

*The tragedy of life is what dies inside a man while he lives.*  
Albert Schweitzer

*There is a strange charm in the thoughts of a good legacy,  
or the hopes of an estate, which wondrously alleviates  
the sorrow that men would otherwise feel for the death  
of friends.*

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

AND SO, LOOK AT THEM. His family. Gathered on the edges of the artificial grass, the dark hole yawning from its centre. Each afraid of their own mortality so rudely addressed. Frightened of stepping too close, in case of experiencing the vertiginous rush that might pull them in – up becoming down, sky becoming sea, gravity a mirage.

Three-year-old Eden steps forward to add his drawing to the others. He deliberates, staring at the polished rosewood coffin hovering as if by magic, at the wreaths and flowers of every colour that sit atop the burnished lid. He squats on the ground, folds his drawing into a rough semblance of a paper plane, and throws it triumphantly across the gap. At that very instant, his tangle of limbs – soft and pliable and clumsy – wobbles in a precarious dance at the edge of the grave ... and Richard reaches out to pull his nephew back. The laughter. Relief. Black suits and black dresses flapping, the mourners released from their frozen aspects of grief.

The deep, haunting tones of ‘Danny Boy’ startle everyone into silence. A woman behind Richard begins to weep; small, hiccupping sobs.

‘I should never have let you choose the music,’ he mutters.

Kelly glares, her eyes red-rimmed behind her sunglasses. ‘For your information, Dad loved this song.’ She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. She complained earlier of a blister on her left heel. New shoes. Black. Not her style. Conservative court shoes, purchased reluctantly for the occasion as she will probably never wear them again.

‘Where is Grandma?’ Violetta, her enunciation perfect, the clipped tones of her pre-pubescent voice carrying across the sea of black.

‘She’s in there. Underneath Grandpa.’ Victoria, her twin, all-knowing.

Richard shushes his daughters as a murmured aside passes between their cousins Kara and Ben, the words *missionary position*. He silences their levity with a glare that would halt a train.

The sky a sweeping dome of china blue; wisps of white floating. A winter sky, clear and sharp, in the midst of high summer. The air dry and crisp. The drought has withered the buds before they can ripen, stopped the leaves from unfurling. Thin leafless boughs, skeletal, echoing what lies under the earth in this place.

As the strains of music fall away, Reverend Peterson resumes speaking in his rumbling, gravelly voice. ‘Friends, we are gathered to commit Daniel Jeremiah Whittaker to his final place of rest ...’ The timbre of his voice rises and falls in a background hum, the tone more comforting than the words of peace and love and everlasting life, heard at a dozen other funerals. The shrill caw of a crow cuts through like an insult.

A breath of wind brings the smell of freshly turned soil, the fragrance of the many bouquets; it ruffles the drawings on the coffin. Inside, his body lies in repose, his hands clasped across his chest,

resting on his medals. His children had discovered them by chance in the days before the funeral, had never seen them before – as if their father had never wanted the medals to be found.

His son and daughters huddle with their partners and children: the inner sanctum of the chief mourners. They are flanked by their close friends and even a few of his own acquaintances (those still standing; not a great number. More lost each passing year. Lost. Is that what he is now? Here, in this place so familiar? Is he lost now too?) Then on the fringes – like the dregs of a receding tide – the friends of friends, the work colleagues from so long ago, the hangers-on, the nosy; the people for whom a funeral is an occasion to dress up, to come forth with just the right amount of propriety and respect. To be swept up in the hymns and the ceremony, to show their faces, their presence duly noted. To join the throng of mourners and to consider life, not only the life of the one now gone, but also their own.

To look into the void.

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Reverend Peterson stops talking. A respectful calm ensues, broken only by the caw of the crow and the sigh of the wind, and a ringtone (Bach?), quickly muted.

The gauzy clouds do little to dispel the sun's expanding warmth, the promise of another still, hot day ahead. Those unfortunate enough to remain standing crowd nearer under the shelter, the closeness of other bodies preferable to the rising heat overhead. Men run their fingers around their collars. Women lift the hair from the backs of their necks. Those seated lift their thighs from the sticky plastic chairs with small, sucking noises.

The Reverend lifts his head from his silent prayer, signals

sanction with a glance. Amidst muffled murmurings and stifled coughs, they rise as one.

They shuffle forward now, towards the basket of rose petals and the pail of earth. Dust to dust. All eyes are on Richard as first-born: his movements stiff and formal, a full head of grey hair, his face a chiselled mask, his imported three-piece suit. His body betrays the encroachment of his sixth decade, yet his stance – one foot slightly behind the other, a fight-or-flight posture – is a remainder from childhood.

Does being here, burying his father, make him feel like a child again?

He scatters the blossoms and a handful of soil. Reaches into his pocket for a crisply ironed handkerchief to wipe his hands. Dabs at the corner of his eye, a subtle movement, noticed by no-one.

Evonne next, looking every day of her fifty-eight years. Dry-eyed, but her sadness written in hieroglyphic wrinkles. Loss inscribed in plain view. Those years of IVF took their toll, and with nothing to show at the end. Children have always flocked to her: her nieces and nephews, the children of friends. Attracted to the persona they sense, as children sense these things – her forgiving nature, her capacity for fun, her appreciation of the ridiculous. And yet, on occasions such as these, it seems the absence within her expands.

