ (her) slavepisker

40 pounced on⁵ every fact they volunteered, storing it away for future use as a crocodile stores
drowned prey under a muddy bank for a future meal. Soon after she moved under the covers of
my old bed, I bumped into Amelia with Ron at the supermarket. I could see that Ron was
uncomfortable with these two parts of his life almost colliding between the cereals and the
jams. I don't know what I expected her to look like. I knew from Elly that Amelia was younger
45 than I am, but I didn't expect the roundness, the bright scarf poured down her back or the
scarlet boots. There was no resemblance to me at all. After a few muttered words about the
road repairs in the main street, Ron dragged her away. I stood by myself in the aisle, consumed
not with animosity⁶ towards her but curiosity about Ron and me. How can two people live
together, create two beautiful children, but never really know one another? He's probably
50 saying the same words to her that he did to me – words like love and forever. I'm not sure that I
believe them anymore.

We met at a party. Ron had come up to town for some forgotten reason, so tagged along with a
cousin. The sense that he had of his own direction pulled me from my smorgasbord⁷ of
university subjects like iron filings⁸ to a magnet. His parents helped us onto a dairy farm close to
55 them. Even I, a city girl through and through, could appreciate that it was a beautiful piece of
land resting in a cradle of bush-clad⁹ hills. We worked hard. Another man would have been
content, but no matter how good the season was, Ron's dreams were always bigger than our
income. The farm was a hole that could never be filled.

60 "We'll lease a run-off¹⁰ for some extra dry stock¹¹ next year," Ron said one evening after a
day spent separating young calves from their mothers. [...]

"I don't want a bigger farm. I want us to sell this one and move to town."

"What would I do in town?" Ron asked.

"Get a regular job with regular pay. I hate how we're always in debt."

"It's the only way to grow."

65 "And I'm tired of working in the shed¹²."

Ron walked out of the kitchen, slammed the door behind him.

"I'll get a job and my wages can pay for a worker," I yelled at his departing back. I didn't see
him again until I went to the milking shed next morning.

70 "Can I come with you when the worker gets here?" Elly quietly sidled¹³ up to me in the
kitchen when I ducked back from the shed to check that the kids were getting ready for school.
She slipped her hand into mine and I knew that she had overheard us the night before. There
was almost nothing on the farm that Ron and I between us couldn't repair, but neither of us
knew how to mend the growing holes in our relationship. Our arguments were as corrosive¹⁴ as
rust, silently eating away at both of us, but now dark bubbles had broken through the skin of our
75 days.

⁵ *pounced on*: kastede mig over

⁶ fjendtlighed

⁷ (her) utallige valgmuligheder

⁸ *iron filings*: jernspåner

⁹ *cradle of bush-clad*: dal mellem skovklædte

¹⁰ (her) græsningsareal

¹¹ *dry stock*: ungvæg

¹² (her) malkehus

¹³ sneg sig

¹⁴ ætsende

We dismantled¹⁵ our marriage as flood waters slid towards the road during my second winter as receptionist at our local vet clinic. It's a busy practice – each day brings different animals and their owners and salespeople. [...] Hours pass quickly, leaving no time for regrets and *what ifs* to enter my mind. With just Ron and me alone on the farm day after long day, I'd learned that
80 marriage offers no guarantee against loneliness. When the flood waters drowned the road, a colleague offered me and the kids the flat under her house. By the time the water had receded, I knew that I would not go back to the farm.

An unexpected calm fell after I'd made the decision not to return to the farm, as if we were
85 fighters too exhausted to continue the war. When the noise died away we could hear each other's offers, not of reconciliation – we'd moved too far into hostile territory for that – but of compromise. There was no third party¹⁶ involved; the farm, although a silent tyrant, was exempt¹⁷ from all blame. Sometimes it felt as if we were actors and the script could change at any moment. It was hard to believe that what had begun in the fragrant¹⁸ warmth of summer in front of our old home was ending in an impersonal room and that I was the one ending it.

