

## FLIGHT OF THE OWL

Her breath comes harder now, each a small mountain to be climbed, thankfully not an Everest, not yet. Eyes clenched tight against a gathering storm, I hear gentle eddies upon the seashore; in and out, foam-filled as they retreat in silence. Or fits and starts of a wintry breeze in the grand old fig through the window; just the sigh now, at the end, of the outermost foliage; the rattle of brittle, waxy leaves.

Soon, there comes a tapitty-tap, a respectful knock followed by the metallic click of the latch. All at once my mother's next breath seems such a private thing. I feel we should own it, share it between ourselves having laboured together so hard. With bated breath I await her next, with every fibre of my being, pray for the last. *Fuck off* comes to mind but is quickly gone. It was never her, nor rarely me. In breezes Rhonda, the RN on shift, and I defer. Amazingly, Mum responds to Rhonda's deep, manly voice while she sleeps restlessly to my own.

But after all, who am I? Haley's Comet? Eclipsed by life's demands whilst all the while, Father Time cruelly beats his drum? In times, oh how trifling, when I crested my sun, there was a brief warmth that spoke of dust and gases and star formation, and a conundrum of maternal gravity that, once broached, took on a repulsion to equal attraction. How I wish I could go back and fill with love the vacuum of those long years when I sped selfishly beyond the realms of her outer planets.

'I'm here, Mum,' seems such small comfort, a pissy grain of sand against the sheer weight of a lifetime of selfless caring. But it's all I have. Regardless, as the rattle of pain peeps beyond the grey fog that's old-man-morphine, she's begun a distant chant that's set to haunt.

*... could you please come soon ... could you please come soon ...*

When I press the buzzer and clutch at her claw beneath the covers, there's a weak flutter of nails; downy feathers soft against calloused work-weary palms I'd thought till now emotionally impervious. How wrong was I? How to remain strong, safe within my shell, when I gaze knowingly upon the wizened pebble that once was my Uluru? When I've sensed the dizzy heights of those that care; seen the wreck when the pot runs dry such that there is naught to be had but sweet surrender? For Mum; nine long years at the last, unassailable; withdrawn from the world within the quiet bastion of aged care.

Deep in thought, I study her hand and count the seconds. Maybe the buzzer's burnt out. Maybe no one hears beneath the corridor cacophony of our resident screamer, Cloris, two doors

down; a constant, building ululation not unlike the deep lowing of a scrub-bull until, in the dead of night, it greets its challenger with a roar to wake the dead.

For now, Cloris might as well be the boogey-woogley bugler on Mars. For in Room 13, as our bright and colourful resident's shingle informs: *Charlotte Anne; born Narrandera NSW, grew up in Orange, barracks for the Eels, has four sons, blah-de-blah*, there's no let-up, nothing else in my mother's shrinking universe.

... could you please come soon ... 'I'm here Mum.' ... could you please come soon ...

Her skin is translucent, her veins impossibly blue-black within desiccated flesh; a tangle of life's trials narrowed and bunched such that it seems they'd barely seep tepid, soap-softened water let alone life-thickened syrup fresh from the bellows.

Rhonda matter-of-factly points out a depression in Mum's throat. A tiny canyon, it pulses weakly, irregularly. She says it's a sign. *Of what?* I won't ask, but why haven't I noticed? Or that her hair isn't as grey as I'd thought, more a salt'n'pepper, thin and wispy; wind-blown streamers of last season's Bunched Kerosene grass against the dazzling alabasters of Rhonda's freshened bedding.

The doctor is here at last. I hold Mum's hand as a cannula is inserted beneath the covers. There's also a gadget called a *syringe drive*, electronically driven, black cased; placed broodingly at the bedhead. It's explained to me that it will ensure a gentler road ahead for my mother; replacing rugged, red-tinged corrugated hollows with a cooling mist over sylph-like, highway grade black-top. Also, that if it doesn't, the dosage can be tweaked. Which is understood, sans explanation, to be a signpost which screams '**point of no return, one-way traffic, no stopping or turning!**'

When Rhonda pads softly away, as the door clicks shut, I catch sight of Mum's shingle; ... has four sons ...