Finally, the baby of the three, Kelly, with her red-rimmed eyes and her once-only shoes. She alone bows her head, with its helmet of ash-blond hair, and takes a moment. Perhaps she is conjuring up the good times, memories to sustain her through the whirl of relatives and finger food and cheap wine that is the wake to come.

Serendipitous that she farewells him at the age he fathered her. Their late-in-life surprise. Her siblings already teenagers, Richard

angling to leave home, and Evonne – at fourteen – amidst the quagmire of her burgeoning personality. Into that mix a sunny baby with a thatch of blonde hair and a ready smile. Perhaps Kelly kept everyone sane for a few years. Perhaps she had kept her parents together.

The ceremony dwindles to the last few stragglers. No rose petals left. The mass of black has transformed into a river of mourners making their way towards the teahouse. Richard strides ahead to see to arrangements, pausing at the top of the rise to watch those dawdling over the graves of others: friends or family, or strangers with interesting headstones. Gravel crunches underfoot. Mynah birds swoop and play. The sound of heavy machinery signals the preparation of another grave for another somebody who is now a nobody.

Adjoining the green baize, the three rows of plastic chairs sit empty under the white marquee. The unsecured corners of the tarpaulin flap against the upright poles with a regular, dull thump. A few discarded orders of service lift in the gentle breeze.

Two men in blue uniforms remove the bands that lowered Daniel Whittaker into the ground, and begin to shovel from the pile of soil. One whistles.

So, that's that, then.

Eighty-eight years. It's a long time to keep secrets.

EVONNE SAT FORWARD IN THE deep leather armchair, her arms folded across the bulge of her generous stomach. She regretted that second helping of pasta. If Libby were here, she would be running her fingers over the matching tooled leather desktop, making witty comments about the heavy law tomes on the shelves, opening a window – making herself at home. Making Evonne feel comfortable. But the solicitor had been very clear: Daniel's children only. No partners, no grandchildren, just the three of them, for the reading of the will.

Her sister sat on the sofa, tracing the burgundy patterns with her forefinger. Kelly's large silver earrings jangled when she moved her head. She looked thin, thought Evonne, thinner even than when Mum had passed. Her clothes hung from her frame; her blouse dipped too low. Evonne had hugged her when she'd arrived, embraced her with an urgent need to reconnect with that child-like sense of sisterhood, now that both their parents were gone. Kelly had felt frail, as though she might snap if Evonne gripped too hard. She felt tears prickling beneath her lids and

blinked them away before they could emerge.

The heavy drapes and soft furnishings cocooned the room in a muffled silence. Even the traffic noise was muted. There was only the insistent ticking of an old-fashioned carriage clock, marking the seconds as they passed.

The door opened and John Hardcastle entered his office, accompanied by Richard. The solicitor apologised for keeping them waiting, even though it had been Richard they were all waiting on. Her brother went first to Kelly, who stood and opened her arms; the two held each other for a moment. It was Richard who let go first. He moved to Evonne and gave her a one-armed hug where she sat, his cologne too strong, his intimacy forced. He squeezed her shoulder and sat in the other armchair. The three siblings looked at John Hardcastle, expectant. He had settled his bulk behind the solidity of his desk. He straightened the blotter and placed a pen next to it. He cleared his throat; the signal, Evonne realised, that he was ready to begin.

‘Thank you all for coming today, and may I say again how sorry I am for your loss. Your father was a client when I first met him but over the years he became a friend. I’m honoured that he appointed me as executor of his estate and I hope to carry out my responsibilities in accordance with his wishes.’

Richard shifted in his chair. ‘Steady on, John. I feel like I’m in an Agatha Christie novel.’ He turned to Kelly. ‘You be Mrs Peacock. I’ll be Colonel Mustard.’ He let out a gruff laugh, which sounded more like a snort of exasperation.

‘I think you’ll find that’s Cluedo,’ said Kelly. ‘And if it was meant to be funny, I hardly think it’s appropriate.’

Richard raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. ‘Not being funny. Not at all. I do think it’s a bit strange that Dad didn’t

appoint me – or the three of us, for that matter,’ he corrected, ‘– as executors, but ...’ He gave the solicitor a wan smile. ‘But I have every confidence in you, John.’

‘Thank you, Richard, and I apologise for the formality,’ John responded. ‘But Daniel has attached very specific instructions and – if I might say so – some rather unusual conditions to his last will and testament.’ He paused, and Evonne sensed the solicitor marshalling his thoughts and gauging the atmosphere. ‘What I am about to tell you will no doubt come as a surprise. But I want to assure you before we begin that Daniel was entirely clear in his instructions to me. As you know, he has been my client for over fifty years, since I first started with the firm, and he remained lucid until the last. In fact, he updated his will only a couple of years ago, after your mother died. And no matter how unconventional you may find his last requests, I assure you that, from a legal standpoint, the will is sound.’

‘You make it sound as if he’s left everything to a home for orphaned cats or something,’ said Richard.

