

THE SIZE OF THE WORLD

Fiction by Lin Gibson

Confess everything but reveal nothing. That's been my motto for as long as I can remember. It's not what I was taught of course nor what I've professed to believe all these years but I see now that it's how I've lived. All those interviews, speeches, pontifications. All those late night tête-à-têtes in the hushed tones of the confessional. What did I really say after all? Perhaps not so very much. Less than you might think.

That's how it's been for as long as either of us can remember but things change, times change. Surely there comes a point when there is no longer any fear of speaking openly of long kept secrets, of how one came to acquire a certain knowledge...a certain perspective. Perhaps I've reached that time. What harm can there be after all in such innocent recollections, such benign remembrances? What is there to fear? It all happened so long ago after all. And one might say that I was only an observer. Not even an observer really. Nothing more than an eavesdropper if the truth be told. And yet even now, even with you, I admit I feel some hesitation. As if I might go too far...go to a place from which it would be impossible for either of us to ever return. Somehow jeopardize us both in ways I don't know how to name. Though we've never spoken of it openly I'm sure you must be aware of it too.

Perhaps it's nothing more than a fear of disappointing you. Perhaps there's nothing more to it than that. I suspect you want to hear more than there is to tell. You're still so young you think there has to be passion, high drama, intrigue. You still think that's what life is all about. Who knows? Maybe you're right. If I were to tell you how it really was, how commonplace, how ordinary really, it's possible you wouldn't understand what it all meant to me at the time. What it means to me still. You might find yourself wondering how we got to the dénouement without experiencing the thrill of the climax but that would be a mistake. The dénouement after all is what is left when everything else has had its' day. There are those who worship resolution you know.

Perhaps you would even be a little bored by it all. And why not? It was all such a long time ago and it happened after all to me not to you. If I were to tell you everything, before too long your gaze, so intent now, so focused, might begin to shift ever so slightly...almost imperceptibly. Gradually you would become aware that your hands are no longer resting peacefully in your lap but have taken on the restless gestures of one who is struggling to appear relaxed, to appear interested. Out of deference for my age, my reputation (out of love?) you would try not to fidget in that too small chair you've chosen for yourself tonight. It's still quite early. Perhaps you'd like to sit somewhere else?

Let me explain how the house and courtyard and the gardens, which were part of a public park, were arranged. In keeping with

the local tradition the main room of the house, the salon, if you can bear such an old-fashioned word, stretched across the back of the house. It was a large and simply furnished room. Rather elegant. A tile floor. Cool white walls. Windows always open to the sea below. On the right were several doors leading to the interior passageways of the house. On the left a set of French doors led to the courtyard. The house and courtyard walls, as you know, were made of stone. That wonderful tinted stone so common to that region. At sunset it took on the most lovely cast. Some days the glow lasted only a few minutes but for those few minutes it was heaven to be in that courtyard — to be bathed in that soft pink light. One never sees that kind of light here. I miss it terribly. Even after all these years.

Beyond the courtyard was the public garden which one entered through a rather elaborately wrought gate almost completely hidden by the tall bougainvillea bushes. That gate led to a life I had previously only imagined. A life which I knew must exist somewhere but which, until that summer, I had not yet found. I was allowed to enter this garden whenever I wished but most of the time I preferred to remain within the courtyard walls.

One could see very little without coming right to the garden gate, without revealing one's self, but what one could *hear* from the courtyard — that was something else entirely. If one were seated on the little bench near the gate, as I so often was, one could witness a great deal of life as it was lived on the other side of the wall. That's how I thought of it — as life beyond the wall. Of course at that time I had no idea of the size of the world, even in the physical sense, but I knew that wherever the world *ended* it *began* just beyond that wall.

You may be surprised to learn how young I was. But it's true. I was very young. Not much older than the child who lies sleeping in the next room. Perhaps eight or nine at most. It's possible to know a great deal at that age. I think it's the age at which a child begins to understand the choices to be made, begins to understand that there *are* choices to be made, and begins to decide for herself how much of the world to let in and how much to keep out. Think of yourself at that age. Think of the child. The one who is asleep. Do you see what I mean?

