

## Elements of a Life

I am being buried in my sea-green dress, the one I wore for Alice's wedding. I would prefer to be laid to rest in my favourite pair of terracotta palazzo pants and that handcrafted alpaca fleece sweater in olive Tim got me on our last, final, I realise now, anniversary. That outfit could easily morph from casual daywear to stylish and comfortable eternal rest garb. Not that I'll be getting much eternal rest, judging by the disagreements over wreaths and hymns and catering.

I should have planned my own funeral but I ran out of time. One moment I was rolling scone dough and the next I was sliding down the kitchen counter with a searing headache and the knowledge that my last day on earth would be a Tuesday. The worst day of the week – too far away from the next weekend to get excited and a day removed from the previous, so the memories are turning stale. At least Tim got to check out on a Sunday. The day of rest. I did smile at that. Eventually.

Upon receiving the news, Alice, the eldest, wept like an ocean, soaking her skin to the depths of her bones. Andrew, the middle child, blazed at everyone and everything in his path, always a spark ready to ignite. Amy, the youngest, swept around the place blowing out sharp huffs of air like an undersized bull. When they came together that night, they sat in companionable silence for the longest time. Alice wept quietly into her wad of tissues but began to share the famous story of how I once limbo-danced under a low-hanging blackwood branch and ended up folded almost in half on the hard soil too afraid to move for fear of breaking my spine. I had lain there for what felt like hours while Tim put them all to bed and apparently agreed to repeated requests to read *Possum Magic*.

She recounted this familial tale, that had taken on a life of its own at parties, turning me into a snake-hipped hula girl or a lithe and limber pole dancer, but during this retelling, the facts stayed true and Amy's huffs of air turned into choked sob-laughes and Andrew's fiery curses subsided. Eventually, he went outside to smoke and the girls joined him by that very branch in the garden where they sat on the sacred spot and pulled at the dewy grass. Looking up, they saw a comet flash across the sky, tail burning. Andrew said that was me, saying my goodbyes in flamboyant style. I liked that idea, though I was never a great flyer. Walking was more my thing. Amy roared at the night, her breath swirling tornado-like in the crisp air. I caught the words as they evaporated.

'I'll miss you so much.'

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‘The feeling’s mutual, darlings.’ I said it as loudly as I could. I willed it into their hearts and souls. I think they got the message. I saw Alice stop crying briefly and look around. I saw Andrew’s expression cool and his eyes closed. I saw Amy’s arms settle by her sides and her feet stop moving, calmer.

But now, a few days later, they are together at the funeral directors and cannot agree on anything. Amy breezed into the office and, pacing in circles where she switches from agreeing with her sister’s ideas and then with her brother’s. The director, a quiet woman with such pale skin and grey eyes that she might pass for a corpse herself, cannot get a word in. She needs to interrupt, she needs to offer advice, she needs to take control, but Andrew snaps and sets fire to all of Alice’s plans. Alice’s face is fluid, eyes watery, nose red-tipped and runny. She dissolves again and there is a ten-minute break while the director arranges for tea and coffee and dainty shortbreads.

‘Give me an eco-coffin that will break down,’ I say. Let me sink back into the earth. I love the idea of the sustainable circle of life – it has become apparent that there is nothing else beyond. Nothing here but rest. No fires of hell, no luminescence of heaven. It just is. I was born, I grew, I lived, I died. I don’t want pomp and ceremony, I don’t want hymns to a creator that hasn’t made an appearance, I don’t want money thrown into a handcrafted timber box with more decoration than a royal carriage. I am not a queen. I am dead. Dead people don’t need fuss. They just need to rest.

Still, my children have other ideas. I’m not happy. I try to make it thunder. I try to cause an earthquake. I think I’ve managed to materialise in the corner of the office because Alice looks up and stares in that direction for the longest time. Her cheeks lighten and her lips part, issuing a faint wet noise.

‘I think we should go for something plain. Mum wouldn’t want anything too showy.’

There’s my sensible firstborn.

Andrew erupts. ‘Fucks’ sake, Alice. You’re such a cheapskate. She should have the premium rosewood.’ He draws in a sharp breath and I can see a heat-haze shimmying around him before he calms down, his face changing from raging scarlet to a mere puce. ‘It’s the colour of that bloody desk she loves...loved so much.’ There’s a clicking sound and I realise he’s flicking the lighter gripped in his hand. The room will explode if he doesn’t stop. Smoke will fill the office and the pale lady will disappear. Poof! There’ll be an unexpected

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cremation. I want to clap my hands. Yes, my boy. Set the world on fire. Start with me! But the director makes a 'harumph' into her small fist and the children turn to her, suitably chastised.