It was when I was at the absolute zenith, light years away in deep dark space aka Leopold Downs Station, east Kimberly, that I placed a call to my mother in Sydney, a miserable few coins to reassure after months of silence. 'I'm still here Mum, somewhere, but you know, how's 't all goin'? how's Dad? how's Mike, Matt, Chris? mightn't make it back this wet blah-de-blah.' The white-haired boy sweating at the pub pay-phone to drunken jeers and cat-calls, in town with the crew to piss-up and chase pussy.

Instead of words, I got sobs. *Fuck! Mum never cries!* It was because of Mike, Michael John, eldest by two years from yours truly. To my credit, I did come *this time!* Also, to my credit, I didn't

know what melanoma was, but came anyway. Or that a six-inch gash into the side of my brother's chest cavity in search of such a thing was a death sentence back in those days. But I did come.

I played golf with Mike, had a beer at the local, but only ever one before he went pale and quiet. Went with him to see Dr McCarthy too, the oncology guru at Royal Nth Shore Hospital where Mike and he shared dark humour and a few 'fucks' of frustration together over the latest dismal tests. Back home, Mum was bright enough, flitting around behind the scenes as was her way. Dad was maudlin, as was his way; it was when he began to write poetry. At some point in time, Mike said to me, 'Whachygonnado? Hang around like a bad smell until I cark it?'

I only wish I had.

And so, deep-space sling-shot once again, this time to planet Rockhampton Downs NT, and from there, a mere parsec or two further north to Innesvale Station in the Victoria River district where I got the inevitable 'Get your arse here, and quick-stick!', a call from my mother on the homestead radio-telephone. As I discovered later, there was also a letter sent some weeks before, a much gentler 'Perhaps think about coming home,' which went around the world and finally to dead letters.

Mike was twenty-three when he passed away. That night, Dad looked a hundred and three, and it was the first time I ever saw Mum drink beer. It was also the first of my near-earth misses, this one by a city block in a speeding cab. But it was a lesson. When stars super-nova, they don't hang about for distant comets.



There's another knock on the door, two of the Kiribati Islander girls, staff sent to turn Mum over. It's the bedsores as much as anything, the worst of them an angry raw mass on the point of her bony, left shoulder. Also, Rhonda's fresh pillowslip is blood-soaked from a scabbed-over, *shaved but not excised* BCC on the left-side of Mum's forehead, which now is a stark reminder of grim outcomes, of medical pragmatism. *What use the scalpel when the sun's going down?*

One of the islander girls buzzes for Eeata, next RN on shift. Brown and voluptuously rounded, Eeata fairly glows with that particular Polynesian vivaciousness. Today, she has a daffodil in her hair. A mother hen to her countrymen, she is a magnet for me. In weaker moments, I see myself sobbing on her shoulder, and wonder if she feels my unshed tears for what is now truly upon us all. For me, it lies like a thick, grey pall over the room. And yet, Eeata's good humour rings through. She cackles agreeably when I compliment her décor, pointing out for her the wisdom of our saying, 'Flowers don't

sit well upon the heads of westerners.’ But the confusion in her eyes is plain to see. How to paint a picture of airport gangplanks, grass-skirts, acres of toned burnished umber and our illustrious Prime Minister’s patronizing grin as he bends for the traditional lei.

‘Bein’ lazy today Anne, aren’t we? She laughs again, leaning close ‘Never seen you at bingo. What’s come over you, Anne?’

Astoundingly, Mum replies. ‘Yes, lazy ... lazy.’ It’s no more than a drunken slur, an utterance that but for Eeata’s sharp ears would be dismissed as delirium. But it’s also the sweet peals of a bellbird in the rainforest, stunning us all to silence. Then Mum croaks, ‘Where’s Steve?’ Eeata cackles and points. ‘Your handsome son is here, Anne. Look, he has a foldaway bed next to you, been there for days and nights. Eatin’ all your meals for you, greedy thing.’

Still smiling, Eeata decides ointment and tape for now, and a tweak of the little black box for the head lolling, on Dr’s advice. When I point out how much Elastoplast loves eyebrows, the unspoken question being upcoming dressing changes, Eeata nods agreeably, without answering. They all do, all the Kiribati girls. It’s the signs, I know; Rhonda’s signs. There would be more. And so, they all seem relieved when I go for a walk. I’ve heard their busy chatter a dozen times through the shingle-door as I pad along the corridor for a coffee. It’s a comfort.