‘No, no, nothing like that. Daniel has provided for all of you more than adequately. I’m merely forewarning you that there are some conditions attached and that, much as we might debate the moral grounds of Daniel’s decisions, the document is legally watertight.’

‘Why on earth would we contest Dad’s will?’ said Kelly.

‘Now hold on,’ said Richard. ‘No-one’s talking about contesting anything. I think you’d better back up and explain exactly what you mean, John.’ Evonne heard an unfamiliar waver of apprehension or anxiety in his voice.

‘Certainly. Perhaps we should begin with the contents of your father’s estate.’

John Hardcastle handed a photocopied page to Evonne and one each to Richard and Kelly. Evonne rummaged in her tote bag for her reading glasses. The sheet listed her father's assets and investments. He had always been wealthy, even while they were growing up. Evonne could not remember ever wanting. Quite the opposite – she had come through her adolescence with a particular embarrassment at the sheer number of dresses and skirts her mother brought home, both for herself and for her daughters, the quality of food on the table, the sporting equipment provided to Richard at the first mention of interest, the exotic holiday locations she admitted to her friends in a cautious way, unsure of their reactions. She had felt the humiliation of wealth unearned, the sharp barbs of jealousy.

She had never been privy to the details of her parents' income. That was 'a private matter'. All three children had been encouraged to become independent from their first jobs delivering newspapers, washing cars or mowing lawns; Evonne had followed her own path, as had her siblings, and she had been incurious as to her father's position.

A movement at the window caught her eye: two pigeons squabbling over the shadiest spot. Her father had hated pigeons – rats of the skies, he called them. He was forever installing complicated spikes to deter them from perching outside his office and, later, on the roof of his house. A vivid picture emerged in her mind – her father in his shirtsleeves, high on a ladder, trying to attach the ugly pointed plastic to his guttering. She remembered the flutter in her stomach, her fear that he would fall. The precariousness of the ladder.

But he had descended without incident, and Evonne had expelled her held breath.

She returned to the sheet of paper that so neatly delineated her father's financial position. He had been a real estate agent for most of his adult working life, employed for several years by one of the major firms before opening his own office – a hole-in-the wall in Ashgrove, tucked behind the supermarket, with a dripping enamel sink and a back door that led onto a filthy lane. He had hired a sign writer to stencil *Whittaker Real Estate* above the shopfront, and furnished the room with a couple of desks, although it would be another year before he could afford a secretary.

His business flourished and he sold it over two decades later to the same firm where he had worked all those years earlier. By that stage, he had five Brisbane offices and over forty employees. Upon retirement, he took his wife on a three-month cruise to celebrate his seventieth birthday.

Evonne cast her eye over her father's investment portfolio: a list of shares, stocks and bonds from fields as diverse as mining, banking, the IT industry, childcare and theatre companies; both Australian and foreign interests. She had heard him mention these a few years ago, at a family dinner. Richard – pale and wan, his job precarious as the top dogs of the banking fraternity tumbled like so many dominos – had made a throwaway comment, something about their father being lucky he was in property. Daniel had barely glanced up from his roast lamb.

‘Most of my money's in shares,’ he said.

‘What?’ sputtered Richard.

‘I said, most of my money, about ninety per cent, is invested in the share market.’ He had taken another mouthful of meat.

Richard was apoplectic. ‘What? You can't be serious. You'd know better than anyone not to over-commit to the share market.’ He glared at their father. ‘Why haven't you mentioned

this before? How much of our money's gone down the great GFC black hole?

He had realised his mistake as soon as it came out of his mouth and at least, Evonne recalled, had the decency to look shame-faced.

Their father had finished chewing his lamb, swallowed, sat back in his chair and wiped at his mouth with a napkin.

'On paper, "our" money is mostly disappearing,' he said. 'More every day.' He had fixed Richard with a steely gaze. 'But as it's actually "my" money, I don't suppose you have anything to worry about.'

'But ... your future ... all you've worked so hard for ... I don't understand why you aren't more upset. We've been talking about the crisis for months now and you've never said a word.'

Their father had sighed and held his glass of wine to the light. After a deep draught, he had said in a low voice: 'If it's my money, and I'm not worried, then I don't think you should be worried, either.' And with that, the conversation was ended, and the state of his financial affairs was not discussed again.

Evonne now saw the properties he had owned: the four-bedroom family home in which he had resided until their mother's death; the two-bedroom apartment in New Farm where he had moved afterwards; a block of shops up north in a Bargara development; and several units on the Gold Coast. She didn't have much of a head for figures, but even to her untrained eye the totals tallied at the bottom of the page amounted to some very large numbers. She looked up. Kelly had already put her sheet aside, but Richard was studying his. His face gave nothing away.

The long-ago boy was still visible in his ageing features, in the curve of his sagging cheek, in the blue of his eyes behind his expensive bifocals. Evonne tried to put her finger on what it was

about her brother that seemed unsettled, not only since their father had passed, but for months prior to that. It was Richard who had been dealing with the solicitor, pushing this meeting forward and making arrangements. Yet he seemed uneasy, uncertain in a way Evonne did not recognise. The pointy end of middle age, perhaps.

