

## **A Handkerchief for the Grieving**

The Rundles were sitting in the living room, upright on the good chairs whilst mother dabbed her eyes with a fresh handkerchief. I'd ironed a dozen that very morning. Apparently, tissues were a no-no for a grieving widow. Thank goodness there'd been a sale on at KMart. What do you fill your basket with when your father dies? I'd bought the handkerchiefs and then added serviettes in a sombre grey, new wine glasses and tumblers, wine stoppers in the plain red (the whimsical animal heads seemed inappropriate) and I bought some new stockings in opaque black to match my funereal dress and coat. Mother had insisted that mourning be observed in all its tradition, despite father being a rather colourful character in life.

I boiled the kettle anew and set about preparing the charade of afternoon tea and posh biscuits for people we hadn't seen since the separation. It still stuck in my craw that these people had wafted back into our lives despite their setting down of clear lines when my parents split. Where were they when she was bawling into a scrunch of tissues each evening after he just upped and left, taking his golf clubs, the good gardening tools and the car – 'she wouldn't know a spark plug from a windscreen wiper, so she's not keeping it'?

'Mary has brought me this gorgeous orchid,' Mother said to me, as I set down the silver tray on the small table between her and Mrs Rundle. I looked at the garish flowers. 'Would you put it in the back room, so it can get some sun, Alice?' She gave me a weak smile and I did what I was told. When I returned Mr Rundle was dunking a Monte Carlo with gusto and the sight of his chomping jowls made me nauseous.

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'You've heard we have the main hall for the service?' Mother said, sipping her tea and waiting for the appreciative nodding of heads.

'We did,' Mrs Rundle said. 'It should be a good turn-out,' she added, as though talking about a football match.

When they left, Mother took to her bed and I dusted and vacuumed in preparation for the next guests. I made a Victoria sponge and left it cooling on the bench before waking her.

'It's nearly four. Do you want me to run you a bath?'

'Not yet, dear. Will you make me some coffee?'

'I'm due home.' I checked my watch. Coffee meant just me and her. If there were no guests she'd let her guard down and sob like a baby. I wondered briefly what she would think if I did the same. Let the tears run to bleed the grief out of my system. I hadn't had the chance to digest the loss on any personal level yet. I'd been at her beck and call, keeping up her pretences to all those who came to offer condolences.

'They'll understand,' she said, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed to reveal her gnarly veins and hobbled toes. I thought of my new black stockings, how easy it was to cover up the things you don't want people to see. Perhaps I was more like her than I would like.

'I'll ring Neale,' I said.

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Mother insisted that she meet the funeral director, despite my protestations. 'You mustn't let it get to you. I'll do all that stuff, Mum.'

She just brushed me off with a wave of her hand, still sporting the ostentatious rings that he'd given her on their milestone occasions. She still used his name too. Some things would never be buried with him.

The funeral director was a woman who remained serene and kindly neutral throughout. I got the impression that this kind of funeral, with two distinct families to please, was nothing new to her.

Her parting words were, 'Your husband had a zest for life that will be reflected in the service, Mrs Tring.'

I remembered some of the tacky photos we still had in the back room dresser. The ones with his trousers round his ankles on a boys' golf weekend, or dressed up like a French maid at a Bucks do on Philip Island, polishing the groom's head with a pink feather duster, or throwing a line in at Marlo wearing nothing but his galoshes. Sometimes a zest for life catches up with you in death.

The hairdresser swept mother into his thick arms in a crushing embrace and then ushered her to her usual chair, ordering the trainee to run next door for a flat white with two.

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'How are you holding up?' He ran his hands through the hair at the back of her head as she watched him in the mirror.

'It's been difficult, but I'm coping.' She flicked me a look and I nodded at the both of them.

'What's the plan for this afternoon? You'll look fabulous, of course.' He swept the hair up and pushed it out sideways from the back.

'I should hope so. I trust my hair with no-one else.' The resolute set of her jaw told me she was steeling up. The hair would add another layer of armour. The make-up would be her war-paint. The sleek black dress and jacket would add the final touch to her wounded-wife-warrior-princess look.

The limousine turned up on the dot of one. Mother settled into the seat like it was her throne. I looked out the window at the low clouds gathering, their soundless rolling mingling with the soundless terror that mother would enter the church to *The Entrance of the Queen of Sheba*. I should have had a word with her, pegged her back. Instinct told me to end the charade there and then but her face, that practised pained expression, those expertly made-up widow's eyes. I couldn't do it.

