

This Journey's End

The perverse commitment tightened a knot of concern in Margo Plinth's gut. "Don't think. Do."

Three apothecary jars are full of M&M peanuts. The contents of the eighty snack-sized bags before her. They added a festive contrast to the pasty, granulated ash coating the table and her. Additional remains crunched underfoot as she spooned him into the tiny sacks and attempted to hot glue them shut.

"Dammit!" For the third time, her wrist twitched. The blistering adhesive coated her fingers, instead of sealing the package. The defensive jerk of her hand flung another unsealed bag into the air. Her husband's deep laughter filled her head. "Not funny, Marty. Cooperate or I'll flush you down the toilet and be done with you."

The warning generated more laughter. Despite her frustration, she unplugged the glue gun and walked outside. A hand befitting her body—stocky yet strong and supple—brushed him from her clothes and shoulder length auburn hair. At the bathroom basin, she washed him off her face; blew him out of her nose and rinsed his grit from her mouth. Once the vacuum sucked the wayward remains off the kitchen table and floor, she assessed the problem and revised her technique over a cup of Twinings Morning Tea and a Florentine.

"Staple the bags shut. Slather the glue on the wreath, and then stick them on."

Two hours later, Margo wrote one word on a wide burlap ribbon, which became a sash. Satisfied, she smiled and hung him hung from a hook on the front door

"Questionably legal. Sacrilegious to most. Perfectly Marty."

At ten minutes to six in the morning, she sat on a dilapidated bench atop a sand dune overlooking the Indian Ocean. A brisk ocean-bound breeze deepened the chill; drove a shiver through her body. The air, redolent with decaying plant and animal matter, assaulted her nose. The wreath and canister of his leftover ashes accompanied her on their favorite resting spot.

Her restless mind churned while waiting. The end of their time together cheated her. It read like an unsatisfying short story rather than a delicious novel. Far too brief for a couple who considered themselves newlyweds. Both being healthy at sixty-two, she never considered it unreasonable for life with him to span two decades. Over the past four-and-three-quarter years,

weather permitting, they cuddled there and waited for the sun to rise. By her estimation, the story ended five thousand seven hundred forty-nine sunrises too soon.

With the horizon's altered light, Margo's eyes turned eastward. She marveled at the progressive shift of colours heralding the arrival of life's sustainer. Ink black rose upon the back of midnight blue which ascended on azure. Margo smiled as the skyline turned pink, orange then radiant yellow. A joyful tear fell as a piercing white orb, visually no bigger than a water bottle cap, peeked over the horizon's edge; stared in awe as it ballooned as large as a beach ball before her eyes. At that magnificent ta-da moment, she stood and swung the canister. Marty's remains carried upon the wind.

A part of her wanted to tarry awhile, but another demanded refuge from the cold and the stink. Margo sighed. A quarrelsome duo dwelled inside her; complicated the simplest decision. Negative Nancy and Positive Poppy, he called them. An optimistic, deep-seated kindness guided Poppy down life's road. Nancy's irksome practicality followed with anchored feet and a dictatorial, "Yeah, but—" at every turn. When Poppy yearned for a slice of deep-dish apple pie, Nancy interjected, "Yeah, but eat an apple. It's healthier."

The glorious new day wrapped a benevolent arm around Margo, offered consent to step toward the rest of her life. A permission Nancy never needed, Poppy appreciated, yet Margo struggled to reconcile.

Those sturdy fingers caressed the wreath's tiny parcels as she stared across the water. "Why must life be such a battle, Marty?" A grief laden sigh escaped. "A near lifetime passed before I found you, but to what end? Life is pointless. Why bother being born?"

Her husband's beloved voice filled her head, pressed her eyes shut.

"Ever heard me waste time philosophizing the un-philosophizable?"

"Not a real word, Marty."

"Says who? No one asked to be conceived, shoved out, and slapped on the ass to breathe. Grow a thicker hide, Luv. Most people hated me, but do I care?"

With a sad smile she shrugged.

"Biggest haters? My employees. Push. Correct. Push harder. Fire. Re-hire. The lot reduced me to a bullying bastard."

"A perfectionist demands excellence. The bullying created better versions of themselves. Believe me, each time your men cross a bridge their hands built, pride swells. Mediocre labourers became laudable craftsmen because of you."