Richard folded his sheet neatly in two. ‘Well, this all looks in order. I had no idea the old man had so much squirrelled away in mining. Had some good advice from somebody there. And all those blue chips have done all right, haven’t they? Weathered the storm. Now, the properties. Can we arrange that through your office? Probably best to deal with Dad’s old firm. Only bastards I’d trust.’ He looked at Evonne and Kelly. ‘I take it we’re agreed to sell everything? The properties, I mean. Not worth the hassle ... maintenance, body corporates. Neither of you want to tackle any of that, I bet?’

‘Well,’ said Kelly, ‘it might be nice to keep the house we grew up in. Happy memories and all that ... something solid for the kids ...’

Richard stopped mid-guffaw as he realised Kelly was serious.

‘Oh, right. I suppose we could consider keeping the house. Good little renter. And Ashgrove’s only going to get closer to the CBD as the city grows.’

‘It was just a thought, Richard,’ Kelly replied, with a flutter of her hand. ‘It’s not that important. Whatever you think is best.’

‘In point of fact, you may have some time to consider your options regarding the properties and indeed the shareholdings as well,’ said John. ‘I’ve been authorised to keep the status quo with the properties regarding tenants and leases, et cetera, and the same with the shares – no buying or selling, at least until the conditions of the will have been met. Your father has made provision for our

office to continue to handle his affairs through power of attorney for at least twelve months.'

'Right,' said Richard, drawing out the word. 'He was certainly organised, wasn't he? I can't imagine it'll take anything like twelve months, but glad you've got it all under control, John. All of us are very busy, as I'm sure you appreciate. Good to know the family fortune's safe in your hands until we get everything sorted out. Now, have you got documents ready for us to sign? Or do we need to come back for that?'

John Hardcastle leant back in his swivel chair, took off his glasses and polished the lenses with a tissue. He returned them to the bridge of his nose and regarded the three of them, peering in particular at Richard across the solid wooden desk. Evonne knew that John had always considered her brother a bit too arrogant. *He's enjoying himself*, she thought.

'Actually, Richard,' he said, 'I'm afraid it isn't quite as simple as that.'

Evonne noticed Richard stiffening as the solicitor continued.

'There's a reason he requested that only his three children attend today.'

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Richard felt the strangeness of he, Evonne and Kelly being referred to, collectively, as 'children', when each was greying and sun-spotted and thick around the middle. He and Kelly had children of their own now; grandchildren, in Richard's case. He had come together with his sisters so infrequently over recent years. He knew the two of them kept in close contact: in the last months of their father's life, they had phoned each other almost every day, reporting on Daniel's condition and making arrangements. But it went beyond

that. Kelly had always relied on Evonne and Libby for childcare. His wife, too, made sure their twins visited their aunts and cousins: Jemima was always bringing the girls to Kelly's or Evonne's. Even his older children – and his first wife – were drawn together by some magnetic pull, whereas he had never seen the need for such intimacies. Christmases and birthdays had been enough for him.

There was one Christmas in particular, when Kelly had been a toddler, that stood out in his mind. As usual, they had feasted on succulent roast pork with salty crackling, crunchy golden potatoes, and beans and silver beet from the garden. The mouth-watering aroma still permeated the house as they opened presents around the tree, with Evonne collecting all the wrapping paper for their mother, who always smoothed the creases and folded it into neat squares for the next year. Kelly was crawling amongst the discarded boxes, putting everything into her mouth: ribbon, half a dropped mince pie – she would chew on the chair legs when she was a tot, his sister. But then she got hold of a marble and chaos ensued – Kelly going blue in the face, Mum screeching, Evonne fallen silent, Dad with his fingers in Kelly's mouth, prodding about uselessly. Richard had grabbed Kelly, turned her upside down and pounded on her small back, hoping he looked more confident than he felt. And it worked. Out popped the marble. Kelly's cries rang in Richard's ears as his parents bundled her up and took her into the next room, checking that she was all right.

Kelly was crying now, in John Hardcastle's rooms. Richard blinked. He felt a tug on the cord that joined him to his younger siblings. He was the patriarch of the family now. Richard looked at his thin, pale sister and wondered how she would cope. Forty-four was far too young to see both parents in the ground. And with her lot still a handful.

He had been jealous of her when they were younger, of her bond with their father. But he knew she had needed their father, especially with Mum becoming so withdrawn after Kelly's birth. For many months, it was their dad who had soaked the nappies and hung them out to dry in flapping lines that flew around violently with the wind. Dad who had cobbled together dinners of lamb chops and lumpy mashed potatoes; Dad who had hacked great chunks of bread and spread them thickly with jam for Evonne's lunches.

But after that incident with the marble, their mother had returned to herself. Perhaps that had been the turning point for her – watching Kelly silently turning blue, then the relief of hearing her throaty cries. She had taken Richard aside after lunch, while everyone was resting and listening to carols. She had cupped his chin in her hand and looked at him, really looked at him, as if she hadn't actually seen him for the longest time.

'Thank you,' she had said. 'Thank you, Richard.'

And he had turned away, embarrassed, and pleased, and proud of what he'd done. Proud of that small act of protection.

