

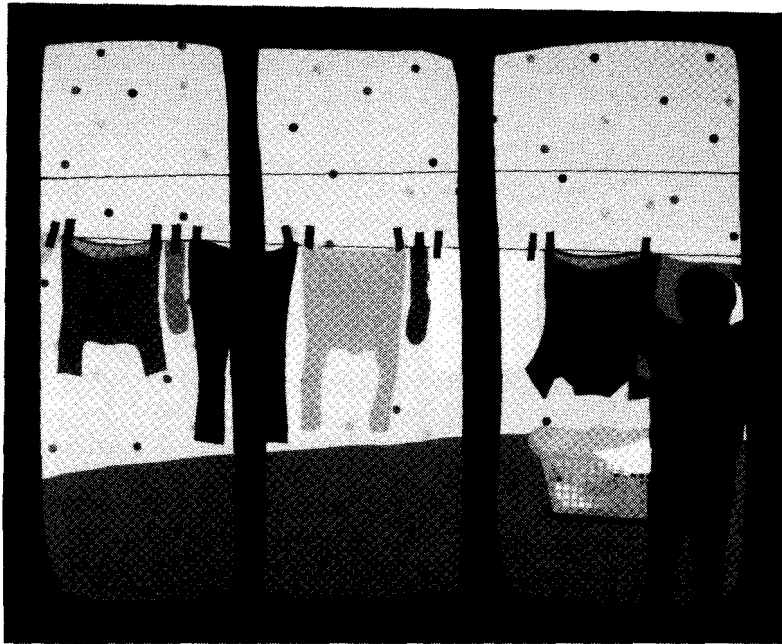
The Green Library

by Janice Kulyk Keefer

Cetexte, extrait d'un roman sur lequel l'auteure travaille, raconte l'histoire d'une femme qui visite sa mère sénile dans un foyer pour personnes âgées. Son désir de retrouver la mère qu'elle a jadis connue la plonge dans ses souvenirs d'enfance lui rappelant l'excentricité de sa mère.

Eva comes to the Home, as usual, with her arms full of flowers: daisies, today and freesia, because she thinks that even her mother can't shut out the stamp of their honey and apricot scent. Holly is in a silk kimono patterned with herons, the one Ellen brought back from a business trip to Japan, and which she'd meant Eva to have. But as Eva explained, you can't do anything in a kimono. The arms get in your way, and the front opens up whenever you take a step. It would be far more suitable for Holly.

Eva's taken the precaution of locking the door, though all the staff have skeleton keys. She would just feel better having a bit of warning, if someone's going to sweep in with a tea tray and discover a grown woman talking to herself, since no one here believes for a moment that Holly hears anything that's said to her. Especially by her daughter, who tries so hard, each time, to make a connection, even if it's only by lifting one of her mother's hands to her cheek and pressing it against the warmth of her face. As if Holly's hands are written over in invisible ink, bearing a message that only love, the stubbornest love, can make visible.



Shlomit Segal, Sunday Afternoon II, Collage, 1993

Hello, mother. Have you any idea who I am, today? Sometimes I think it's a game you're playing with us, an enormous, intricate game with a thousand different moves that only you're familiar with. You pretend not to know what you're doing: it's the way you used to get through Hearts and Canasta and all games of strategy, as opposed to luck. Pretending that you were flummoxed, that you hadn't an anxiety in your opponents, who couldn't count any longer on the laws of probability.

Yoo-hoo, mother. Are you there? Remember our neighbour on the Kingsway, when I was small? She was English: she used to call out "Coo-eee" to her children, to round them up in the playground. The other mothers thought she was pre-tentious, playing on her war-bride status, but it enchanted you. Yoo-hoo. Coo-eee. Are you here mother? Or are you back there, on your island, some time before you even knew I was going to be born.

Wherever you are, even you don't know.

I don't think you know you're lost. That's why you don't need us anymore—whatever you remember of your baby son, and Garth; and what you have of me. And Ben, who's well and happy, if you want to know. I've put that photograph of you holding him, newborn, in a gold frame—gold because it's so much warmer than silver and because gold never tarnishes, never changes. The day I took that photograph is the one time I remember you ever holding him, looking into his face. Loving him. You were already ill, then, ill with whatever it is you're possessed by, now. Whether you chose it, or it you,

doesn't matter. Any more than the doctors with their careful explanations that tell me nothing, their best-case worst-case scenarios. You may live to be a hundred, mother: your heart is sound, your blood unclogged, and the mole the doctor removed from your forehead months ago turned out to be benign. You can't even see the scar, with your hair the way I've asked them to arrange it.

Your hair was what I always loved playing with. Not your jewels in the red leather box from Florence, or your shawls and scarves and silk dresses, but your hair: brushing it for you, and pinning it up; braiding it, winding it round and around your head. No one else's mother had such long, rich hair, wound round from the nape of your neck to the crown of your head, and down to the nape again, like a halo you were afraid would escape if you didn't tug it tight around you. It wasn't fashionable. All the other women had short, permed hair, then. I've seen the

styles in old magazines: perky, zesty, easy-care: none of which you were, or ever cared to be. It was the weight, and softness and the colour of your hair I loved. That colour no one wants anymore—ash blonde, though it would get streaked with gold in summer. Warm and soft as ashes, after a fire's burned out. You were so beautiful, you looked like someone who'd spent their whole life in the mountains, your skin the colour of brown sugar, and your eyes that frightening blue, so blue it's almost blind. I have your eyes, at least, mother, though we've never seen anything the same, have we? Your eyes and your hair, though I've cropped mine shorter than Ben's. I couldn't bear the weight of it, it would have been like carrying you on my back if I'd let my hair grow long.