"Huh. forget thickening your hide. The world needs your kind-heartedness to soften us crusty old bastards. Don't let anyone use you."

"Says the worst advantage taker of all the time."

"Nah, just showed how much I needed you. All your sweetness removed the bitterness from my life. Quite the keeper you are, Milk Chocolate. Forevermore mine."

"Never forget it, Peanut Guy. The keeper part."

"Not the forevermore?"

"Gotta keep my options open."

His voice went silent. A foreign contentment bloomed in Margo as she appreciated the coastline. A sweeping crescent of white sand arched below her. Irregular scallops of curling waves collapsed and ran up the shore. In the low-slung morning sun, millions of sea-nymphs danced upon the ruffled water. The early hour provided the solace and solitude she sought. No surfers. No walkers. No traffic. This place, at this hour, belonged to her and Marty.

Though too early to see, eyes sought the transition from green blue to deep blue thirty meters off the shore. Four years ago, the colour change meant nothing. Now she understood it signified a surfer's paradise. Eyelids dropped again as she listened to the surf break and dissolve.

A memory rushed in.

With their heads buried under straw hats, Oakley protected eyes fixed on a surfer gazing at the horizon. He exercised patience in judging the rise and fall of the water. Something concealed from them demanded he turn his board shoreward. A swell rose beneath him and he dropped to his belly, lifted his chest. Strong arms spun like windmill blades to gain the momentum required to ride the surging wave. As a trough formed, he sprung to his feet, wobbled in his fight for balance then jockeyed his liquid steed a dozen meters.

Marty chuckled. "The Barney handled that well."

"The what?"

"Rookie surfer. He's learning. Only got worked-pounded by the wave and pushed under water-after the curl."

"I'd be terrified of a shark attack."

"Nah. A bloody marvelous way to go, I reckon. One mighty chomp and your gone while doing what floats your boat. Bloody marvelous."

A sharp spasm beneath Margo's ribs flung open her eyes. A hard swallow cleared the lump in her throat as a shaky hand swiped the droplets from her cheeks. "Too many days lost in sadness without you."

Time became irrelevant. The dark void surrounding her begged for nothing and offered the same. The vacancy allowed emotions to swell and crash like the waves; memories to wash upon her like the surf on the sand. Before her rested a promise made. The fashioning of the wreath was the third step toward completion. Funeral insurance the first. The determination of final wishes the second.

With no family or close friends to consider, she wanted her remains placed in a gift box she purchased from Red Dot, along with half-a-dozen packets of milk chocolate and peanut M&Ms. At high tide, he was to toss it over the Cape Peron outlook and blow her a kiss. Sweet and simple.

"No! Do something grand. Something stupendous. Be released on a waning tide from the point in Leeuwen Naturaliste Park at sunrise."

The man latched on the idea, researched and collected data to ensure the execution of his grand exit. Upon Margo's critical reflection, the strategy was unachievable. "How do I scramble down a cliff-face to a slip of beach? My swimming through those swells to set you free impossible. Oh hell, Marty, your wishes are rife with problems."

Despite such grave misgivings, she returned home and booked two nights at the Abbey Beach Resort in Busselton. Poppy believed the tide chart, map, and plenty of faith sufficed to complete the task. Nancy deemed the plan absolute lunacy and refused to participate.

"Through an open mind solutions flow," Margo reminded herself.

With Marty strapped in the passenger seat, she played their favorite CD and chatted to him along the way. Somewhere between Pinjarra and Bunbury, deep sorrow swelled and rendered breathing difficult. The weight of how life changed depressed; sense of abandonment crushed.

"The shock and pain never end. No more cuddles. No more hugs and kisses. No more you. How do I survive this?" Teary-eyed, she reached over and stroked the wreath. "Our last road

trip, Mate, and I'm driving because you are dust bundled in candy bags. Circumstance sucked all the triumph out of the moment."

The front desk receptionist greeted her with a brilliant smile. "G'day. How may I help you?"

A list unfurled in her mind, starting with raising Marty from the dead. "Margo Plinth. I reserved a particular room with an ocean view."

Another first. I registered. The clerk presented the keycard to me, not you.

"May we assist with your bags, Mrs. Plinth?"

