

# liveArgyll Flash Fiction – May 2024 Challenge – “Growing” theme

## ***Winner – Helen Daniels***

### **‘Growing’**

A reflection, written by Helen Daniels

The forecast tells me it’s going to be 20 degrees and sunny. The excitement builds as I anticipate just how many loads of washing I might get through!

Once upon a time I might have messaged a friend to see if they fancied a cold glass of wine after work. Not now. Even my children sense what’s coming and go into hiding for fear of me taking the clothes off their backs!

It’s that same shift in thinking that found a recent conversation with a good friend leading to the conclusion that it’s a bit of a risk buying a new oven because, “Things just aren’t made to last like they used to.”

Stop the bus! When did I become so middle-aged?

It may have been the moment I chose big, comfy knickers over the pretty, laced ones. Or the day I rose from sitting on the floor grumbling, “Ooft, my knees!” Or possibly the evening my son turned up the radio to listen to a ‘brilliant’ song only for me to exclaim to my husband, “This is from *our* teenage years! My goodness, it takes me right back to when we were young.”

The thing is, I think we are still young, it’s just that life is full of conflicting seasons. Growing up we long for the freedom of adulthood. We navigate the challenges of adulthood, wishing for the freedom of youth. We long for a ‘child-free’ evening to watch TV in peace, then years later find ourselves worrying about rattling about in an empty house once they’ve flown the nest.

Recently I came across the term, ‘sandwich generation.’ A term used to describe people in the season of life when they find themselves looking after both their young family and elderly parents. If I’m honest, having just navigated that season it felt a little more like a toastie than a sandwich. The pressure of being squeezed in all directions and being a little burnt around the edges!

But it was also a privilege caring for my Dad. He’d lived a life full of adventure, unafraid to take on jobs around the world or substantial renovation projects. He made a point of talking to people wherever he went and met fascinating people with incredible stories to tell. In our final months together, as he endured the cancer which we knew

was bringing his life on earth to an end, I had the joy of hearing his memories and came to appreciate the value of a life well lived.

I also found myself appreciating just how young I still am. That age doesn't have to define me. I have a choice to focus on the hurdle or the hope. So I am going to acknowledge the struggles, but embrace the hope, intentionally finding a nugget of contentment in each day, season and circumstance. I'm also going to actively seek out more adventures and be less afraid of taking risks. However, I will still be unashamedly wearing my big, comfy knickers!

## ***And some of the other fantastic entries –***

### **'Parting Gift'**

by Jackie Fallows

4.00am. Helen paced the living room, trying to soothe her tiny daughter. She had fed and changed her, but the baby would not settle. She was red in the face, arching her back, her seemingly disconnected feet and fists fighting any restraint, lashing out at this hostile new world. Helen knew how she felt.

It was nearly eight weeks since Rob had gone, leaving her to face the last fortnight of pregnancy and the birth without him. Somehow all the necessary arrangements had been made, but she had no clear memory of any of it, only the rage that he had left her. Perhaps that had been what got her through. It was certainly what had driven her poor mother home the day before. 'Just for a day or two, love. I need to recharge my batteries. You know you can call if you really need me.'

So here she was, totally responsible for this screaming infant in the middle of the night. This nameless, screaming infant. She and Rob had spent hours discussing what to call their child, but neither had liked the other's favourite names, and so they'd agreed to wait until the baby was born. Nothing seemed right. She'd have to decide soon, or she wouldn't be able to register the birth. She grimaced as she remembered how she had flown at her mother when she'd tentatively mentioned the subject.

She looked down at the raging child in her arms. Rose, Rosa? Well, she was red, and definitely prickly, but not very flower-like. Maybe she could try attributes, like that religious group, the Quakers was it? Not really fair to burden the child with something like Asperity, or Hostility, though. What about Storm? That would definitely fit the circumstances. 'Well, then, Storm,' she said, rocking her gently. Still the baby screamed.

Helen continued talking softly, almost crooning the name, but it was having no effect, and she was becoming increasingly worried that the child was ill. It was now nearly 4.45am. She pulled back the curtains, and looked through the patio doors to see the growing daylight. One last try, before she called the doctor. Maybe it was just heat. She decided to take her outside. The neighbours probably weren't getting much sleep anyway.

