

Lily

I should have been expecting it, but then there'd never been any particular time frame. Probably best that way, as it would be too much to anticipate my own death all of the time.

Normally I'd have another half hour of sleep before waking to the first blushes of dawn across Finn Bay, heralded by the squawks of lorikeets in the garden outside my room. Even then, I'd resist full consciousness, aware of my body nestled into the slight dip of the mattress. The sun's rays would begin to push into my room through a gap between the heavy night drapes and for a while would strike at just the right angle, allowing me to focus on the warmth delivered to the paper-thin and rucked skin of my right side. This sensation and the birdsong afford me two of life's few remaining pleasures. In the still-subdued light I'd let myself drift in and out, fully aware of my aged body's tender pressure points, but too dozy to let myself care.

But it's still dark, and I don't hear the sound of my door swinging on its hinges. The first indication I'm not alone is when a shock of cool, silky material is contoured around my nose, cheeks and mouth, jolting me from my stupor. I know from the overpowering smell of lavender that the fabric belongs to a cushion, a Christmas gift designed to help me sleep. How fitting.

My eyelids shoot open but the cushion blocks the face of my assailant. I don't need my eyes, though, to tell me whose weight is being used to smother me, who has been kind and brave enough to agree to perform this ultimate, unselfish act of love. My memory might be rotting away but I've known this moment was coming, and I welcome it.

For a short time I don't move, or try to breathe. I feel a humbling gratitude to my saviour for having the courage to bestow on me the gift of death. I want to cry for the sweet relief that will soon be granted to me. I will, as promised by our pact, be spared dementia's heartless progression. The pressure on my face builds, and it hurts. But I don't mind the pain. I'm counting on the fact that my collaborator wants this to be over quickly, before their resolve turns to dust. As if from a vast distance, I hear their grunts of effort and, like a pinprick of light in a black tunnel, something about the sound catches my attention. It's not right, not expected ...

Like an absurd, macabre duet, my own groan, a visceral but muffled whimper, rises from somewhere in the depths of my being. The stench of lavender fills my nostrils, burning my throat, saturating my lungs. I feel a rising panic, a desperate need to inhale. Fighting with everything I have, I kick out with adrenaline-fuelled violence. My bladder releases its warm contents. My spindly legs struggle against the sheet, now a cruel straitjacket. I try to wriggle sideways while scrabbling and clawing at the cushion but the material is slippery and, as my left arm is still without strength, I can't grasp it. Please, whoever you are, let me die now, or let me breathe. I never imagined this terror. Have mercy on me.

I'm fading, black turning to white as a sense of peace washes through me. I let go, surrendering once again to the prospect, the relief, of death. My core, in its original and pure form, will soon be free. Using every ounce of strength I whisper, the words of my request floating along on the river of what I pray will be my last exhalation. Please ... don't ... stop ...

1999

The change room's heavy burgundy curtain traps us in a musty fug of dust-ridden carpet and stale sweat and, despite my best intentions, the first grumblings of impatience niggle my insides. I watch on with amusement though, as my daughter wrestles with a shiny, cross-strapped dress in custard yellow that is only part way over her head. The two of them seem to be in a stalemate.

This must surely be the twentieth outfit Pauline has tried on. Still, I'm delighted the two of us continue to share this kind of activity together.

'Mum, I think I'm stuck.'

I can't help but smile at Pauline's muffled plea for help. She really has got herself into a tangle of shoulder straps and arm- and neck-holes.

'Here, let me help,' I offer, and, as we attempt to determine which bit of dress is supposed to go where, my daughter's laughter is infectious. 'I think you need to take it back up over your head and start again,' I suggest, just as her face and hands burst through the garment in triumph.

'I thought I'd be stuck in there forever,' she says, looking flushed but highly entertained. She turns to examine herself in the mirror, smoothing the dress's material over her thighs as her expression falls into a mix of bemusement and analysis. 'I quite like the colour on me, but there should be a danger warning on the label: *Beware. This garment is not for the faint-hearted.*' She twists to inspect the rear view. 'Seriously, though, what do you think?' she asks, striking a flamenco-like pose. 'Have we finally nailed it with this one?'

Pauline's always appreciated honesty over platitudes so I don't feel I have to tiptoe around her. 'After all that effort, I hate to say it but I think you can do better. The shape is nothing special on you. And in this humidity a synthetic fabric isn't the best choice.'

Pauline flips up the hem in search of a label. 'You're right. Ninety-five per cent rayon. I'd be sweating up a storm.'

