RAY'S ZINNIAS

The sky this morning, the morning of my father's funeral, is strung with lines of softly-drawn cirrus, or mares' tails, as he called them. He liked clouds.

'Almost there,' I tell my mother. Stating the obvious. Quelling emotions I'm not ready to meet.

She doesn't respond, and I didn't expect her to. She sits in the passenger seat staring straight ahead, expressionless, as we approach the glowering brown brick church. It looks like a giant radiator, already reflecting the day's heat.

Inside, it sheds its gloom and is all purity and light. Honey-coloured timber, high vaulted ceiling and white-washed walls stamped with coloured mosaics from the arched windows. I haven't been in here since I was a kid - some school thing or the other, fifteen, twenty years ago. It's lovely - big urns filled with flowers, an altar cloth of lace, a fall of soft notes from the church organ. And a horrible chrome fold-out trolley in pride of place, ready for the casket it's about to receive.

I guide my mother to the front pew and an aunt steps in as support for her. My role's over. I move further along the pew to await the next stage of the procedure.

The casket. Here it is, borne aloft by my brothers and uncles and my father's best mate Mack. They lower it onto the trolley and my brothers take their places next to me in the pew, solemn with the fulfilled weight of their duty. We hold each other's hands briefly. Brothers, sister, gathered here together. We listen to the words from the minister who never knew my father, and the eulogy from Mack who'd known him for most of his life, we sing hymns and recite prayers I know by heart yet haven't thought of since childhood. My tears are forming deltas and I swipe them and remember the Queen in the time of covid, alone, veiled and black-masked at her husband's funeral. The mask would have drawn the tears in and absorbed them. Or maybe they don't have tears – royalty. Not in public, anyway. Mine are a surprise, considering the pall of unreality which has enclosed me all morning.

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Here in the scorching cemetery my mother's standing next to me and I hadn't meant that to happen. I'd hoped to keep at least two aunts between her and me for the rest of the day, but in the polite shuffle to allot the family prime standing room at

the graveside, we ended up right next to each other. What's she wearing today? I've barely noticed. That grey suit with the long-sleeved jacket. She must be sweltering. There's a lightweight blouse under it; why doesn't she just take the jacket off? I was so glad of my aunts' attention to her at the church, sparing me from having to give that, but now it's my turn again. What do I say?

'Are you doing alright, Mum?'

She looks at me, poker-faced, doesn't answer.

We stand side by side near the mound of flowers surrounding my father's open grave. He wouldn't be too proud of me for some of my thoughts today. He and she lived separate lives in the same house for years, distant with each other but cooperative, and he would have expected me to support her today. How bloody dreary everything is.

Even the flowers. Pallid wreathes and the usual pastel floral arrangements all placed to detract from the hard-edged hole in the ground. Wafting their sickly perfume at me. It's so bloody hot. The morning's mare's tails have long gone and the sky's heat-bleached and furred with dust. Five metres and we'd be in the shade of those gum trees. Marris? Maybe jarrahs. I want gum blossoms at my funeral - those bright red ones that grow down on the south coast. And big over-the-top bunches of red and yellow and purple flowers. Anything to knock the wind out of the bleak anaemic sadness of it all.

Finally, the minister's ready.

He takes us through the burial ritual, forlorn in the cloying heat, and we step back into the shade of the gum trees. Mingle and submit to quiet condolences. What's next? Surely there has to be something organised apart from the lunch my aunts, Dad's sisters, insisted on for family members. My brothers will know.

'Yeah, wake's sorted for the Imperial. Sorry, meant to tell you earlier. Mack's been letting everyone know.'

Mack, who was my father's good mate, and whose eulogy was touching and brotherly. Mack standing here under the gum trees, with stout neck and faded ginger hair, wearing a suit which, by the look of it, might have done him since the last century, for the few occasions requiring it. That makes me grin, at least. Mack's nudging a tuft of grass with his shoe and pulling at his tie which looks to be the same era as his suit, worrying the neck of it as though it's about to choke him. Getting ready to speak again.

He watches a magpie walk past.

'Alright everyone, can I grab your attention for a minute. Just want to make sure you all know about the wake,' he says. 'Down at the Imperial. Counter lunch'll be on, so come along and raise a glass for Ray.'