Outside, it’s wintry sun and tepid coffee. It’s shit, but it’s aged-care kitchen regulation. Anyhow, who gives a fuck. Right now, I’m numb and happily so. It’s warm and sheltered in the courtyard, the wintry sun cresting gleaming banks of newly-installed solar panels. I can breathe air that’s not COVID-regulation sterile, and dream of steaming hot coffee. There’s a grey-haired woman at the corner of the building, doing much the same as I’m doing. I know her face, said ‘hullo’ once or twice during rare visits at bingo. She catches my eye. I’m trapped.

For her, it’s recently deceased hubby who apparently was God; ream after ream, a diatribe, a life history without so much as a pause for me to say, ‘Excuse me, Mum’s still alive and kicking, and right this minute, probably chanting *could you please come soon*. But I know Mum. She would have listened politely, and so I try. But my mind’s elsewhere. It’s the damned shingle again; *has four sons ...*

Matthew McMurry, third in line, suicided at 36. Dad and I attended, leaving Mum to wring her hands a hundred and fifty miles away. Even so, she was our rock. What would she do? What would she advise comes next? What in hell do we do without her to tell us? *And yet, thank Christ she’s not here!* There was heaps to do out at the block, a few Ks along the Manilla Rd; the gruesome stuff. The clean-up, the dog, the piecing together, the guilt, the uncooked eggs in the frypan, the trail of aluminium beer cans between the house and his aged Holden sedan, the fail-safe fitting from exhaust

to cab, the letter in the glove-box, and the all-pervading smell. Even so, for me, then as much as now three decades on, the worst was always Tamworth Police Precinct, front counter.

The Officer in Charge looks Dad up and down. 'I'm sorry Sir,' he says with a sigh 'if you could wait just a minute. There are some belongings.' There isn't much, a cut-off beer carton full of knick-knacks when it's words we both crave; explanations, a voice from the dead like in the movies, a benevolent echo absolving those left behind, wondering. Inside the box there's a scrunched up page from an 'Elders' note-pad, the one that comes before 'ewes; breed-chart.' Dad unfurls it and howls like a baby. I've prized it gently from his shaking hand and hugged him tight, trying to be the strong one. Over his shoulder it's a moving target, racked by explosive sobs. Matt's last will and testament, a dozen lines, one item per line; all that's left that's not hocked, tragically willed back to his parents for want of a wife that's somewhere, and friends he's held at arm's length until they are also somewhere.

When Eeata waves me inside, Dad and I are all alone in the world. There's not another soul, not the roar of a motor car, not an office phone amidst the hustle and bustle of a busy, regional Precinct at mid-day. There's just the two of us, drowning in reception, leaned helplessly against the front counter. It's an image that sees me stride out with renewed purpose across fresh-cut dew-drenched lawn. I've signed to Eeata that I'm coming. She and I have already had the heart-to-heart over my long history of near-earth misses. She knows I will not miss this one.



Mum stopped eating a month ago, just like she said she would. Not outright, not enough to alarm, but enough so that over time the fire would flicker and fade to cooling embers beneath a blanket of white ash. What she did peck at was enough for Eeata to reassure me over the phone, 'Yes, Anne's eating, ate almost half her breakfast this morning,' breakfast being a sparrow's portion of Greek-style yoghurt. That would be Mum, a spoonful to please, then a firm shake of her head at the prospect of more. *What else? How else?* Mum's passing would be the flight of an owl, a thief in the night. Her passing would give no one else pain.

It was Matt dubbed her 'The Owl'. There was a family photograph taken during one of my outermost orbits. It was happier days at some metro club or pub; Matt 'the entertainer', Dad pulling funny faces, chinking a froth-filled schooner glass against Christopher Martin's, brother number four, and Mum's eyes a barn-owl's, caught in the flash. Inevitably, she was affectionately known as 'Owly' by close family and extended. Christopher Martin, last to fly the coop, bore the full brunt of her purported superpowers. According to Chris, the 'Owl' could hear ants crawl, knit her brows at a lie

before it was told, sniff out hidden Penthouse mags like a bloodhound, and swoop mercilessly, seemingly from nowhere, upon bad behavior.