My rosewood desk was where I contemplated life. It stood in an overstuffed study with a view to the garden and it was where I escaped to write in my journal or to contemplate life and all its wonders and frustrations. What was it all about? I'm still not sure, but that room always got me thinking. Outside, I could admire the pond that Tim had constructed after Alice was born. A tinkling water feature and floating pink lilies made it a favourite. On the desk there was a ceramic dragon breathing fire, a gift after Andrew was born because our son had entered the world red and angry. On the nearest wall was a sketch of a windmill in rural France, sails keeping the air clear over the nearby graveyard, home to a relative of Tim's, a fallen soldier whose corporeal remains had been interred a hemisphere apart from the family but who kept his spirit alive in stories and photos and medals. We had conceived Amy on that trip.

On the desk stood two photographs of our family, one where the children were small and missing teeth and had bright eyes and elastic limbs; the other where we were all adults and our joints were stiffer, our hair was tamer and our smiles more painted. But we were all happy. Our family had grown, adding husbands and wives and children and pets. Alice, Andrew and Amy got together occasionally and that made Tim and I so proud. I wrote about it in my journal. I wrote about my enduring love for my children, my husband, my life. When I wrote I was grounded to that desk, its energy flowing through the timber into my pen. I hope they find that last book. You can't be embarrassed about diary entries when there's no heartbeat to pump blood to your cheeks.

If I am to be buried perhaps the idea of a coffin that matches my beloved desk isn't a bad one. But Amy is talking about the gravestone now. White marble. Gold lettering. Ugh. Amy! Who are you? But then her mind swings wildly, blowing through black granite to bronze before she settles on an etched rock which sounds more up my alley. I sigh and the lights flicker. They all look up.

'It's a sign,' Amy says, arms floating by her side.

'It's an electrical fault,' Andrew counters, still flicking the lighter, but slower now.

The director glares at him and he stops. She writes something in her notes and advises that they don't need to make all the decisions now.

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‘We do,’ Alice declares. It’s the most decisive she’s been for decades. There’s steel in her eyes for a half-second, before she crumbles again and sniffs into her tissue. ‘I can’t do this again.’

Lucky she only has one mother then, I think, but not unkindly. Poor Alice. She takes everything so personally, as though she has forgotten she has two siblings to share the decision-making with, to share her grief and bewilderment and anger at being an orphan. But it’s all my fault she’s like this. As the eldest, I trained her in the art of mediation and now she martyrs herself to it. Speaking of which, they are all now looking at a brochure with a range of religious markers and I shudder. Surely not.

‘Wooooooh!’ I screech. I want to rush from my viewing point like a Banshee and rip the brochures from their hands. Instead, the pages flutter and the book thumps shut. That’s that on the cross-for-a-headstone front.

Later, when they’ve all gone, decisions made and everyone (even me) happy, or perhaps comfortable would be a better choice, I am bereft. I suppose I could follow them to their homes and watch them. I am free for now but this haunting stage cannot last. Presumably after the funeral, all parties will have to accept their fate and resume their lives, or in my case, death. So, until my beautiful but understated rosewood coffin, to match my desk, has been lowered into the ground, I will rage against this injustice, weep for my children and grandchildren and the things I will never get to see, the laughs I will not hear, the gifts I will not buy, the glorious mundanity of the everyday I will no longer be able to experience.

The day of the funeral is crisp and golden and cool. Just right. Alice will bring the moisture with her Biblical tears. Amy will move the leaves on the trees with her tempestuous mood swings. Andrew will give the eulogy, so I expect flames.

They are nothing if not predictable. My eldest cannot function without weeping for the world. She leaks and snivels and her sadness is crushing. Amy, my baby, rushed in and sat in three different seats before settling. She is fidgeting and blowing out sharp puffs through her nostrils, presumably to avoid crying. She knows she couldn’t match her older sister on that front. And Andrew, my piggy in the middle, does such a wonderful job of the eulogy that he almost sends enough fire into my heart to get it started again. My life, as he recounts it, sounds like the dream. He recalls so many moments I had forgotten. I hear laughter. I imagine

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heads nodding in memory. I don't want it to end. But the point of life is that it is finite. I understand this now. Its brackets of birth and death mean that the equation in the middle must be experienced. And I believe my experience was perfect.

Soil hits the coffin, more and more of it. Thud, thud. Sounds are muffled. That chapter is ending so I let it go. My life is now in the minds and souls of others. I am memories. I am moments that have been forgotten. I am the colour of a desk. I am lines in a diary. I am lilies in a pond, a windmill on a wall, a dragon on a desk. In the final darkness, I finally understand that of all the elements in a life, the one that endures beyond, is love.