

Justine Molony

The Family of the Deceased

They gathered under the trees. The extremes of temperature, seemingly endemic to cemeteries the world over, were at work on this day, as any other. The heat radiated from the ground and a few feet up was met by the baking heat of the sun, the collision creating a bright mist that made the surrounding headstones a fluid, flickering haze.

The men had got out of the cars first and lingered in front of the bonnets, tipping their heads to one another, waiting for their wives to finish pulling hats from the back seat, checking perspiration under their arms, taking last drags on cigarettes. Couples, unaccustomed to the intimacy, were forced to walk arm in arm across the uneven ground, heavy suited shoulders supporting wives who tripped and stumbled as their heels caught in divots and punctured the edges of ant heaps.

With the diffidence of funeral goers they clustered together, out of the sun, 30 feet away from a pit draped on all four sides with the synthetic grass used by butchers and funeral directors alike.

‘Would you look at the size of that arse.’

‘Shh.’

‘No, come on, you can’t pretend you haven’t noticed.’

'I've noticed, I just don't think it's the time to be drawing attention to it.'

'Oh, sorry, I didn't realise personal comments should be reserved for in the car on the way to the wake — or would that be too gauche too? Should I wait until after I've had my first beer back at the house, and just ask her, straight out, "Have you seen the size of that trailer you're carrying?"'

Lucille snorted a laugh back into her throat, 'Shirley, shut up. Give us a drag.'

The sisters stood some distance from the rest of the mourners. Shirley, ignoring the unspoken directive that all ladies extinguish their cigarettes before getting out of the car, held her fag like a schoolboy behind the boat sheds, between the thumb and forefinger, cupped in the palm of her hand. Amorous friends, examining Shirley's palms, quickly saw from the yellow stain of nicotine in the centre that it was not an unusual stance for their lover. Under the malevolent stare of their mother, leaning on the arm of her son, the women took sharp, short pulls on the cigarette, defiantly making eye contact as they blew the smoke out of the corners of their mouths.

'It's a fuckin' big arse all the same,' said Shirley, grinding the fag out with the heel of her shoe, hitching her bag further up her arm and starting to move towards the others.

'Hey, wait,' said Lucille, stepping after her, 'who is she anyway?'

The family of the deceased. As they would be known, and had been known for the past three days in their consultations with the funeral director, had lingered near the hearse. The young men, rubbing their shoulders where the coffin had rested on the way out of the church, talked softly about the weight of the old bastard. 'You wouldn't have thought it. I was in the hospital only a week ago and I could have picked him up with one hand. He was living on lemonade and icy-poles at the end, couldn't get any solids into

him.' 'Ah, it's all that bloody liquid they pump into them in the funeral home, you know, embalming fluid. To make them look good for the family, iron out the wrinkles. Must have had to put a good keg-full into old Len. Still didn't do much good, did you see him at the viewing? He looked like Darth Vader without the helmet. The good Darth Vader, though, the one in the white dress.' 'What white dress?' 'You know, that frock they put dead people in, like what you'd wear at your baptism' 'They put you in a dress?' 'Yeah, didn't you know?' 'I'm not bloody wearing a dress at my funeral' 'I doubt you'll be in any state to object' 'But, he is bloody heavy isn't he? I reckon there's something more in there, as well as the body. I reckon Mona put his Victa in with him.' 'Get out, I'm getting the Victa, I asked her already.' 'You didn't, you cheap prick! He's not even buried yet.' 'Yeah, I know. But I reckoned if I didn't ask straight up Ron would have had it down to the pawn shop and into the pokies before today's over. So, I thought I'd be doing them a favour by taking it off their hands.' 'So how's Mona going to get her lawns mown?' 'She won't have a lawn where she's going.' 'What's that mean? Where's she going?' 'Well, Noeline was saying that she and Maggie had been over to the nursing home opposite the bowling club and they reckon they've got a space and Mona could move in straight away. So they'll sell the house and all the gear and Mona'll get set up in a room over there, pretty much immediately.' 'Bit rough isn't it? She loves that house.' 'Nothing to do with me mate, I'm just explaining why I stepped up for the mower when I did ... anyway, looks like we're on again.' The undertaker had opened the rear door of the hearse and was beckoning the pallbearers over. He murmured directions in a soft voice, the gentility of his demeanour betrayed only by the inky edges of prison tattoos that slipped out from under his shirt cuffs as he bent down to lever the casket out of the car.

Mona, bewildered by the sympathetic stares of strangers, and trying to maintain the dignity befitting a member of the family of the deceased, was led over to the grave by her two eldest

daughters. Her grandsons, men now, stepped heavily behind her suppressing grunts as they laboured under the weight of brass handles and solid pine coated in a walnut veneer. The sun bounced off the high polish of the coffin and the men's grip loosened as sweat formed on their palms.

'Come on Mum, not far to go now, we'll be over soon. Oh, look, they've set up a shade cloth, let's get in under there and you can sit down ... yes Father?' Noeline helped her mother to sit and moved further into the shade to consult with the priest. Seated on a plastic chair under a green-and-white striped awning, Mona, looking like a punter out for a day at the races, stared at the grass surrounding the grave and thought of the butcher that had closed down at the local shops. 'Pity,' she thought, 'Len misses O'Connor's sausages, I reckon he put nothing but sawdust in them, but Len loves them.'

Urged by the undertaker and his assistants, the crowd under the trees moved towards the grave, taking up positions on three sides. The half-dozen children, brought to the funeral by well-meaning parents, squirmed and pushed through the legs of the adults to the side of the grave and peered over the edge. Ghoulish, on their best behaviour with faces set in a mask of false piety, they leered into the pit.