"No thanks, Marty's turn to wrangle them," she said and walked away.

To lodge in the very room they spent their last anniversary evoked wanted and unwanted memories. From her suitcase, she withdrew a framed selfie of them sitting on that very balcony. As she stared out over the water, emotions flowed. "Life played a cruel joke on me, but you played one much crueler. Why ask this of me?"

In the mirror above the dresser, Margo's troubled, hazel-blue eyes examined her reflection. She appreciated how he found beauty in a face most considered one step below plain. No expensive miracle creams hid the decades lived. No Spanx compressed the padding which crept around her midriff once she turned fifty.

"The package a man wants to come home to, not whore around with. Brings comfort not the distrust possessive jealousy generates."

The comment initially confused, so she passed Poppy the first half of his statement to store as a pleasant memory. The whore around part she tossed to Nancy to criticize anyway she deemed fit. In hindsight, she recognized it as the compliment he intended.

With tears wiped and nose dried, a deep breath swelled her bosom. A sharp exhalation marked a marching point—a moment of brave determination to execute the plan. With Marty on a chair overlooking the ocean, Margo headed out to survey the dreaded launch point.

A stiff breeze turned the coastline into an agitating washtub. Ragged rocks created a dangerous apron for someone not of nimble body and mind to navigate. Though his desk research determined the ideal release site, the reality turned her knees to rubber. One violent wave after another pummeled the jagged sandstone boulders. In a flash of insight, she realized he never

considered her dogpaddling across the pool proved an enormous feat. The plan guaranteed the forevermore he wished.

"Don't even consider obliging his insane request. It's suicidal," Nancy shouted. A whimpering Polly cowed behind her in agreement.

With a grunt of disgust at her faint-heartedness, unconditioned knees and ankles cautiously navigated the steep, twisted descent to the surfer's beach. Halfway down her eyes rested upon a vista which stole her breath. Australia's coastal beauty cradled it for several long moments. The Indian Ocean's variegated blues ranged from navy to cerulean to powder and turquoise.

She understood how the frothy ruffles of the curling waves lured the surfers to come play. The scene appeared deceptively refreshing and fun from where she stood. Beyond the beach, crags of sandstone battled to wall-off the formidable turbulent waters. The stony rubble at their base evidenced many lost skirmishes. Tiny, narrow crescents of white sand found a place among the pitted, sharp rocks the sea endeavoured to pull back into its depths.

Conscious of being an overdressed, geriatric oddity, Margo smiled and said g'day to a group of bronzed blokes with wild, sun-bleached hair and ripped muscles clutching boards. With barely a glance, they slipped past her. The last Adonis stopped.

"A tricky place to walk, Beautiful. Once you start sliding down the slope you won't stop. You sure you want to tempt fate?"

"Kinda need to be a young mountain goat or drunken fool to take the challenge, eh?"

A laugh erupted from him. "Most of my mates are sober fools. No one dares drink before tackling these switchbacks or the surf."

Defeated, her eyes swept across to the water. "Must be quite the reward at the bottom."

A cheeky grin spread across his face. "Bikini clad angels and demon waves."

"Then you'd better hurry or your mates will snag the best of both."

"No worries. Got a beauty waiting. Need a hand climbing back up?"

"No, I'll manage, but thanks anyway."

With slow, steady steps Margo worked to conquer the series of switchbacks. A mallet now pounded her brain as the sun prickled exposed skin and thickened the saliva in her mouth. A long list of should-haves popped in her head with each thump: should have worn a hat, carried

water, slathered on sunscreen, eaten lunch. Her annoyance swelled when Marty chimed in and berated her, too.

How many times must I remind you to take care of yourself and think ahead? No one should care more about you than you.

An uncharacteristic anger boiled in her gut and spewed out her mouth as she pushed herself to the top. "Don't talk to me about thinking ahead or taking care of myself. Explain why the death-defying, grand plan you saddled me is riddled with deadly flaws. Let's start with the extreme likelihood of me dropping to my death or drowning. Mark my words, Marty Plinth, I refuse to join you this trip."