He wasn't sure how – or when, or even why – he had lost that connection. It struck him with a pang that his jealousy towards Kelly and her relationship with their father had returned in recent years, especially since their mother died three summers ago. This time, it had been Kelly who made time for their father and his growing needs as he aged: she had popped over early in the morning with fresh bread and coffee, driven Daniel to watch the kids' sport on the weekends, regularly changed and washed his linen. And all this despite the stress of being a single parent after her marriage had fallen apart. Evonne, too, had done her bit – kept his lawn mown and his garden tidy, and she and Libby often arrived unannounced

with Thai takeaway and a movie. Richard knew all this because his father would tell him, during their (he was ashamed to admit it) occasional phone calls. Mostly he justified his sisters' ministrations as a singularly female trait, but in darker moments he knew he had deliberately kept his father at a distance.

And now that Daniel was gone, it would be them against him, with whatever surprises their father had left behind. Evonne would probably accept it as one more strangeness in a lifetime of unexplained oddities, undeserved joys and unjustified wrongs. Imperturbable. Kelly, young enough to feel cheated by the death of their parents, would still be too caught up in her grief. Richard, however, would rail. He knew his sisters thought of him as ponderous and imperious. But at least he wouldn't be putting up with any nonsense.

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Evonne watched Kelly and thought again how fragile she seemed. The antithesis of Richard, stiff and unmoving. Remarkable, she pondered, how three siblings with the same parents could turn out so differently.

John Hardcastle's words returned her to the matter at hand.

'Before he died, your father left in my possession a number of envelopes – letters, I believe, although I have not witnessed their contents. My instructions were to furnish the three of you with these envelopes at his passing. His further instructions are that each envelope is to be hand-delivered by one or more of his children to the addressee.'

John withdrew from a desk drawer a sepia-toned folder with an old-fashioned string binding. He unwound the string from the circular tabs and fanned a handful of envelopes for the trio to see.

A couple were standard-issue DL envelopes. One or two were yellowed with age. One was A5-sized and thick, clearly containing more than a letter. Three bore the logo of their father's old real estate firm.

For a moment, no-one said anything. Richard was very still. Evonne expected John to continue and, when he didn't, she said: 'I don't understand. Who are these letters to? Are they part of Dad's will? Has he left things to other people?'

'Of course he hasn't. That would be completely out of order,' interjected Richard, finally recovering his speech. He reached across and grabbed a letter. 'Margaret Sonnet,' he read. He threw the envelope back onto the desk. 'Never heard of her. The idea's absurd. Clearly the old man wasn't as with it as we thought.'

'I can assure you that your father was of sound mind each and every time he presented me with another letter.'

'What do you mean, each time?' asked Evonne.

'Your father gave me the first letter over thirty years ago. I can check my notes for the exact date.'

'Thirty years?' spluttered Richard.

'Approximately, yes. Thereafter, there was one every few years or so. Sometimes nothing for five or six years, and then he'd bring another to add to the folder.'

Her brother was on his feet now. His eyes blazed. 'Now see here, John. I have no idea what you're playing at, or what my addled father was up to, but what you're suggesting is outlandish, and I won't have it.'

'I'm afraid you have no choice, Richard. On the whole, the estate is to be bequeathed to Daniel's family, but the dispersion of your father's assets depends on the specific instructions of his will being carried out in a thorough and timely manner.'

‘But I don’t even know a ...’ he glanced at the desk, ‘an Irene White. Haven’t got the foggiest. Or that one. Or that one.’ He pointed in turn to the correspondence spread across the desk. Evonne noticed that Kelly had blanched. Was it the mention of that particular name? Or the whole peculiar situation?

‘Then I suggest you make some effort to find them. Each of them. My client’s instructions were very clear. Each letter is to be delivered, in person. By one of the three of you.’

‘And if they’re not?’

‘I’m afraid,’ said John Hardcastle, peering at them again over his glasses, ‘that should the conditions of the will fail to be met, your father’s entire estate is to be bequeathed to the Red Cross, specifically to fund its work in the’ – he consulted his notes – ‘ah yes, “to fund Red Cross and Red Crescent emergency medical teams in war-torn or disaster zones”’, he quoted.

*Would that be a bad thing?* wondered Evonne, and realised by the look on her brother’s face that she must have spoken aloud.

‘*A bad thing* ... good grief, Evonne. Have you taken leave of your senses? This is our inheritance we’re talking about. Dad always meant it to come to us. He didn’t even like the Red Cross. Used to send all those doorknockers packing.’

‘Perhaps he changed his mind,’ said Kelly. ‘Decided to do something good at the last.’

‘We’ll contest it,’ announced Richard. ‘The whole thing’s absurd.’

Kelly stared at him. ‘I thought you said no-one was talking about contesting the will.’

‘Well, that was before I bloody well knew what was in it.’

‘Of course, you are free to contest any aspect of your father’s will,’ said John, ‘but I must reiterate to you my view that your father

was of sound mind when he made his testament, and each time he amended it, and that – legally – I believe it is watertight.’ He gathered the envelopes into a tidy pile. ‘And of course, contesting his will could become a time-consuming and rather expensive exercise.’

Richard paced back and forth before the solicitor’s desk. ‘What if we *can’t* find these people?’

