



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.

...

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.