

Mothers and Other Strangers

Gina Sorell

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All her life, Elsie Robins has had mysterious dreams of South Africa, a fire, and the death of her beloved nanny. Suddenly, the dreams are worse than ever although she's thousands of miles and several decades past those early days. While she's never been able to explain "what it felt like to be incomplete, to long for something and someone you hardly knew, and yet were wise enough to know that its absence defined you," Elsie must decide if she's brave enough to face the void inside her—a void looks suspiciously like the past—in Gina Sorell's *Mothers and Other Strangers*.

Out of the blue, Elsie is notified that her mother, Rachel Robins, has died of cancer. Shocked but not surprised she's been left in the dark, Elsie returns home to Canada to wrap up her mother's affairs. As Elsie sorts through Rachel's apartment, she confronts the fact that her mother "had been telling lies her whole life, doling out pieces of the truth to different people, but never enough so they'd have the whole picture." Even so, Elsie holds out hope for some clue about who Rachel really was. When a neighbor gives Elsie her mother's last bequest—a photograph and a box containing the very clues Elsie's been looking for—it seems that her wish is granted. However, the box only offers more questions, leaving Elsie to decide whether or not she wants to seek answers.

Like many people, Elsie Robins is getting over a relationship, but it's her relationship with her mother that's failed. Sorell's haunting exploration of that failure is the saddest love story in the world, filled with all the yearning and unrequited love of a feral child trying to attach to a narcissistic parent. *Mothers and Other Strangers* gets at the raw truth of survivorship, showing that even when the past is buried, it never truly dies.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (May/June 2017)

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