I was also very small for my age of course. It helped. People thought that I was only six or seven years old. That I wouldn't understand. No one paid any attention to me. No one ever saw me. As you know, children, especially little girls, can make themselves almost invisible when they want to. And if one of the adults happened to be watching from the window or from a doorway what was there to see? Nothing really. Nothing but a small child sitting on a bench engrossed in a book balanced on her drawn-up knees, or perhaps lying on her back gazing up into a star-filled sky and singing softly to herself. What harm was there in that? The ability to eavesdrop while talking or singing by the

way is a very valuable skill to have. I've made use of it often. In fact I've often wondered if writers are born with this talent. God knows most of us are good at very little else. At any rate I had no need to be surreptitious. Even walking alongside the stone walls that formed the parameters of the courtyard I was so small that not even the top of my head could be seen from the other side, the garden side, and my tiny feet never made a sound on that emerald carpet of grass. Tailor-made for the child who wished to hear but not be seen. It was perfect.

That little stone bench was a godsend. I've often wondered about it. It was bigger than it needed to be for a child and yet it always seemed a little too small for adults. Perhaps that was the point. Perhaps whoever had placed it there had done so for reasons of convention but had wanted to discourage people, I mean adults of course, from staying too long. I don't know if that was the intent but it was certainly the effect. Other than the occasional visitor (who never stayed long) I can't recall an adult ever sitting there. You're not the first by the way to point out that most of my chairs are too small for the average adult. I don't care. I've never been much interested in average adults.

From my perch on that little bench it was possible to hear things which seemed to me remarkable and which I feared I might never hear again. Things that would forever alter the course of my life. It happens you know. Such moments exist. I understood that even then. At that age. Most of what I heard of course would appear very mundane, perhaps even banal, were we to hear it now, as adults I mean, but the effect on a child — I can't begin to explain it. It was extraordinary really. To hear such thoughts, such ideas, expressed openly! It was something I had never experienced. Something I had only imagined was possible.

Looking back on it now I sometimes wonder that I wasn't disturbed or frightened by much of what I heard. It was after all a very difficult time. And yet I don't remember feeling that way at all. On the contrary. I think I was actually very happy. Perhaps as happy as I've ever been since. It was through those floating, almost disembodied voices, those tiny fragments of conversation which made their way to me over that wall like crystal raindrops, that I began to understand the decisions which would one day be mine to make. I began to understand that life was a great deal larger, that the *world* was a greater deal larger, than I had previously been led to believe. There was something rather comforting in that. It gave me hope somehow.

I began to feel that I was a part of what was unfolding not ten feet from where I sat on my little bench, that I had a role to play in the events that were to follow. I began to feel that I was one of *them*, one of the 'garden people' as I called them, as if at any moment one of them might turn to me and say, "And you, what do you think should be done?" When we met in the street, at the market place, across the dinner table, I wondered if they knew

that I was no longer the child they thought I was. If they knew that I had somehow been transformed. I searched their eyes, their gestures, their words, looking for a sign that I was no longer invisible to them, or at least that I would not always be so. Of course none of them ever acknowledged me, ever revealed themselves to me. At least not openly. Yet I suspect that there were some who knew. Looking back on it now, after all these years, it still seems extraordinary to me and yet there's so little to tell really.

Maybe it was nothing more than the sultry magic of those warm summer nights. Perhaps that's all it ever was. Certainly they were the kind of nights which cling to the senses, live on in the memory, long after everything else has vanished. The velvet coolness of that stone bench on the back of my legs...the yellow light spilling out of the windows...the smell of the bougainvillea and the hibiscus. Do you remember that smell? The sound of the sea? The light? If so I think you can understand what I'm trying to say, what I'm trying to tell you.

Surely I don't need to spell it out for you. Not after all these years. Not after so many words, so many silences, have passed between us. There are some things which can't ever be explained. There are some things best left alone, things one simply can never uncover, can never reveal even to the best of friends. A certain knowledge...a certain perspective....

All these years I've carried those voices, those words, around with me like some rare, priceless treasure too precious to reveal. A tapestried carpet-bag full of memories that could be opened or closed at will. My will. Always *my will*. That's how I've lived all these years. I see that now. Perhaps you think I'm only taking advantage of the latitude afforded the memories of the very young and the very old. Perhaps you're right. It hardly matters whether it happened the way I remember it or not, but who's going to prove me wrong? You? You weren't even born at the time. Anyway who cares what I did or did not hear in a far-away garden more than seventy years ago? There's so much that I've chosen not to reveal, not to share with anyone. Not even you. And perhaps mine is the greater loss for all of that. What on earth could I have been thinking of all these years?

Perhaps all that really matters is that it made a difference. A very big difference. As to whether or not *I* made a difference...well I'll leave that for others to decide after I'm gone. I suppose they will anyway. You have my permission to lead the debate when the time comes.

The child is awake now. I can feel her listening just on the other side of that closed door. I think she's smiling. She is able to imagine a great deal, don't you think? Perhaps, like us, she's rather happy tonight.