‘In the event that Daniel’s heirs are unable – or unwilling – to locate the addressees, I am under instruction to engage a private investigator to carry out his final instructions.’

‘A PI? Oh, this just gets better and better. Who’s going to pay for that, then?’

‘Should it be necessary, Richard, the fees charged by the investigating firm will be deducted from the net value of the estate.’ John matched Richard’s stare. ‘I have taken the liberty of looking into the fee structure for such a firm, and at approximately four hundred and fifty dollars per hour, minimum, I would suggest that it might be worth your while, financially, to at least attempt to locate these people yourselves.’

Richard glared for a moment longer, then threw up his hands in exasperation. ‘What if they’re dead? Moved? What if they don’t want to be found and given a letter from some ... some deceased crackpot?’

Kelly gave a little hiccupping sob.

John Hardcastle passed her a box of tissues. ‘In the event that the addressee has predeceased your father, the correspondence is to be passed to that person’s next of kin.’

‘This is absurd,’ Richard said again, and dropped into his chair, his head in his hands.

The pigeons fluttered against the window. The ticking of the clock sounded overloud.

Evonne addressed the solicitor. ‘These are Dad’s wishes?’ she clarified.

‘Yes, unequivocally. I do of course have Daniel’s last will and testament here for your perusal, now or at your leisure, but I can assure you that your father was quite firm on the matter.’

‘Dad never did anything without a reason, Richard, you know that,’ said Evonne. ‘And no matter what you think about this ... this unusual situation ... it’s not something he would’ve contemplated lightly.’

‘And he’s not ... he was not ... a crackpot,’ added Kelly. ‘You know as well as I do that he was in his right mind until the last, and it’s unfair of you to suggest otherwise.’

Evonne found in herself the voice of reason. ‘You don’t know what’s in these letters, John?’

‘No. I’m not privy to the contents of any of them.’

‘They could say anything,’ Richard whispered. ‘Anything. We haven’t a clue. God knows what skeletons he’s decided to take out of the cupboards. And we’re to deliver them personally? It could be embarrassing. Humiliating.’

‘Look,’ said Evonne. ‘Obviously this is something Dad felt strongly about. He’s been writing these letters or whatever they are, and giving them to John for safe-keeping, for ... how long did you say, John? Over thirty years? This is not some whim, a fancy of an old man who knew he was dying. He’s planned this, Richard. Planned for those people – whoever they are – to receive those letters, and planned for us to deliver them.’ She glared at her brother. ‘He’s never asked us to do much.’

‘What about all those medical bills? Who do you think paid for that treatment? If I’d known—’

‘What, Richard?’ asked Evonne, her voice now as steely as his.

‘You wouldn’t have paid? Are you seriously telling me you resented paying a few hospital bills?’

‘You’ll get it all back now, a hundred times over,’ said Kelly. ‘What a horrible thing to say. Anyway, you might have paid the bills but it was me over there every Sunday, trimming his toenails and changing the sheets on the bed.’

‘Stop it, both of you,’ said Evonne. ‘This is hardly the time or the place for this discussion.’ She turned to the solicitor. ‘I’m sorry, John. Dad could be a bit difficult, especially after Mum died, but we all did our bit. I wouldn’t want you to think any of us resented caring for him as he got older.’ She glared at Richard as if willing him to defy her. ‘Anyway, it sounds to me like it isn’t such a lot for him to ask. Deliver what, a dozen or so letters? How hard can it be?’

‘I agree,’ said Kelly. ‘And even if it is an old man’s foible as you seem to think, Richard, it can’t do any harm. It’s Dad’s money. He can do whatever he likes with it. Who are we to question his last wishes?’

‘We’re his family, his children, that’s who. And while it’s lovely that you think no harm can come of this, knowing Dad I would have to disagree. God knows what’s in there.’

‘You can’t abide uncertainty, Richard, that’s your problem,’ said Evonne. ‘Never done a spontaneous thing in your life.’

Kelly reached out and took their brother’s hand. Her tears had gone; a hint of a smile played around her eyes. ‘Come on, Richard, it could be an adventure. Maybe we’ll learn something about Dad.’

‘Or maybe we’ll just deliver the letters and learn nothing,’ said Evonne. ‘Doesn’t matter. Point is, Dad’s asked us to do it. And I, for one, am not going to let him down.’

Kelly interlaced her fingers with Richard’s and moved to sit on the arm of Evonne’s chair. ‘We’ll be doing it together,’ she said.

‘Unless you want to leave it all to John here, with his PI poking about for thousands of dollars?’

Richard closed his eyes and leant his head back. He disentangled his hand from Kelly’s and rubbed his eyelids. ‘Bloody migraine starting up, I’m sure of it.’

Evonne smiled. It wasn’t much of an agreement, but she knew that for Richard it was capitulation.

‘Right then,’ she said to John. ‘You’d better give us all the details.’

‘Bloody Dad,’ said Richard, ‘Unbelievable. He’s managed to keep control from the bloody grave.’

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Kelly thought Richard was wrong. Whatever the puzzling nature of their father’s request, she refused to believe it stemmed from an issue of control. But Richard’s brain seemed to be wired differently. Always suspicious of motives and behaviours, particularly where their father was concerned.