Balancing the baby carefully in her left arm, she unlocked the door, opened it, and stepped into the cool air. Tiny white flowers glowed in the dimness. She walked over to the pot of gypsophila that Rob had brought home earlier that summer, just days before the accident. 'Here,' he'd said. 'A little mist of baby's breath to welcome her.'

Helen squatted down, waved the graceful stems gently, and stroked them across the scarlet cheeks, trying to attract the baby's attention. The screaming wavered, stopped. The little body slowly relaxed, and Helen knew. 'Gypsy,' she said. 'Our little Gypsy. I promise to help you grow to be free and independent, like your Daddy would have wanted.'

## **'Growing'** by Pip Mayberry

She was about four years old with mousy hair-straggles escaping from her sun hat. She walked slowly along the blooming flower beds looking at them with great intensity, every now and again, pointing her finger to trace the shapes and movement of a flower or a trailing vine. A breeze lifted her hat gently before whispering through the garden causing the flowers to sway and the leaves to shiver. The girl lifted her arms and spread them out in a loose quivering dance, then swung her hands forward, wiggling her small fingers, as if waving to the flowers on their stalks.

An adult's voice broke the concentration of what she was doing. 'Are you dancing, Shona?'

Shona turned, and with a sigh, replied, "No.'

The voice asked, 'Are you drawing in the air?'

Shona shook her head and murmured, 'No.' She turned away and continued waving and weaving her fingers and arms through the summer air, tracing the line and contours of the flowerbed.

The voice intruded upon the hypnotic movements once more. 'What are you doing, then, Shona?'

Without looking round, Shona answered quietly, 'I'm growing.'

She returned to casting her spells on the garden, and when the next puff of wind crept between the fence slats, the garden shimmered ever so slightly. Shona laughed lightly. Within seconds she had become as tall as the fence, then as tall as the tree that leaned on the fence. When Shona was as tall as the house, she decided that she was as tall as she wanted to be today so took a long breath before shrinking down to her usual size. She giggled and giggled.

'What's so funny, Shona?' the voice said.

Shona smiled. 'Growing tickles,' she answered. 'Growing tickles a lot.'

## **'Have I grown enough Maia?'**

by Rakitha Melan

My parents passed away when I was merely two years old. It's a stark introduction, perhaps not the ideal starting point for a tale, but it set the stage for a life journey filled with lessons and revelations.

Over the years, I've come to understand that uncertainty shrouds our comprehension of life itself. Do any of us truly grasp its intricacies? In the wake of my parents' demise, I found myself in the care of a relative whom I affectionately called Aunt. She had four children of her own—two sons and two daughters—all elder than me. However, instead of feeling embraced by this new family, I was met with the cold shoulder. It's a familiar scenario, isn't it? The newcomer, often sidelined or, worse, targeted for mistreatment.

Some experiences cut too deep to confide in others. Secrets become heavy burdens carried alone. I believed then, and still do, that the world revolves around sex. But life, as I've learned, is far more nuanced than a simple equation of physical desire. It's about the intricacies of human connection—the unspoken bonds that transcend the physical.

The memory of that day lingers, a reminder of the shadows that crept into my childhood. As I settled on the sofa, seeking rest after school, Raju the younger son of my Aunt unexpected intrusion shattered the quiet. His accusatory behavior pierced my heart stirring fear and confusion within me after he raped me.

The fear I felt was palpable, overwhelming my senses and leaving me trembling. Tears welled up, a silent testament to the turmoil within. Even now, the memory remains clouded, a haze of uncertainty and discomfort.

In the aftermath, I found myself grappling with the aftermath alone. With no one to confide in, the burden of silence weighed heavy on my shoulders. The cycle repeated, leaving scars that lingered long after the incidents faded from memory.

No child should endure such experiences. It's a stark reminder of the importance of protection and support for the vulnerable. My story serves as a reminder of the resilience within us all, even in the face of adversity.

Returning to my hometown, I crossed paths with Raju, his son in tow—a mirror image of my own age when I endured Raju's torment. Yet, facing him now as a grown man, I found no trace of the anger that once consumed me. In my youth, I even dreamt of retribution, of righting the wrongs inflicted upon me. But as Raju avoided my gaze, unable to meet my eyes, I realized the profound change within me.