'Maybe we should just get in the car and drive to Rorook,' I suggest. 'Most of the shops there are open until five-thirty.'

'I'd love to, Mum, but I've got a hair appointment at two and Rachel's bringing her new boyfriend over this after-noon to meet me and Sam. She's made a fancy cake and everything. She might really like this one. Christos, I think his name is.'

'My granddaughter's been baking? In this weather?'

Pauline rolls her eyes with a small smile. 'Yeah, well, young love,' she says before raising her arms above her head. 'Back into battle, then?'

I laugh and help her navigate her way free of the dress. 'Remember when you were little, how you used to get all manner of ingredients out of the pantry and invent your own recipes? There was always a hell of a mess but it was nothing if not entertaining.'

'Oh god. You were so patient with me.' Pauline deftly flips the garment right side out and gives it a solid flick. 'You still are. Even now, you're happy to come along and do this,' she adds, gesturing with the polyester number towards the other dresses fighting for space on the No hook. 'And I really value your input.'

A familiar current of maternal love drenches my body. I place my hand on Pauline's shoulder. 'Even at seventy-nine?' I fish.

'Yes, so don't you go getting old on me,' Pauline says with uncharacteristic solemnity. 'I need you for a few good years yet.'

I raise my eyebrows. 'You do realise I'm already pretty ancient, don't you?'

‘On paper, maybe, but honestly I don’t think of you that way, Mum.’

‘Thanks, darling. And touch wood my good health keeps going.’ I reach for the timber frame of the change room’s mirror, even though I don’t believe in that superstitious nonsense.

In the end my daughter settles on a conservative knee-length black skirt with a floral halter-neck top that shows off her square shoulders and athletic figure.

‘Let me pay,’ I offer as we approach the counter. ‘As a reward.’

Pauline hands the items over to the cashier. ‘Reward?’ she asks, smiling at me through a frown. ‘What for?’

‘Maybe “reward” isn’t the right term. As a congratulations then. For your promotion to principal. You deserve it after two decades of service to Glenmore. That’s quite an achievement.’ I know I’ve laden Pauline, especially as an only child, with the burden of expectation that she will have the same ambition and work ethic as me. She could well have rebelled against that. Instead, she has always risen to challenges, from the day she could crawl. But I’m so proud that her capability and drive haven’t come at the cost of a beautiful heart. ‘So, let me buy these for you.’

‘Are you sure?’

I reply by handing over my credit card and she doesn’t protest.

We emerge into blue-sky brightness flooding the main street. Pauline reaches for her sunglasses before looking at her watch. ‘What do you have on for the rest of the day?’

I used to worry, before I retired, that I’d dread being asked that question. That I’d feel lost without the daily invigoration and stimulation of clients and conferences and work colleagues. But it turns out that in the decade and a half since I hung up my accounting boots I’ve never been bored. And certainly not dispirited. Without having to go out of my way to keep busy, I find each day seems to present necessary tasks to undertake, or unforeseen opportunities to grasp, or simply quiet moments to surrender to, just as and when I need them.

I do a quick run over my mental checklist. ‘I need to pop into the greengrocer for a few things and then thought I might drive out to the nursery for some mulch. Other than that, just a bit of house-cleaning and bill-paying.’

Pauline looks across the road to the bay, sparkling under a determined summer sun, and I follow suit. Between us and the water, the esplanade’s casuarinas provide fine slivers of shade and a handsome green curtain against the blue of the Pacific. Half a kilometre away to our right the headland stands with modest majesty, and about the same distance to our left the almost-black rocky platforms defining the bay’s northern end are today playing host to a handful of fishermen.

I hear Pauline fill her lungs and I know what my girl is thinking before she even speaks.

‘After a lifetime of this in my backyard, I never get sick of it,’ she says, spreading her arms as if inviting the view for a hug. ‘It’s like a tonic. How did we get so lucky as to live in Finn Bay?’

I sigh my agreement as we continue to stare out to the ocean. Three cars in succession drive past, their pace languid as, after all, it takes only twenty seconds to get from one end of the main street to the other.

The sun bites at my skin, breaking the reverie. I reach for Pauline's hand and give it a light squeeze. 'Well, you'd better get going. Have a wonderful time tonight and don't let the students get up to too much mischief on their big night.' I kiss her on the cheek and we embrace.

'Thanks for your help, and for the outfit,' she says before mumbling more quietly in my ear, 'You're my rock, Mum.'

And despite the heat doing its best to get the better of us, we shuffle even closer, and being in her arms is like finding home.