She supposed their father had always related to Richard differently than to her and Evonne. After all, he was a boy, and the first-born. Years ago, that had meant something. Richard had been expected to walk a certain path. She wasn’t sure whether her brother had felt he had to prove himself to their father, or whether his determination was driven by Daniel’s own ambition. By the time she was old enough to recall, Richard had been a young man, already studying at university and training at the bank, mature and responsible. Kelly had felt as if she’d grown up with four parents rather than two parents and two siblings.

Her mind lingered on her father’s last days. She saw him reclining in his easy chair, the remote control on one arm, a packet of liquorice allsorts on the other. The crocheted antimacassar

behind his head, a remnant from the days when her mother had been alive to care about such things. She searched the memory of his face for some clue as to the conundrum with which he had left them. She tried to imagine the story behind his actions.

His story.

Her father had been old even when she was young. He had been in his mid-forties when Kelly was born, and she had always pictured him with grey hair, stooped shoulders and a face full of wrinkles. It wasn't until she herself reached the age of forty, and realised that she felt no different, that she understood how skewed her perception had been. Surely her father had once been physically stronger and more resilient, his memory sharper, but her dominant image of her father was that of his last years, when he had been stubborn and difficult, forgetful. Frail. Frustrated. Her siblings, who could remember their father as a younger man, had found his descent into infirmity even more startling.

He had doted on Kelly when she was small – taken her for ice-cream, or into the city to see the lights, or shelled out for horse-riding lessons. Sometimes she had felt like an only child, showered with privileges not bestowed on Evonne, or even Richard. It was not related to money – it was his precious time, doled out exclusively to her, that made her feel distinct. Evonne had told her how it had begun when Kelly was a baby, when their mother had been unwell. Kelly had been thrust into their father's arms and he had been forced to confront the challenge, and she was grateful for that bond.

One of her strongest memories was of her father pushing her on the tyre swing that hung off the massive fig tree in their backyard. She would've been eight, maybe nine, her legs outstretched, her hands gripping tight to the nylon rope that

chafed and rubbed. Her father behind her, mouth open, shouting encouragement, strong arms ready to push again, ready to catch her should she fall.

In recent years, of course, their roles had been reversed. Caring for her father had been at times heart-breaking. Watching him struggle to recall a name, or even a familiar household word, his voice desperate. His habit of wiping at his constantly weeping eye. The way his signature had deteriorated – once a strong flourish, it had become weak and insubstantial, his hand shakier each time he wrote. She had cringed at the marks on his underwear that he tried to hide and, somehow worse, the food stains on his shirts that he didn't even notice. Every time she visited, she saw a new nick or scratch, never anything he noticed himself. *What have you done now?* she would say, and he would reply, *It's nothing. I don't even feel it.*

In the end, he had slipped away quietly. One morning she was replenishing his bread and milk and massaging a cramp from his calf; a few days later she and Evonne were poking about in his bathroom cabinet, sweeping whole shelves of out-of-date medications and skin care products into black garbage bags, sorting out the paperwork in his filing cabinet, divvying up the houseplants and pantry items. They had found dusty ornaments and piles of newspapers, faded photographs of ancestors they couldn't identify, childish handcrafted knick-knacks from his grandchildren, and even dresses of their mother's that they hadn't realised he'd kept. The detritus of a lifetime, disposed of in no more than a week. With each bag of rubbish that went out for the tip, or each box of salvageables that was earmarked for the charity bin, a little more of her father left the dwelling, until barely a trace of him remained – the scent of his aftershave clinging to the walls, the sounds of his silences lingering in the empty rooms.

Silences: yes, their father had gathered his silences about him like a heavy coat. Richard and Evonne had both been with Kelly the day they found the medals in a small, velvet-lined case, packed in a larger cardboard box that had been shoved under the stairs between a broken vacuum cleaner and a suitcase of old shoes. Kelly had opened the small case and held up the medals by their striped ribbons, the metal discs reflecting the light as they swung from her hand. Richard had been silent, as if he hadn't wanted to admit that the discovery was a surprise to him too. Their father had never talked about the war much, or his experiences.

'What are they for?' she had asked.

'I don't know,' Evonne had answered. 'We could look them up, I suppose.'

But somehow it was never done; none of them had found the time. When Kelly had chosen a suit in which to bury their father, and polished his shoes, and approved of the way the funeral director had parted his hair and knotted his tie, she had pinned the medals to their father's chest herself. Richard and Evonne had come to view his body, and none of them mentioned the medals again, as if she and her siblings tacitly agreed that this would remain a silent subject, closed for discussion, the medals and all they represented buried with their father.

And now, these letters, scattered across the desk. Innocuous and yet vaguely discomfiting. She stared, willing something – some meaning or witticism or posthumous remark – to fly out and make itself known. But of course that didn't happen. They were merely letters, ink scribbled on paper. What other secrets did their father have?