Ray. My father's name. Whenever I hear it spoken, it's as though Ray was a different person to Dad. Ray was the one who led the other life – the card nights, or at the Men's Shed, or the voluntary firie gigs. Tending his garden and mowing the lawn, too - that was Ray. His job; no one else's. Not even my brothers' or mine, when we were old enough to take over. Ray liked doing the yard. Got into a space you didn't interrupt.

His friends are all nodding or murmuring their agreement, getting ready to head off to the Imperial.

'Ray's been a good mate for a long time,' Mack adds, but so quietly that only those of us standing close by would have heard. He watches the magpie walk through the cemetery gates. He bends the tuft of grass with the toe of his shoe. Ray's best mate Mack. Might have thought he'd see him grow old one day; not go and die of a heart attack at sixty seven. No; he'd know there's no guarantee. I'm not even in my thirties and I've already learnt that one.

The family lunch, then. How in hell am I going to avoid that? My mother, seeing people beginning to disperse, is summoning my brothers, requesting they be present for the lunch. Pursing her lips when they opt for the Imperial.

'Yeah no, sorry, Mum, we're going to the wake down at the pub if that's alright.'

'Yeah, talked it over with Mack already.'

'Oh, did you really? Pity no one thought to consult me first.'

'Yeah, sorry. Might call in later this arvo eh?'

She turns on me. 'You, I assume, will be coming to lunch?'

It wasn't a question. I, the errant daughter, who did at least deign to come home straight away to be of help, will be going to the family lunch, while my brothers and some stray cousins I hadn't seen for a decade or more peel off and head for the Imperial. My mother leaves with an aunt and uncle and I drive to the lunch by myself, detouring via our street and picking a bunch of flowers from Dad's front garden. Zinnias, I think they are. Red, bright orange, blazing pink, yellow and purple.

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We gather in the kitchen where two aunts sit with my mother, who at least has finally shed that jacket, while the other aunt and I prepare the table. We bring platters of sandwiches and sliced fruitcake, prepared earlier, and I pour glasses of iced lemon water. The uncles, standing well-clear of the kitchen preparations, are talking amongst themselves. Probably wishing they were at the Imperial. No, probably not – they never really had a strong connection with Dad or his social set. I find a vase for my flowers and place them centrally on the white tablecloth.

'For Dad,' I explain when my mother frowns and an aunt or two raise eyebrows. 'They're from his garden.'

Here we are, then, seated at the funeral lunch, eating sandwiches and making suitable conversation about the church service or the floral tributes or what a large gathering of people were there. My mother sits silently. She nibbles into a sandwich before pushing it to the side of her plate, shakes her head when offered another, draws a deep breath and emits a long sigh. The aunts on either side of her lean in and murmer sympathetic words. One pats her arm and she withdraws it slightly and sighs again.

I'm reduced to polite comments. I tell an aunt, when she enquires, what it is that I do these days, and that, no, there isn't a special man in my life, and no, it's not a pity at all; I'm fine with it. Another aunt steers us back to easier topics. The airconditioner hums quietly in the background and life outside continues - a dog barks, a car goes past with subwoofer thudding, someone in a yard nearby cranks up a leaf-blower.

A pot of tea is made and an uncle brings beers from the fridge for those who'd prefer that. I opt for a beer and ignore my mother's frown. I wonder if I should I be the one to make a speech. Are we doing that? Finally, thankfully, an aunt, the oldest of Dad's sisters, taps a teaspoon gently against her cup.

'I'd like to say a few words for Ray,' she announces. She might have suppressed some unkind thoughts about her sister-in-law sitting there opposite her, and she might never have known her brother, my father, on any level deeper than I did, but she rallies.

Her words for him are plain ones. He was honest and hard-working. Decent. Unassuming. Fair-minded and reliable. The other aunts and uncles nod in agreement, and so do I, because Ray was that person. Played a part in the community. Did what was necessary to be a family man - the basics and whatever else it took to keep the

peace. Even after he moved downstairs, made it his domain and installed his own telly and recliner chair in there, Ray kept the peace.

You kids don't have to worry – Mum and I never argued and we're not starting now.