Emotional and physical exertion raced her heart raced and stole her breath. The Oakley's now failed to protect her eyes from the pain of the intense sun sparkling off the water and white sand. The narrow path appeared narrower and the sand less compact beneath the feet. The climb infinitely harder. As she ascended the final slope, a couple and their unleashed boxer headed down the trail. In its excitement, the dog bounded toward her. Unsure where to go, Margo responded too late. Its body slammed against her knees.

"Hold on," the man shouted as her legs buckled and body crumpled seaward. Hands latched on her clothes, grabbed her arms. With her muscles rigid with fear, the couple struggled to set her upright.

"So sorry." Margo stared into the woman's panicked eyes, the same blue green as the sea below. Upon standing, the knee failed to hold her weight. "We'll carry you."

"No, I'll walk." Before she objected further, they swept her into a human seat and shuttled her to the parking lot. "Thank you."

The man shook his head. "No reason for thanks, Mate, our dog almost dropped you over the edge."

At her pallor and trembling body, the woman said, "I won't leave her alone. She's not fit to drive. Retrieve Bruiser, do the run, and I'll meet you at home." With a nod and another apology, he chased after the dog.

The woman's guilt bothered Margo. "Your pet never meant any harm."

"Should have leashed him," she said with a smile framed by sun-kissed cheeks and ginger dreadlocks. A generous scattering of freckles enhanced her beauty. "My friends call me Suki."

"What do people who aren't your friends call you?"

A smile shifted her mood. "Suzanna Kirkwood."

"A pleasure to meet you. Mine call me Margo. Margo Plinth.

"Doubt any enemies exist. What possessed you to navigate the sheep track?"

As the woman listen to Margo's story, tears deepened the colour of her eyes. "A noble idea, but the waves would crush your head and body against those rocks. An instant death. Let's return to your hotel room, and I'll contact a mate who might help."

The sun rose long after Margo. With Suki's hot-cold treatments and doses of Extra-Strength Advil, the knee felt stiff but able to bear weight. Once dressed as directed, two more tablets slid down her throat then waited for the dining room to open. Nancy dominated; ordered toast and coffee despite Polly's whining for Eggs Benedict and sausage.

"Don't be stupid. You'll vomit and embarrass yourself."

Half-an-hour before their rendezvous, she hurried to her room and stuffed Marty inside a complimentary, oversized white laundry bag.

"Hopefully you'll arrive in one piece. No nagging in my ear. Sit tight, shut up, and I'll set you free."

It never mattered to Margo whether Suki appeared. The stunner with a surplus of freckles and sea-foam eyes provided a survivable alternate plan. Marty's *Insurance Line* policy supplied enough money to settle the hotel bill, pay her personal expenses, and cover any incidentals which surfaced to carry out his wishes. In the event of a no-show, she had the name of a man to do the job.

While she'd wait at the point as instructed, thoughts of Marty's death filled her head. Disbelief ripped through their social club upon hearing a blood clot ambushed him. The cerebral haemorrhage was so severe, he perished in the garden before she found him. The man she adored died alone. A blessing in many ways. To survive the massive stroke meant total incapacitation. At the possibility, he voiced a strong opinion.

"I'd rather die than be imprisoned in my own mind and body."

"No, Marty."

"Damn straight. If I can't live as a whole man, I won't live at all."

A gentle tap on a car horn drew Margo's attention. When the mist cleared from her eyes, a face alive with freckles smiled hello. She studied Suki a moment longer before stepping out of the car.

"You are sunshine and honey and wheat blowing in a field. A glorious spirit radiates from you."

"What a beautiful greeting. Thank you. How's the knee this morning?"

"Doable."

"Brilliant. The tide is changing so we gotta fly."

Margo refused Suki's offer to carry Marty down the steps to the beach. The crude stairs and railing provided the confidence to navigate unassisted. "Without Bruiser's intervention, I'd have gone to sea with Marty."

"Yes, a tragic loss averted. Now strip to your bathers. A magnificent chariot awaits." Suki laughed at Margo's strained smile as she sighted the watercraft she hired. Not a boat, but a *WaveRunner*. "Did I tell you Shane holds nine national titles on those things? Only God handles the machine better."

"No, you didn't," Margo said as she strapped on a life vest. As Suki handed her a massive helmet shaped like a praying mantis head slid on her head she added, "Did I tell you I can't swim? Will I sink headfirst in this thing if I fall in?"

