

The lawn is knee high, peppered with perennial weeds.

William gets up every day at 11am and heads straight for the study. A forty-two year old boy, plump and permanently track-suited, he languishes in front of his computer wearing T-shirts that are frequently smeared with old, dried up food stains. Since his father passed away he has the study all to himself, his personal den containing haphazard towers of software paraphernalia and stale air. It has never occurred to William to live anywhere else but this spacious suburban bungalow, unlike his elder brother who swapped his life of a chain-smoking mother and dysfunctional sibling for the ozone-filled air and vibrant atmosphere of the Sierra Nevada eleven years ago.

William was born out of sorrow. His seven-year-old sister had died tragically and he was the 'replacement'. His mother, surrounded by an aureole of pain, was so fearful of losing her youngest son that he was brought up pampered and overprotected, remaining in a permanent state of childhood.

Despite being given every opportunity, William proved to be no academic, preferring instead to watch TV and play on his X box. He was a poor reader, mystified by maths, mutinous in his avoidance of any physical exertion and completely clueless about anything else. From the age of sixteen he flitted from one temporary job to another, showing no desire to do anything in particular but play WWE wrestling games on the computer. He was resigned to the banality of his life at home, suffocated by an indulgent mother who provided him with all his favourite food: chips, burgers, doughnuts and cola.

Brambles snatch at your skin when you open the garden gate.

'William, what are you going to do with your life?'

'Leave him alone, he doesn't know yet,' his mother counters defensively to his exasperated father. 'What's the hurry?'

'Well, he can't stay here forever.'

'You stay as long as you like, love.'

So he did. He furnished himself with the latest games, and he built up an online posse of like-minded geeks with whom he could while away his time online.

The plum tree disgorges its unwanted fruit like so many spent gun cartridges. Windfalls, wasp traps, rotten to the core.

When his mother had a bad fall and became immobile, William realised he would have to replace her. At the age of thirty-five he bought a wife – a Thai bride. Mya was young, pretty, and full of high hopes for a rich husband who could support her extended family back in Thailand. She would be very useful around the house, and they could take over the larger bedroom which his mother had always preserved as a shrine to her deceased daughter – a waste of space, in his opinion.

'Don't you think you should have talked to us first?' His exasperated father again.

'Leave him alone! There's plenty of room here,' his mother declared defensively.

So Mya joined the family, and learned the few words of English that would get her by.

The rotting fence panels began to fall down, eaten by weather, time and neglect. Neighbours stopped sending Christmas cards.

Less than a year later, Mya was gone. 'You no good, William.' She had saved some money from shop work and was eager to move on to bigger and better things. William came under more pressure from his father to do some work around the house. But William didn't do household chores, gardening or pressure.

'You'll be out of this house if you don't start pulling your weight,' threatened his even more exasperated father.

'Leave him alone! He can't cope,' his mother yelled defensively.

The concrete drive begins to crack and break, like his mother's heart did all those years ago.

Now his father is dead. William is the official carer for his mother who is bed-bound, sunken in despondency, wasting away with tar-filled lungs and crumbling sparrow bones. Unwashed mouldy crockery accumulates in the kitchen sink and the inside of the microwave is thickly coated with the remains of bespattered ready meals. The commode, parked permanently in the middle of the kitchen, attracts bluebottles like vultures circling above a carcass.

There is enough money left over from the carers' allowance to buy all the games William needs. His mother asks timorously for help now and again, reluctant to disturb him. He takes her requests in, sucking them like a gobstopper before spitting out his response like a petulant toddler.

'No!' he replies acidly.

William

When I was born, their overwhelming feeling was relief – that I wasn't a girl, I mean. Mum couldn't have coped with that, not after Amelie. As it was, she nearly died giving birth to me. You could say I entered the world vying for attention. But how can anyone compete with a ghost, a perfect being who left this earth too young?

I overheard the churchlike whispers used by adults as they compared me in reverential tones with Amelie: I was slow to walk and talk, I struggled with reading, I couldn't count or kick a ball; no one wanted to be friends with me. I didn't like school whereas she was always top of the class. I was no good at anything.

My mother loved my brother and me, but she had been broken by her tragedy; a figure of futility who battled on with the limbo of living while having no life. She was there but not there, unfocused glassy eyes still reflecting the hurt which permeated her, afraid to let me fly free from the cage which constrained me. I wallowed in a lake of over-indulgence while my brother became the archetypal scapegoat. If he resented this fact he buried his feelings as deep as a squirrel buries nuts before a hard winter.

Father grieved in a different way. The day they found him sitting on my sister's gravestone, empty bottles of pills scattered around him, was the start of another chapter in our lives. He endured a protracted stay in a mental institution while mother doled out the money we needed to look after the house and ourselves. This was teenager heaven. Junk food reigned.

I attended school sporadically, but my brother was ambitious. After university he married and moved abroad, whilst I enrolled on apprenticeships, one after another. There was a maze of opportunities out there but I always took the wrong turning. I sensed that, just as I didn't want them, they didn't want me. Mother didn't seem concerned. Her apathy was contagious; she didn't want anything except to maintain the umbilical link between us.

She made me feel safe.

My father was eventually 'healed'. He accused me of being greedy, lazy, manipulative. But the more he harangued me to find a job, the more I withdrew into my safe, womblike world: my mother's unconditional love and my computer games.

'I love you Mum,' I would say to her, several times a day.

As my mother deteriorated physically and my father deteriorated mentally, I tried marriage. Mya, however, soon recognised that our relationship was on an unequal footing. Caring for three of us without any monetary gain was not what she had signed up for, so she escaped as quickly as my brother had.

Now, my father has died. My support network, feeble though it was, has crumbled around me. Grief and rage encircle me like vultures. What do I do?

I hate you, Mum, I think.

'I love you, Mum,' I say.