Ray, this aunt once revealed to me in an outburst of pique, had, many years ago, spent quite some time in a mental health facility. The lunatic asylum, she called it. Warned me, a fourteen year old who'd been rude to her in her own kitchen, that I was heading the same way if I wasn't careful. *Not that they've still got those places, more's the jolly pity*, she'd added. I was too young and self-absorbed to understand the full extent of what I'd been told, but I clearly remember the shock of it, the thump to my guts, the feeling that everything I knew about my kindly distant father had dropped out of kilter. Or had been added to in a way, though I didn't understand how.

Later, back home, my mother gave me her cold silent treatment when I asked her about it. The disclosure by my aunt had caused friction between them, I knew that, and I was instructed never to mention it again. *Your aunt had no right to go spreading tales and you can forget what she said,* my mother ordered me.

As if that was ever possible.

We drink tea or beer, eat slices of fruitcake and fall into a few agreeable reminiscences. Ray's admirable role as a volunteer firie. The things he made at the Men's Shed. Liked that jarrah clock, eh, an uncle says, and another says yep, lucky he got in before they went and shut the blasted timber industry down, and an aunt says she liked how well he kept the yard.

I like how he liked clouds, too, but I'm not saying that one aloud. I wonder what my mother liked. She's gripping her teacup so tightly that I think the handle must be about to snap. Maybe I should ask her if she's alright. No, she's releasing her grip. Puts the cup carefully back onto its saucer.

'Regardless, it was The Lord God's will,' she says sharply.

I stop a spray of cake leaving my mouth, an uncle wipes a momentary grin from his face and my aunts look at her blandly until one manages a response.

'Yes, you could say that. And let's be grateful it was very sudden and he didn't suffer.'

My mother nods briskly. 'Indeed. Well, if you'll all excuse me, it's been a long day and I need to go home and rest.' She looks across at me. 'If you don't mind.'

Amidst the goodbyes at the front door my aunt hands me the zinnias, now gathered into a fold of dampened newspaper. 'You might like to take these with you,' she says. I nod, and accompany my mother to the car in silence.

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She sits rigidly in the passenger seat and the day sits like a stone between us. I glance over at her and apart from the thin tight line of her mouth, she bears no expression. What's she thinking about? The Lord God's will happening to her estranged husband? What was that about?

I've never once thought of her as religious. I've just assumed she holds the standard beliefs and customs of her era; keeps them filed away in some remote corner of herself to be drawn on for an occasion. The procedure at weddings or funerals. The odd snide remark about Catholics, or the Jehovah Witnesses who turned up at her doorway occasionally. The box of mixed Christmas cards, when she'd decide who best to be sent the ones with the three wise men or the nativity scene – Mack and his family, who were occasional church-goers, a distant relative who was a Baptist. The family who once lived next door and attended church on Sunday mornings. That's three cards down. I stifle a laugh and she turns to look at me.

'What's so amusing?'

'Nothing, Mum. Just thinking about happier times.'

She frowns at me and looks away, and I suddenly feel empathy towards her, sitting so close to me, full of a lifetime's words which will never be spoken. I already know the uselessness of anything I can say, but I'll carry on anyway.

'We'll all have some happy memories of Dad, won't we? That's something of a comfort.'

'For you, maybe, but you're not the one widowed, are you?'

'Well no, of course not, but you know what I mean. There were good times over the years, and you'll want to remember them, won't you, now that Dad's gone?'

'Excuse me. It's not up to you to dictate what I should or shouldn't remember.'

'God, Mum.'

So much for the empathy. It was probably only ever a fleeting thing borne of today's tidal wave of repressed emotions, and here it goes, sucked back into the maw of who we both really are. We ignore each other until the house comes into sight, but I'm going to say one more thing before she gets out to open the gate.

‘Will you miss Dad?’

‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous. What kind of a question is that?’

She opens the gate, shuts it after I drive through, and sails past me into the house.

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What a sad shit of a day that was. Made it through though, and it’s time to hit the hay, as Dad used to say. I can see the outline of his zinnias on the windowsill. We shared this house, he and I, for sixteen years, all my childhood, and he was kind to me, saw to my needs, even turned up at the occasional school event.

He slipped me a roll of fifty dollar notes when I left home, I remember that. Five of them. A fortune to a sixteen-year old. *Don’t tell your mother,* he grinned, and I grinned back. I think I hugged him. I hope I did.

Who’ll grow zinnias and mow the lawn now, I wonder. I wish I’d been at the pub today, to raise a glass, and to listen to people talk about Ray.

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