His son, however, bridged the gap between our past and present, extending an invitation to play. In that moment, I couldn't help but reflect on the journey I've traveled—the wounds healed, the forgiveness found. It made me wonder, have I truly grown? Amidst the echoes of the past and the promise of the future, do I stand as a testament to resilience and maturity? What do you think—have I grown enough?

## **'Growing'**

by Evelyn Smithies

Feeling groggy from another night of tossing and turning, Meg drags her feet as she shuffles from her bedroom through to the lounge and follows her well practised routine. She reaches out and grabs a fistful of fabric in each hand and with a sharp jerking movement, pulls open the heavy curtains while offering up a silent prayer that the weather forecasters were correct, and the overnight showers have moved on to pastures new. Like a switch being flicked, the morning sunlight floods into the room. Meg gazes through the rain speckled glass into her much-loved garden. In an instant, feelings of melancholy disappear, her heart is gladdened and filled with delight. In the border surrounding the lawn, after weeks of waiting in eager anticipation, the shrub which has been growing for over twenty years, has finally put on its annual display and is covered in small delicate lilac blooms. She raises her head, a smile creeps across her face and she inhales to the bottom of her lungs imagining she can smell the familiar sweet aroma.

Before the family moved into their new forever home the property had lain empty for sometime and the garden, which before her death, had been the previous owner's pride and joy, had become overgrown and neglected. When choosing their new base an ample garden with room for the kids to run around had been high on the priority list.

As with many house moves, money had been tight and there was nothing left over to re-vamp the outside space. During an afternoon of much-needed cash free maintenance while sifting through the scrub removing wizened and withered detritus, in a sea of hard dry cracked earth, a forlorn bush of no more than half a metre high, gasped as it popped its head out to sway in the breeze. Although its sparse green leaves were drooping it was a survivor and they decided to leave it where it was, give it some nourishment and wait to see if it pulled through. All these years later, in late spring, the now over two metre tall bush, dominates the garden and rewards them with a yearly riot of colour. They still have no idea of the fancy-dancy Latin name or the more pronounceable English alternative for the plant but somehow that doesn't seem to matter.

With a much lighter tread, Meg heads towards the kitchen to make her morning cuppa and reflects on how their favourite tree sized shrub is a metaphor for life. Clear the path, give a little space, pepper with nourishment and encouragement then the growing and thriving will take care of itself.

## **'Anticipation'**

by Stewart Devitt

As usual the potatoes had been planted in the middle of March; an early variety of Maris Piper. It was the first time Maurice had used raised beds, having reluctantly agreed to do so as his mobility and general health decreased. The beds had been specially made and placed at the far

corner of the garden where they were in direct line of the afternoon sun. They were big enough to take two lengthy rows and high enough to eliminate the need for excessive bending.

Having dug two trenches into this allocated area Maurice mixed in three bags of garden compost and manure to add richness to the soil. Then carefully placing the seed potatoes six inches apart, with their little eyes pointing upwards he pressed them down further into the ground. Stumbling across the invasive grasses growing over the middle of the garden he made his way towards the shed. Struggling with the key he finally managed to open the door and pulled out a rusty old rake before slowly navigating his way back to his potato patch.

Determined to complete the task, despite the pain in his back and arms he carefully began the process of earthing up the soil over where the potatoes had been planted.

Over the next few weeks Maurice kept a watchful eye on progress of his crop, making sure he checked on them daily, chatting with them as if they were small children and further building up the earth as shoots started to appear. It was a painful process at times, especially carrying a full watering can from the pipe at the side of the house down to the bottom of the garden. At times like this he did follow his doctor's orders and took the range of pills prescribed for him. As the plants began to grow stronger and develop plenty of green leaves Maurice looked forward to the time ahead when his harvesting would begin. This was the real fun and satisfying part of the whole process, seeing the outcome of his loving care and devotion. For as long as he could he resisted the temptation of digging into the ground, promising to wait until mid-July to see what treasures were to be found.

On the morning of the day when he had decided to dig up the first of the potatoes, he prepared himself a small flask of green tea, and texted his carer to call into the local patisserie and buy two strawberry and cream cakes. The exhuming deserved some form of recognition.

Opening the front door Mary picked up the envelope lying on the floor and went through to the kitchen handing it and the cream cakes to Maurice. "From the hospital, I think." Maurice opened the letter, read it slowly unable to prevent the tears as it told him that his latest X rays showed his tumours had increased in size and immediate tests were required to assess the extent of his cancer progression.