★

Richard watched as the solicitor straightened himself in his chair and tapped his fingers on the pile of envelopes. He wished John would just get on with it. He had no desire to jump through whatever hoops were about to appear, but he wanted the ordeal to be over, and quickly. He couldn't keep lying to Jemima. Although he didn't think of it as lying, exactly; more as sidestepping the truth. And once his father's inheritance came through, it wouldn't matter anyway. His problems would be solved and he could be honest with Jemima and know that she wouldn't have to worry. For that was what he was doing, he reasoned – preventing her from a whole lot of unnecessary worry. Yet now his father was impeding things, with whatever nonsense John Hardcastle was on about.

'Right. As I explained, your father left a number of envelopes with me to be distributed. I have a total of twelve letters and they must all be delivered in person by the three of you,' said John. 'Perhaps if you all have a look at them and then we can work out how to proceed.'

Richard and his sisters crowded towards the desk. Kelly clutched a handful of letters and began to look through them, passing some to Evonne, and soon all of the flimsy envelopes were circulating between the three of them.

'I don't know any of these people ...'

'I don't think we're meant to ...'

'How on earth are we going to find them?'

'What if they're not in Brisbane, do we have to travel?'

Evonne dropped back into her chair. 'Where do we start? How do we decide who's delivering what?'

'May I suggest,' said John, 'that we approach this in an orderly fashion.' He collected the envelopes back into a pile.

Richard pointed at the letter on top. 'Irene White,' he read.

‘Never heard of her. Do you have any information about her, John, or are we supposed to use our powers of extra-sensory perception to figure it out? Huh. I don’t have the first clue.’

‘Actually,’ murmured Kelly, ‘I know that name. That’s ... that was ...’

Evonne and Richard both turned to her expectantly.

She sighed. ‘I think Irene White was Dad’s first wife.’

Richard opened his mouth in disbelief, but no sound came out. Evonne looked as though her stomach had lurched.

‘First wife?’ Richard spluttered. ‘Dad never had a first wife. He was married to Mum for sixty-one years! When did he get time for a first wife?’

‘He married her during the war,’ said Kelly. ‘He told me about it one night when he’d been drinking. It was just after Simon and I broke up. Think he wanted to make me feel better.’

‘Oh, for the love of God. You’re serious?’ Richard could feel himself turning an unpleasant shade of puce. ‘And you didn’t think to share this with any of us?’

‘Don’t know if I really believed it myself,’ Kelly said in a small voice.

‘What, you think Dad made up having a first wife to make you feel better about the collapse of your marriage? Why didn’t you say something?’

‘And what would have been the point, Richard? Mum was still alive. I didn’t want to hurt her. Can’t even recall if she knew. Besides, Dad was drunk. He could have said anything. I didn’t know if there was any truth in it.’

He glowered at his younger sister. ‘I cannot believe, I simply *cannot* believe, what I’m hearing. Dad was not married to anyone but Mum. Whatever he told you was bullshit.’

‘Maybe it was,’ said Kelly. ‘Like I told you, he’d been drinking.’

John Hardcastle held the envelope between the two with a questioning look. Richard shrank back. ‘Give it to her. I don’t want anything to do with it.’

Kelly took it, not with reluctance, thought Richard, but with reverence.

His hands were sweating. Kelly was turning the envelope over in her hands, as if staring at it hard enough would cause some information to magically appear.

Evonne spoke up. ‘John, just give me a couple of random ones. I don’t care who they are.’

The solicitor handed over three envelopes. ‘That should be your share.’

Evonne read out the names. ‘Michael Adamson, Nigel Lawless, Audrey Blackson. Sound innocuous enough.’

‘Lawless. I know that name. Didn’t Dad work with a fellow called Lawless for a while?’ asked Richard.

‘Guess I’ll find out,’ said Evonne.

‘Give me two more too, then,’ said Kelly. ‘Jennifer Ibsen,’ she read. ‘And Monteray Max.’

‘What kind of a name is Monteray Max,’ muttered Richard. ‘All right, all right. Hand the rest this way,’ he said in resignation. ‘Leanne Young, Margaret Sonnet, Jeffrey Upton.’ This last was more a packet than an envelope; it bulged with unseen material. ‘Three names that mean nothing at all to me.’ He counted in his head. ‘John,’ he said, ‘that’s only nine. I thought you said there were twelve letters.’

‘Yes,’ said John. ‘I was just getting to that. There are three more, one to be delivered specifically by you Richard, one by Evonne and one by Kelly—’

‘Well, hand them over then,’ interrupted Richard.

‘—but they are not to be given to you until all the others have been delivered. I don’t even have the envelopes here with me; they’re in the safe.’

‘Are they for us then?’ asked Kelly, a glimmer of hope in her voice. Richard knew what she was probably thinking. A last message for each of them from their father. Some last great words of wisdom, some sign of his love.

‘No,’ said John, ‘not *for* you, but to be delivered *by* you. I’m sorry, I don’t know any more than that.’

*Don’t know, thought Richard, or can’t say?*

Into the silence of the room drifted the unasked questions, like petals shaken free from the boughs of a tree by a gust of wind. Richard wanted to sweep them all up – the questions, the envelopes, everything – and dump the whole mess into the bin. But his father’s last requests hung heavy in his hands, the envelopes weighed down with uncertainty, his mind reeling with doubt. Who, when, where, why and how. The most basic of questions, unanswered.