The cross on the tower loomed, a stark beacon in the darkening sky. It didn't offer me any comfort. My father was dead. My mother was on the war path. The battle lines were drawn from the moment the limousine pulled into the driveway and upstaged the small sedan carrying his other family. The ones he once told me had

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made him see how simple life should really be. When he said that I wanted to pummel my fists on his chest and ask him how he could have walked away and left me with all the hard work. Instead, I bit my lip and he took my hands in his, a gesture of surprising warmth, considering his affections were usually ruled by the volume of beer he'd ingested.

'She was once the love of my life, you know, Alice. And there's nothing that can change that. But somewhere along the line she pushed me too hard. When passion burns out, it stinks.'

We sat at the front. I nodded at the other family as we took our places. The other woman, Janice, glanced at her children, teenage boys caught at that age between needing her and needling her. Perhaps she was checking their comfort level, gauging whether their sullen pouts were a bout of grief locked inside their immature minds or just simple tedium. The older one had my father's chin. Janice offered me a flicker of the lips and a slight closing of her eyes. Mother held her gaze towards the pair of stained-glass windows high on the stone wall. Mary Magdalene was tending to Jesus.

The eulogy was delivered by an old friend of my father who had managed to tread the fine line between his two lives, making him sound like a good bloke. We laughed, we dabbed our eyes, we remembered. The celebrant chose careful words and generic passages to illustrate his life. It was like she was talking about a kindly uncle or friend of the family, unmarried but generous with his time, everybody's

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mate. Was that really what he was like? Not just to me and my mother, but to his other family? Was this really what we deserved, what they deserved, as a tribute? Should we not have listened to the truth of his life? We were still living with it, after all.

The slide show started and I looked at my lap, a handkerchief spread over my knees, slightly crumpled but retaining its dignity more than a tissue. I watched my father's life unfold to the irony of The Beatles' *Let it Be* in a series of grainy baby photos, Polaroids, holiday snaps, family shots (both) and boozy, blokey poses. At the end, his eyes watched us from the screen, slightly hooded in his old age, but still bright, asking us to smile with him. Janice squeezed her sons' hands. The younger one's shoulders bobbed up and down and he whipped his hand out from hers and grabbed his head, hunching over. His brother reddened but held back his tears.

After the service, when we mingled around the entrance in a collective social awkwardness, I took hold of my mother's elbow. 'You have to say something to them.'

'I shall do no such thing,' she hissed.

'It's the right thing to do.' I looked to Neale for support but he was chatting with an elderly aunt.

'The right thing to do would have been to keep her legs shut and her claws off my man.' She looked over at Janice with a sneer.

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Her man. I nearly laughed. Even in death she still felt possession over him.

'He left you. He didn't love you anymore. He said it a thousand times. Why can't you let it go?'

Her slow blink told me I'd crossed so far over her lines that she considered me a deserter. 'He's still married to me.' She clasped her gaudy bag to her chest, so it decorated her bosom like war medals.

'He's dead.'

She sniffed. 'He didn't make that commitment to her.'

'You denied him that opportunity. The least you could do now is to be civil.' I wanted to march her over to Janice, usher her forward like a small child who needed reminding of her manners.

Mother retrieved a handkerchief and snapped her bag shut. She walked towards the car. 'Are you coming, Alice?' Her voice was loud, cutting through the muted chatter.

I made a desperate face at Neale who waved me towards the car with a sympathetic shrug. Janice broke from her group and walked with me.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' she said to me, touching my arm.

Her chiffon sleeved blouse blossomed around her slender wrist, pale heather delicate against the charcoal of her fitted skirt suit. Her court heels and matching clutch, small pearl necklace and earrings, seemed effortless accessories.

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Understated. I looked to Mother. Her mouth was a thin, white line – even something that would be invisible on others stood out on her.

‘Thank you. That means a lot. I’m sorry for your loss too. He loved you very much.’

Mother got in the car, sweeping her legs around and planting her patent shoes in the foot-well. Janice strode over to the still open door and stood between it and my mother.

‘Mrs Tring,’ she said, her arm extended to the sleeve of my mother’s jacket. ‘I’d like to offer my condolences on the loss of your husband.’ She emphasised the ‘your’ so that the gathering eavesdroppers might have something to take home to chew over later.

The silence stretched between them, giving mother every opportunity to repay the favour, but she reached forward with her bejewelled hand and grabbed the door handle. Janice stepped back with a half-smile of victory and I slipped into the seat next to mother in time to give her a fresh handkerchief.