The comment stunned Suki. "Good grief, aren't you the bravest person alive? Why attempt—" Delicate speckled hands applied a tender squeeze to Margo's. "With this gear you'll become a human cork," she assured and waved to Shane.

The driver's eyes greeted his passenger. The serenity and composure present contradicted her preconceptions. No thrill-lust of a title seeking speed-demon glowed; rather she swam in a calming bath of warm dark chocolate. The stubbled face and gentle smile of the slightly built man offered reassurance. Not a thing about him agitated Nancy.

Shane saluted her and held out an encouraging hand. "How are things, Mrs. Plinth? Quite the challenge you've accepted. Sorry to push, but we must get a wriggle on."

"You board while I hold Marty." Without waiting for a reply, Suki took hold of the laundry bag.

With a clenched gut, nervous eyes moved between Suki, Shane, and the machine. Afraid to open her mouth and show her cowardice, Margo nodded instead. Those guts rose into her throat as she waded waist deep into the surf and accepted his hand.

Once aboard, the machine came to life. "Expect a rough trip, so hang on. Past the point the pull is ocean bound and things become smoother," he shouted over the rumble.

Suki handed her Marty as Shane pulled on his helmet. The depth of the woman's bravery and dedication to her husband evident as she sandwiched the laundry bag between them and shaking hands locked around his waist. The *WaveRunner's* front end lifted as it eased forward. With a twist of the throttle, Margo screamed and tightened her grip at the sudden backward shift of her body.

Suki's concern rose as the nose dropped and skipped over the danger ridden water with the added speed. Apprehensive for them both, she maintained visual contact as they cut across the bay. Upon disappearing around the point, she said a prayer and sent an angel heavenward to keep them safe.

The trip jarred Margo's entire body. The watercraft bounced off concrete ridges not liquid waves, yet the experience exhilarated. Now stationary, they rose and fell as the ocean breathed like a magnificent creature. Shane turned to her.

"Time to say good-bye, Mrs. Plinth."

"May I remove my helmet?" With a nod, he released the strap and eased it off her head. "Thank you."

"No worries."

Hands continued to tremble as she pulled Marty from the bag. Her throat closed and eyes welled. "Alright, darling husband, promise kept. Mission accomplished. May your journey to the wondrous beyond be extraordinary. And don't fret. Though heartbroken and disoriented I'll manage. Please visit me often. Miss you, Peanut Guy. Thanks for the love and the laughs."

Once Margo kissed the wreath, she flung it on the water. When Shane caught sight of the FOREVERMORE written on the ribbon a lump formed in his throat. Out of respect, he allowed them to bob a moment longer.

"Sorry, but we must fly. The angel in our midst is screaming danger."

Once her helmet was securely fastened, the *WaveRunner* growled and turned their backs to Marty. At the shift of her body to cast one last good-bye kiss, Shane slowed and swung their ride to ease her view. Another warning snapped his gaze to align with hers. A distinctive fin sliced the water then disappeared. A moment later, the wreath rose out of the ocean in the jaws of a beast ten meters away. The massive creature slammed against the water's surface before it disappeared with Marty to depths unknown.

"Goodness, what was that?"

"A great white. Hang on!"

Now unencumbered by the wreath, arms wrapped around Shane's waist as the machine accelerated; jumped from one wave to the next as they tore homeward. The minute he beached the watercraft, Suki ran to Margo and removed the helmet. A cocktail of concern and excitement spilled from her. "Are you alright? A beautiful send off until the end. How terrifying."

Margo stood on shaky legs. "I don't understand. How—?"

"My Shark-Spotter recorded the ceremony. Spied the shark's shadow moments before he surfaced. I notified Shane of the monster's arrival. His helmet is wired with a communication set. The drone surveys the waters during surfing events. I monitor the water from the back of my vehicle, and he rescues."

Comprehension strikes Margo.

"The angel in our midst." The widow glanced at Shane, Suki, and back at the ocean. A visible tremor coursed through her as Marty's voice filled her head.

"You made this journey's end perfect. Bloody marvelous. Live with joy, my darling. Be seeing you around, Milk Chocolate."

Not his words, but the fulfillment of her promise afforded Margo permission to step toward the rest of her life. "Will do, Peanut Guy," she whispered and blew a final kiss.