

❖ Across Oka

.....ROBERT HOLMAN

CHARACTERS: EILEEN (70), TESSA (46)

SETTING: *The cobbled backyard of a small terraced house in England. A warm July afternoon, the present.*

Shortly after the demise of TESSA's father and EILEEN's husband, mother and daughter seek to find comfort in each other's grief. EILEEN saw her husband as a dreamer who resented his rigid life of husband and father.

TESSA: Mum, I think your own doctor should write a death certificate. I'm not certain I can. Don't you worry about it. I'll ring him.

EILEEN: Will you?

TESSA: Yes.

EILEEN: Don't listen ti 'im if 'e goes on about yer dad. It'll be stuff and nonsense.

TESSA: Dad came to me about his incontinence. It's very, very common. There's nothing to be ashamed of.

EILEEN: I didn't know that?

TESSA: He didn't want you worried.

EILEEN: I was worried.

TESSA: I know you were.

EILEEN: Then why didn't you tell me?

TESSA: He asked me not to.

EILEEN: Did he ring you?

TESSA: Yes. He came to the hospital. We looked at him properly.

EILEEN: I didn't know any of this, Tess.

(A slight pause)

TESSA: I asked him to tell you, but he wouldn't.

EILEEN: Why?

TESSA: I don't know, Mum.

EILEEN: He was getting his own back, wasn't he?

TESSA: That's very silly.

EILEEN: Is it?

TESSA: You must know it is.

EILEEN: I don't. (*A slight pause*) Jolly was very bitter, you know. He thought life had let him down.

TESSA: Did he?

EILEEN: He was very bitter. I'd be a fool if I didn't know that I was his life.

TESSA: I think you're twisting things, Mum.

EILEEN: Twisting what?

TESSA: Twisting your memories. (*A slight pause*) When I was seven, Jolly was working. You've nothing to feel guilty about.

EILEEN: He wanted to study, you know. He always did. We couldn't afford it. All my life that's what I've said. When you went off to university, he shone like the sun. He said: I wanted Stephen to be the doctor, but now it's our Tess. (*A slight pause*) I just worried you'd fall into bad company.

TESSA: I didn't, did I?

EILEEN: No, you've made your life very good. He was proud of you. (*A slight pause*) He could always meet you, Tess. D'you know what I mean?

TESSA: Not really, I don't.

EILEEN: In intelligence, up here. (*EILEEN taps her head*) I've wanted to say this for a long time. Not way, so much as admit. For most of my life I've been a very jealous woman.

TESSA: Mum —

EILEEN: If yer dad had been on his own — this is true, Tess — you'd have come home much more often. I've seen yer dad broken because you didn't come home.

(*TESSA looks down, and then she looks back up*)

TESSA: Why don't we wait before we say these things?

EILEEN: I want you to understand that I do know what I'm like.

TESSA: Mum —

EILEEN: Jolly used to say that you make time for the things you really want to do. You didn't come home because of me. That is the truth, isn't it?

TESSA: I've had my career. And Matty. I've wanted him to grow up responsibly and strong.

EILEEN: Yes.

TESSA: It isn't you. Now isn't the time. Not for recrimination.

EILEEN: I'm worried there never will be a time. Yer dad used to say:

our Tess has outgrown us, Eileen. I used to say: she's flown the nest, pet. (*A slight pause*) He was such a dreamer. It was me who made the ends meet. I was busy running the family. (*A slight pause*) I used to think: we'll not have a family if I let him dream — we'll be out on the streets — we'll be begging. Isn't that stupid? I'm sorry, Tess.

TESSA: It isn't stupid, Mum.

EILEEN: It is, you know. (*A slight pause*) I suppose the one thing I've learnt — is that somehow you do get by. That must be true, because we did.

TESSA: Yes.

EILEEN: I am sorry.

TESSA: You've nothing to be sorry for.

EILEEN: I have, you know.

Source: Methuen London Ltd.