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Gain and Loss

by Sue Hitchcock

Eleanor, known as Ellie, or Nelly was a greedy child. She wanted everything and was a little plump. As she reached her teens, she realised there was more than sweeties and crisps, dolls and frilly frocks. Now she wanted to be the most popular, but the admiration of her friends conflicted with being favourite with her teachers and with the approval of her parents.

She wanted her own way and only independence would do. Nelly needed her own home and her own man. It was not so easy to achieve, men having their own ideas, but at last the dreamy white wedding took place. Surely she had everything now? But no. Now she wanted a baby and in time she got what she wanted.

Change took place. Her baby's gaze held her eyes and there was nothing she could refuse, not sleep in the early hours, when her breasts gratefully spouted the milk her darling wanted, not the clean, perfumed blouses now besmirched with baby sick, like milky cheese, not the time to enjoy her husband's loving touch, before she fell asleep. It was temporary, wasn't it? The baby struggled to become like her, to walk, to talk, to explore every cupboard and play with her mother's things.

Only restricted by safety concerns, Nelly gave her everything she could and delighted in her progress. Then, just as she had experienced herself, the girl got the urge to become independent and Nelly understood. When the girl left to go to University, how could Nelly not feel proud? But there was too much time now to think.

Had her mother felt the same abandonment? Now she felt sorry that she had ignored her for so long and began to visit the old lady more often. They talked at length about their darling girl and were happy, but sometimes Nelly was sad and her mother still had something to give her. She sympathised and listened, while underneath the old lady knew a more profound truth.

“Darling, the truth is, the art of losing isn’t hard to learn. You already know it, and it makes you sad. But you would be just a child, if you wanted everything, to swallow the whole world, you would burst. Look at all this clutter I’ve collected. There are memories, but without it I still remember. You have memories, you can afford to lose the rest.”

The old lady lived long enough to see her granddaughter’s marriage, happy beginning, sad goodbye. But then Nelly felt the anguish of her mother’s death, not unexpected, but yet she remembered her mother’s words and had learned the art of losing.