Each breath now is anything up to a minute, yet her pulse is strong. On the telly, an orca is birthing in a media bubble at Sea World. For each agitated, swirling somersault, there's a flex of a tiny, emerging tailfin, and also another laboured breath. But when bub emerges in a whoosh of inky blackness, there's something else. A jarring rattle that sets my pulse racing.

Perhaps mum's just clearing her throat. Or was it the door swung to, just as junior went plonk amidst cheers and howls of joy in the strange dry world beyond marine plexiglass? Some shit-of-a-kid fangin' by on a pushbike with a clacker on his front wheel? How long ago was it that Mike and I did the same, back when it was clothes pegs and a fold of Kellogg's Cornflakes cardboard? Or was it...?

But lo, there's another; the gurgle of the sink after the dishes are done, a wet irregular gargle sucked rather than blown, apparently heralding the next stage of dying as forecast so brutally by the palliative care lady. How kind of her. How generous to set out a roadmap of failing anatomical functions that smacked of abattoir shut-down procedure at 3.00 pm sharp. So kindly meant, so suitably forewarned and forearmed, it was all I could do to resist shutting her outside with Cloris.

Helplessly, I buzz for Paul, another Kiribati angel. Didn't he say earlier he has something to dissipate the fluid, something to help, not necessarily stop what's unstoppable? While I wait, I'm all, 'I'm here Mum,' again; 'Paul has something for your throat.' I have her hand under the covers, and for just a heartbeat, her eyes fly open, sightless and alarmed. Her lips move slightly. She knows I'm in close orbit. She also knows about death rattles. Along the corridor, Cloris starts up again.

Before Mike, it was her own mother. After Mike, it was Dad's mother, followed by Dad's father and shortly after, her younger brother. At 90, it seems she's nursed so many, not least amongst them, my Dad when it was his time to be called. For Mum, it was just what you did, selflessly and at home if possible. What an agony it must have been for her to imagine son number three and four facing their own respective curtain-calls, alone and bereft of such a comfort. Chris, yes, Christopher Martin as well; youngest survivor of our super-Owl's maternal stifling, lying half-submerged upon the shores of Menindee Lakes, broken and bleeding under the stars at the foot of a rocky causeway. *Oh, to be there!* To wipe away the sweat from his brows, and hold his hand as the death rattles took hold.

Paul is a comfort. Eeata said he's shy, but bedside over the past few days during his shift, we've talked footy, politics, sheep and women, and compared kids' crazy games; literally oceans apart and yet similar. There's an Island one that smacks of schooldays 'red-rover-cross-over', except for a weird, rubbery vine fashioned into a lance. Hurlled like one; think *Shaka Zulu, you're dead* instead of a

desperate clutch for a shirt collar and *you're it*. Paul laughs self-consciously, and we go quiet for a moment, picturing the scene that we both have in our minds, staring across Mum's prone form. All at once a somber mood comes over 'Room 13 - Charlotte Anne' that shrivels laughter's warmth such that the husks of its joyful peals drop to the vinyl flooring like autumn leaves. *What a difference a day makes!* Wasn't it only yesterday, amongst footy, politics and women that Mum's eyes flew wide, as did mine and Paul's when she gasped, 'I'm enjoying all the talking!'

Outside, through open curtains and ceiling-to-floor glass panels, headlights flicker and fade beyond darkening shrubbery. *How strange*. Wasn't it also barely moments ago that Eeata charged Mum with first-degree laziness? Bathed in fresh morning brightness through the very same windows, I'd been left pondering that subtle yet unmistakable change in the quality of sunlight that somehow defines am from pm. A somehow melancholic delineation, it's nevertheless a will-o'-the-wisp. *Perhaps, I'm thinking, seen only by those that set vigil for the dying*. At such times, as I've come to understand, other-worldly concepts intrude upon the mundane. It's the steady beat of time itself, unfathomable, unstoppable. For now, I shudder at the thought of dusk's gloaming without Paul's companionship. Tonight, I suspect, there'll be no, 'I'm enjoying all the talking.'