If it means anything to you at all, mother, I haven't let them perm your hair, make you look like every other old lady. It's had to be cut—there's no one here with the time to brush or braid your hair any more. You wear it loose, and just below your shoulders. It makes you look strange, foreign: not from some different country, but from some place where time has got confused, and stretched out of shape. You wear your hair the way a young girl would. And your hair is white; your hair is thick, loose, and white as the whites of your eyes that are always staring at something no one else can see.

You never sat staring at your hands at home, or if you did, I never saw you. You were always in motion, flowing—even when you sat at your writing desk, or read your books. When you read you would swing your foot up and down or from side to side, not jerkily, but as if you were dancing to some music playing only for you. But what I remember best was how I would look back at the house on my way to school, and see you flinging open the windows, one after the other, the whole house through. You loved that huge house on the Kingsway: pseudo-Tudor, you used to call it, and far, far too large for the three of us, but you adored the darkness, the richness of the dark in that house. Even the windows were mullioned and diamond-paned, so that every view was framed and broken into separate pieces. Yes, I remember you best on summer mornings, pushing open the windows, your hair loose, your feet bare under a silk

kimono the colour of moss. Singing out the windows, so the whole neighbourhood could hear.

Could have heard, if the houses had been closer together. But it was a wealthy neighbourhood: there was a ravine at the back, and miles of lawn and only a screen of pines at the front for an audience. Your voice wasn't high or clear or lilting. And you'd never sing the kind of songs women leaning out of casement windows ought to sing, never "Early one morning" and "I'm off with the raggle taggle gypsies, O," but "Blue Moon," and "My baby likes Bacon" and others I've never heard anywhere since. And I wanted, every morning setting out to school, going down the endless driveway, how I wanted to grow up to be like you, to be you, belting a song out a window on a summer morning, your hair in your eyes, your body hugged by a blur of green silk, without a care or regret in the world.

But it wasn't quite like that, was it? Were you acting for me, putting on your daily performance? Or had you made yourself forget, forced yourself with such violence that something inside you had already started to collapse, to burst, the way your eardrums burst when you shift altitudes too sharply in a plane? And now you've lost your memory so completely that I have to make it up for you, bring words and images in armfuls, like summer flowers. How can you lose something like memory—it's like losing a house, instead of your way—losing something so vast and intricate that you're drawn up at the very edge, with nowhere to go but down into the place that used to be your mind. It makes me think of photographs I've seen of bombed-out cities, where the houses have been cracked open by the force of the explosion. It's like looking at a doll's house, with half the building sliced away and the other exposed. And you can tell that the people sitting at table, in chairs pushed back against what used to be a wall, but is now thin air, are just registering the fact that if they shift in those chairs, if they so much as crumple up their napkins, or even gently put down their forks, they'll tumble into the crater below.

How can I get you to fall, mother? I'm trying to make you remember yourself through my eyes. It was a rule with you, almost the only rule, that the house should

be always full of flowers. In winter from the most inventive, and thus expensive florists; in summer with wildflowers you yanked up in handfuls from the ravine. Crystal and porcelain vases and jam jars, filled with dames' rocket or devil's paintbrush or monkeyflower. And the other thing I remember is how hopeless you were at anything domestic: sewing, cooking, even pushing a dust cloth across a table. I learned to cook at the age most kids are learning to ride a bike, because it was clear we were going to starve, otherwise. No cook would ever stay with us, because there were no mealtimes to be observed in our house. We never sat down to eat as a family. You would wander through the house with a book in your hands, chewing on a piece of stale bread you'd fished out of the pantry, or a withered apple. Garth was away most of the time, and when he was at home, he'd take us out every night, so that I knew the restaurants of Toronto—at a time when you could count the good restaurants on the fingers of one hand—better than I knew my times tables. When he was up north I'd set the dining table for the two of us and end up eating on my own, with a book for company. I don't mean to sound like the little matchgirl here—I knew from the kids at school about the torture of having liver forced into you, to build up your blood. Or having to sit without slouching, without so much as your wrists touching the edge of the table. Whereas I had perfect freedom—though I discovered there's a hitch, even with freedom; that you have to pay for it with something. I paid by not having you with me; never having enough of you. Not then, and not now. I remember once reading a biography of some well-born Englishwoman who said she'd adored her mother—I knew exactly what she meant. To worship, to love not like a child, carelessly, selfishly, but like a lover: dazzled and unrequited, never being able to take anything for granted, to be sure it would come your way again: a kiss, a smile, five minutes of undivided attention.

Excerpted from the author's novel-in-progress, tentatively titled The Green Library. Janice Kulyk Keefer teaches at the University of Guelph. Her last novel, Rest Harrow, was published by Harper Collins in 1992.