Lucille and Shirley lingered towards the back, avoiding the glance of their mother as she craned her neck around, looking for them.

'So, we're going to the wake?' asked Lucille, fanning her hair to dry the sweat that trickled down her back.

'Yeah, of course. Len was the only man in this family worth a pinch of goats. He treated Mona like a princess. I'd go if only for that.'

'Can you just get over it Shirley, they're not that bad ... they're just, you know, unlucky.'

'And you'll end up married to one of them, with that attitude. Someone just like Dad, or Den. You try and explain everything for them. Why can't you just accept it. They're selfish morons who wouldn't know how to shake their own pricks if they didn't have a woman standing behind them. And they'd give her a back-hander for the trouble.'

'You don't have to talk like that. And that's a lie. Dad never hit Mum.'

'Den hits Wendy.'

'He does not! ... Does he?'

'Shh, it's starting.' Shirley hissed, 'And yes, he does, why do you reckon she's always wearing long sleeves?'

Lucille's gaze moved to a young woman standing to the side of her mother. She was tightly buttoned into a navy dress, a size too small, the seams cutting into the two rolls of flesh that embraced her back. Wendy held the hand of child, too young to be let join the little group of children by the edge of the grave. Her free hand was gesturing fiercely at an older boy, who, stepping too close to the side, had to be grabbed by the back of his shorts to prevent his descent into the underworld. Her husband, Den, stepped forward and gave him a swift slap on the back of the thigh, the sound of contact was drowned out as the priest's voice rose above the crowd with the first words of the ceremony. The boy, held around the top of his arm by his father's hand, tried to swing away but was brought to ground with a tug that left him sprawled at the feet of his mother. The father crouched down and whispered in his ear, the words inaudible but the hiss of threat was evident. The boy stayed on the ground, head down, picking at the grass. The ceremony continued around him.

The undertaker knelt down at the final 'amen' and flicked a switch to the side of the struts that held the coffin, hovering, above the grave. Slowly, to the sound of whirring cogs, it began

to descend, trembling on thin ropes. Standing beyond the edge of the group a young man in a military uniform put a trumpet to his lips and began to play the last post. The shriek of mis-fingering — ‘You’d think he’d done it enough to know the tune by now.’ ‘Shut up Shirley.’ — spread across the heads of the mourners, mingling with the noise of the slowing gears as the coffin touched the bottom of the grave. The heat of the sun had intensified as the ceremony progressed and its glare made the group lower their eyes and twist their heads to concentrate on the dust and grass at their feet — a convincing illusion of sorrow, surprising Mona who had never known Les to have so many friends. In this way they dispersed back to the cars obeying the priest’s instructions to ‘join the family at the old home for some refreshments’.

Shirley, walking with Lucille, turned at the sound of her mother’s short, tight footsteps. ‘Here goes,’ she murmured.

‘You’re not coming back to the house are you?’

‘Yes, why not?’

‘Dressed like that?’

‘Mum, you haven’t seen me for eighteen months. I thought you’d be glad I’m dressed at all.’

‘Haven’t seen you? Don’t you think I’d be happy if that were true? I can’t walk down the street without getting an eyeful of you, in and out of that pub like you own the place.’

‘I do own it, you old cow.’

‘That’s a lie. That old man you’re shackled up with owns it. Everybody knows how you earn your crust. Wages of sin, my dear.’

‘Oh, go hop.’

‘That’s enough, the pair of you.’ Lucille stepped between them. ‘We are coming to the wake Mum. We won’t stay long, don’t

worry. And we won't talk to anyone you'd care to know. Shirley just needs to ask a girl about her arse and then we'll be out the door. So relax.'

Lucille stalked to the car, listening for her mother's gasp and nodding when she heard it.

'That woman cannot be our mother,' she said as she dropped into the driver's seat. 'Jesus Shirley, didn't I ask you to put a towel on the steering wheel, I can hardly touch it it's so hot. You were so busy looking for someone to upset you couldn't listen to me could you?'

'Don't have a fit, what's got you going? It'll cool down in a minute. Here, pour some of this on it.' Shirley passed over a bottle of water. 'You can mop it up with the towel.'

Lucille sighed. 'I just can't believe she still hasn't got a drop of sweetness in her. She's such a desiccated old lizard. You'd reckon she could hold her tongue at a funeral.'

'I wouldn't worry about it. It's not you that makes her squirm with shame in bed at night. At least you haven't hooked up with a publican. Nobody suspects you of running a brothel using yourself as the main attraction.'

'It wouldn't take much to prove that's not true. Why do you have to let people believe it? You're a stirrer. You are. You love it. The way people look at you, cross to the other side of the street. It makes you feel so high and mighty.'

'Ohhh, look. Would you shut up. I don't want to fight with you. All right. Can we just go to the bloody wake. I'm gagging for a beer.'

'Fine,' Shirley forced the car into reverse, her face fixed with sarcasm, 'Let's. Let's just see if we can start a row. That'd crown everything, wouldn't it. If we started a riot at Len's wake. Mona

sitting up next to the seven dwarf statues while the family falls apart around her.'

'Have you finished? Can you drive the car now? Without speaking? I'm not going to start a fight. I'm going to pay my respects to the only man this family ever produced worthy of the name. So let's go.'

The dust rose in clouds from the tyres as they turned out of the car park. The last to leave, joining the procession of vehicles as they snaked out of the cemetery and turned towards Mona's house.

'So, who is she?'

'Who?'

'The girl, you know, the one with the arse.'

'Oh, she's a cousin or something.'

'Are you really going to ask her how she got it?'

'Yeah, maybe ... Yeah, I reckon I will.'