'Another one we used t' play,' Paul goes on, 'makes y' grit y' teeth properly ... same way. But at least,' he grins, 'you're alive.' He then describes a particularly exotic island fruit. Wind-fallen, aged and dried, it's set alight and then hurled at one another for a laugh; fiery water bombs that scar for life! In the dim light from the hallway, I can't help but glance at his forearm, a stepladder of pale, thin scars against milk-sweetened mocha. Once more, he challenges the cloistered oppressiveness of 'Room 13 - Charlotte Anne.' 'Nother one again,' he laughs, sensing raised eyebrows, 'different game, courage thing you know, for the girls.' Eeata had told me already; matchsticks lit and left there to smoulder. 'True, bro,' Paul says, shaking his head at the stupidity; perhaps remembering the twang of burnt hair and flesh. 'We all got 'em!' he cackles. I see that, can't see the girl. Maybe it's Eeata.

Paul and Eeata have a special connection beyond their Kiribati ties. Never having set foot off their Island home, they landed at Brisbane airport together. Then followed their respective years of study and prac' work before a posting to Longreach as fully qualified R. N's. As Paul explains, in Longreach, he again felt some of what he'd left behind, the simple things. *Minus rubbery assegais and Molotov cocktails*, I'm thinking. But it's not the time for wisecracks. The way things are moving on for Mum, it's no longer the time or the place.

The dreaded rattle. As we sit bedside yarning, I'm thinking for Paul sake as much as for Mum's that it's definitely less, and say so. But when he's paged away into night-softened corridors, I see it's the same as it was. Mum would be proud of me, I'm sure.

Paul hands over to Courtney at 10.30. Mum is gently turned, and the syringe drive carefully scrutinized. I'm assured I'll be shaken in my foldaway at the slightest change, absolutely confident as I pull the cover over my head, that sleep for me tonight is the supplementary number in million-dollar Lotto. For me, coffee after supper is Avgas in a 50's model Villiers cement mixer. Nevertheless, sleep comes. And in my exhausted, turmoil-heightened state, also, the worst of my near-earth misses.

Taree airport, mid north coast NSW. I have my bag from the carousel. *I've made it!* All the same, I cross whatever fingers I can behind my back. Soon enough, grey-haired and pony-tailed Derek, sixties love-gen renegade, friend of Dad's, strides through. There's something about his manner as he comes towards me. It's the hustle that's lacking, eyes averted until the last. All at once, I hate him. He's telling me what I don't want to know.

Then it's Wingham Memorial Services Club. My hand is a jackhammer. I have double vision. One moment it's a blur of hastily scrawled ball-point pen, the next, a sea of expectant faces, some cramming the auditorium exits when all the seats are filled. Some I know, family and close friends. Most, I don't. In close orbit, Dad had quite a gravitational pull, something I'd almost forgotten about whilst deep space roaming.

I'm fine until I get to the part about how we used to enjoy a beer together at the local, but choke on a gob-stopper when I try to say, 'Sadly, not often enough,' sensing those that knew him well would know that as well. But with my Uncle Gerry's arm around my shoulder, I hold it together through the rest.

All at once, there's blinding lights and serious fluros. Awakened in sheer panic, I'm suddenly back at the airport? Derek hovers close, inches from my face, shaking me by the shoulder and whispering, 'Sorry, but your Dad passed away.' This time, I hate him so much I've hissed 'Fuck off'.

Flinching away for just a moment, his unkempt, stubbled greyness is all at once the soft glow of Courtney's blonde halo, soothing and calm. 'Sometimes,' she says, touching me gently on the wrist, 'it speeds things up when we turn them in the night. But you have time, Steve. You have time.' They are the sweetest words I'll ever hear.



It's well after 1.30 am when Eeata comes in. Courtney tells me later she'd insisted she be told. With her beautiful black mane untamed and draped around her shoulders, dark, sleep-crinkled eyes alight,

perhaps with the parting touch of a lover's caress, she pads softly into 'Room 13 – *lately* Charlotte Anne'. At last, I thrill to the hug I yearned for. She is perfect. 'Better getchya dressed, Anne,' she says, just like it's wake up and coffee-time. 'Warm stuff, eh? Cold down Wingham way, they reckon. That handsome son o' yours'll know, won't he?'

In Mum's cupboard, I rummage for her tan slacks, luck onto the floral top she loved beneath a neatly folded stack of nighties. There's an emerald green woolen cardigan she used to wear as well. 'See, Anne?' Eeata laughs, 'the tan ones. Hated black din-cha, fuss-pot?'

Out in the corridor, I hear their talk while Eeata, Courtney and Linda do what they have to do. But tonight, there's a respectful murmur through the shingle-door rather than the ffffft of pressure relief that normally follows me along the corridor for a coffee.