90 In the lawyer's office, I often wanted to reach over to Ron and touch his hand. I wanted him to look at me with his crooked smile, raise an eyebrow and say, "Forget it. We can sort something out." In those moments I knew that I loved him more than I had for a long time. One evening he came around to the flat. I cooked dinner and we sat down to eat as a family, which we never did
95 at the farm. Ron rarely finished before seven. After dinner, Ben and Elly went off to do their homework. Ron surfed through TV channels while I made us coffee. The kids kept finding reasons to come back into the lounge. I think they couldn't quite believe the tableau¹⁹ in front of them. I wanted to hold the moment, to say, "Can we talk?" But when he didn't find anything worth watching, Ron looked at the time then said, "Early bird catches the cows²⁰. I'm off." I watched his coffee grow cold.

100 Guilt and relief combined to ensure that the divorce settlement was not in my favour. At times I hated Ron, but I also hated myself for what I had done. I had failed in the most important job – to make a happy home for my family. Ron was surly and the kids were miserable and it was my fault. Now months go by without Ron and me speaking, but I rang him two weeks ago to share my concern about Ben's plan to go mountain climbing over the summer holidays with what I
105 argued was inadequate equipment.

"He'll be fine," Ron said.

"I want you to talk to him about it."

"He knows my number," replied the man who would stay out on the farm all night with a sick
110 cow in the days when I lived with him. I slammed the phone down but a few days later Ron rang back. Things were sorted with Ben. I was surprised that I'd forgotten how Ron shoves problems into some compartment in his brain until he's ready to think about them. I wanted to know exactly what equipment Ben was taking but I could hear Amelia saying something in the background. For the first time I didn't feel that she was an intruder in the house that I still owned.

¹⁵ afviklede

¹⁶ *third party*: tredjepart

¹⁷ fritaget

¹⁸ duftende

¹⁹ (her) fantasibillede

²⁰ *Early bird catches the cows*: (her) Den, der står tidligt op, får mest ud af dagen

115 After our soup, Elly goes to her room to face her unopened homework. I ring Ben.
"Did you know that Dad was getting married?" I ask.
"Yep."
"Why didn't you tell me?"
"I thought you knew."
120 "How do you feel about it?"
"She's okay. A bit useless on the farm, but it'll be nice for Dad."
A door slams in the background. Ben muffles²¹ the phone, blocks me out then comes back on.
"Hey, Mum. We're just leaving. I'll ring you tomorrow night."
I could choke on the number of words I've read about supporting children through their
125 parents' divorce, but now, even in my worst moments when loneliness creeps in with the dark, I
know that the kids are okay. Their scars are as faded as they ever will be.

Amelia's interest in flowers reminds me of a painting hanging in our local art gallery. At a glance,
it's simply an explosion of colour. Pinks and reds and yellows meld²² into shining dark blues and
greens. My first impression was of a riot²³ of blossom somewhere in the tropics, but from
130 different angles or in a different light it could be a flotilla of nudibranchs²⁴ in a southern ocean,
or the deserts and mountains of the world as seen from a space shuttle. It's untitled so that
viewers are left to interpret the shadows and shining ridges²⁵ of colour for themselves. When I
was at the farm I wanted to buy a piece of art to lighten the south-facing corner between the
front door and our bedroom, but there were always things that we needed more – fencing wire,
135 fertiliser, a new pump. The corner remained empty.

Ron and I were not good for each other but without him there would be no Ben and Elly. I
can't begin to imagine a life without them. Maybe if I'd hung in there we'd have reached a stage
in life where we would go grocery shopping together or talk about holidays in Bali or perhaps
Amelia has something that I lack [...]. I'll never know. [...] After school tomorrow I'll take Elly to
140 look at it; although I think Amelia will like it, I no longer presume to know Ron's favourite
colours. I'm not sure that I ever did.

(2017)

²¹ dæmper

²² blandes sammen

²³ væld

²⁴ *flotilla of nudibranchs*: flåde af farvestrålende nøgensnegle

²⁵ forhøjninger