It's hard for me to look at Mum when I get the call. She has her teeth back in, which gapes her mouth in a rictus. And with the waxen pallor of death already a sheen upon her face, the whole effect is distastefully contrived China doll rather than shrinking violet, the absolute sheer simplicity that was always her. Nevertheless, with her lids tightly shut, hands folded neatly across the hem of her green cardigan, Mum's hush is stern, 'Can't you see? It's for them, not for you. Or even me!'



Talk turns to Eeata's homeland, which leads to praise and my heartfelt thanks to Paul in his absence, which somehow leads impossibly to WW2 Japanese occupation in Kiribati. There's the chair Paul had earlier on for Eeata, pushed back beside Mum's bookshelf laden with odds and sods and several plastic and ceramic owls. She rests her elbow beside the pot-gutted wooden one, the hand-carved owl sporting bright orange fish-lipped beak and neatly parted crest reminiscent of an immaculately coiffed avian Donald Trump. One of Anne's favourites, it was a birthday gift from her granddaughter, something Kate, our youngest, lucked onto during one of her many forays into the delightful disorder of second-hand bookstores.

Courtney claims the bathroom wall, a tiny portion of it. Slim and tall, fair-haired and softly spoken; she leans stork-like with one leg up. She has a smile for Eeata's loud and forthright manner. I do as well. It's just not reflected on my face, still somewhat haunted by the presence of my China doll.

Remarkably, Eeata tells of a mass grave exhumation by the U.S military when she was a child. Apparently, as told by the elders on the island, well-entrenched Japanese soldiers once repelled a seaborne liberation attempt by US forces with devastating loss of life. Five decades on, guided to

densely overgrown, beach-front sites, forensic experts were dumbfounded to discover that the remains of the US Marines had been buried with dignity, row upon row beneath the sandy loam; each with rifle to hand, dog tag carefully arranged for future scrutiny.

It's totally out of left field. It's salivating over tonight's cheese, crackers and avocado dip whilst emptying shit-cans. It's Eeata the magician, instinctive grief-councilor extraordinaire. All at once, there's a world out there again. After a gee-whiz or two, I pit Kiribati against Torrens Creek, a small town 500 Ks north of Longreach. There's just a smidgen about death, literally the elephant in the china shop; my description of an enormous morgue facility set up near there to house the bodies of US servicemen and women until flights back home. But it's mostly about the starkness of remnant, rusted stacks of five-gallon fuel cans and the hundred by three-thousand metre landing strips that still dominate an otherwise remote and lonely landscape. Somehow, I convey a picture of rusty-red swiss-cheese cattle yards scattered willy-nilly across the district, complements of acres of interlocking landing pads that once upon a time allowed B52 bombers safe harbour from anticipated Japanese raids.

There's more; Courtney tells of her parents' place north of Winton, childhood days of sheep and cattle and School of the Air. But when she catches my eye, staring up at her from the other side of Mum's bed, the words die on her lips. 'She liked simple,' Courtney points out, complimenting my choices. 'Very particular, Anne was, but she liked simple.'

Outside, in the corridor, it's deathly quiet. With a deep breath and a final glance at my mother, I switch the light off for her, and latch the door gently. *Did she glide on silent wings along the corridor? Did she sit with Cloris, finally stilling her demons?*

On the short walk to the carpark, I stop for a moment outside the blank that's now Room 13. Amongst the shadows, from a gentle night breeze there's a soft sigh, a rustle of leaves in the old fig tree; but no owls. There's a shiver takes me by surprise; perhaps the chill of the night air, perhaps my imagination running wild. As it sweeps me away, I walk quickly from beneath the canopy to roam the heavens once more, and to yearn for them.

In the vastness of space, I wrinkle my nose to the acrid taint of super-heated hyper-giants, shiver amongst shadowy clouds of icy gases and tingle to the sting of storms of neutrinos that pluck at my tail like angry paper wasps. And in the diamond-studded, velvety blackness, I hear echoes of Courtney's parting words, shouted across the cosmos. Somewhere within them, garlanded with the brilliance of a million paper daisies, is the epitaph I'll one day come to write.

**Our mother, our rock; a simple life. Simplest of all, she simply cared.**

