

## No Grit, No Pearl

The coffin was resplendent. Not in a shiny, ornate way but in a simple and splendid way. It did in fact look like an intricately decorated pine box. Painstakingly adorned with cunjevoi leaves and the fronds of fern and palm, in shades of vibrant avocado married with shadowy bottle greens. It was effective in its ethereal representation of rainforest, exquisitely hand painted by my clever friend. She's an artist. She has always dabbled in oils, a trait she'd inherited from her mum, Pearl, a renowned botanical illustrator.

There were no actual flowers today, a specific request for donations to cancer research in lieu, well expressed via funeral notice and on the printed handout. The painted foliage was enough.

I knew Pearl was much adored, but it was overwhelming the number of people that crammed the space. Apparently, there were others watching through a live-stream outside. Pearl was like a mother to me when I'd lost my own in my early twenties.

We were at the part where the obligatory slide show played, the PowerPoint presentation expertly synced to Monty Python's *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*. The perfect balance of humour and pathos. Pearl had wished it so: one last poke at society and its generational subjugation to rite and ritual.

The montage showed different layers of her well-lived lifetime. Wonderful images, impeccable angles, real people, real-life moments, captured in stills. A celebration of a flamboyant and sometimes calamitous existence.

Families. Weddings. Birthdays. Exponential growth of the numbers of people represented on the screen. Adults and babies, grandbabies and great grandbabies. Friends and colleagues. A plethora of pets and animals. Horses, dogs, cats, birds, cows, chickens, pigs, kangaroos and cockatoos. Scenes from the outback days, scenes from the dairying days, coastal holidays, camping at the edge of the beach, fishing trips and so on. I spotted myself in more than one

picture towards the end of the audio-visual.

Ninety-two years of nostalgic reminiscences squished ever so neatly into thirteen minutes of screen time. An interesting lady to say the least. How can such a large life fit into such a small wooden box? The snapshots were entertaining and enlightening. I'd only known her in later years. Who'd have guessed her former years were played out so extraordinarily?

My friend and her four brothers had agreed upon the order of proceedings. Together with their dying mother they'd planned the chronicling of her lifespan over tea and lemonade scones. Frank discussions about the importance of honesty and comedy in equal measure were chaired by the gentle matriarch. Their mother had vowed that she should be recognisable throughout their memoirs. No sugar coating to make certain parts more palatable. No embellishment for effect, just the uncut truth in all its gaudy detail. She'd hated those funerals where the person spoken of didn't equate with the person she'd known in the flesh. She threatened to come back and haunt them if they failed this mission.

Pearl was born in the outback. A midwife delivered her after a prolonged breech birth. She never knew her mother. Not much was said about those hard and dry infant years, other than her fledgling love of all creatures great and small and a capable knack with horses.

She was sent to boarding school aged eight, when her father married their young governess. This was the catalyst for her rebellion against rulebooks and convention. She hated wearing shoes. She missed the horses, the red dogs, the sheep and the smell of ochre earth.

Pearl wasn't welcome in her childhood home and never ever met the new family of half-brothers and half-sisters spawned after her escape. She lived intermittently with her mother's spinster sister, Gladys, who lived in Paddington. After the third expulsion from yet another stodgy all-girls college in as many years, her Aunty Glad took pity on her, issued an ultimatum and took her on full time. Pearl settled enough to finish her final year of education. She excelled in Art and written expression and became addicted to reading and painting. She

discovered boys...or rather they discovered her.

I look at the front cover of the leaflet in my hands. There's a picture of her wearing a colossal, purple felt hat. The ludicrously wide brim flopped down over coy blue-green eyes. It's Pearl with younger skin, perhaps in her thirties, sunny and slender.

On the back cover another portrait. She's in a fabulous white dress. Not just a dress. It's a ballgown and she's wearing a tiara. She looks like a young Queen Elizabeth, but even more lovely. Perhaps a deb ball at Cloudland? There's an elegant, handsome escort with a tie and dickey board, clearly happy to have the adolescent beauty on his arm. The young man destined to be her first love and spouse. A war cut short her first love story and her life in Brisbane.

Meeting her second husband in the School of Arts at Ravenshoe was unexpected and almost magical. Glad had taken her way up north to visit relatives on her mother's side. She met sixteen cousins she never knew existed. Pearl was twenty-four years old and a widow. As ever a striking lass, soon the young singles were filling her dance card. One young beau especially intrigued her. A cow cocky with jersey brown eyes and a shy smile. He didn't stand a chance and was willingly coerced into sharing passionate kisses on the verandah outside the dancehall, much to the chagrin of her aunt and the Presbyterian church ladies who organised the annual ball. Juicy fodder for the small town and equally small-minded gossips.

But she didn't care and neither did he. Their marriage lasted fifty years. He was a fourth-generation dairy farmer up there. It was a happy, abundant time of post war calm and children aplenty. For the first time she felt planted. Her love of the rain forest and the ocean was nurtured through these decades, access to both habitats close by.

Beloved husband number two died from lung cancer. He rolled his own Capstan Blue baccy in Tally-ho's. And in the evenings, he smoked a pipe. Who knew about the risks in those bad old days? Everybody smoked.

In her seventy-fifth-year Pearl married for the third time. And in the following year he was killed by a drunk driver travelling the wrong way down a one-way street. She was in the passenger's seat. Weeks later she woke from a coma to find they'd buried him two weeks prior. She limped for the rest of her remarkable life. She bore no grudge for what life had offered up, always happy and thankful for the good things around her. Family, friends, the rain forest, her art, good books and her bitsa dog, Rags.

How wonderful and sad I thought.

Tears were shed, some of them my own. I read somewhere that funeral-goers tend to grieve their own loss at every committal attended. The cycling stages of grief on repeat. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. I wondered if I'd ever reached the acceptance phase vis-à-vis any of my own personal bereavements.

The wake was a celebration of small things. Tiny, crustless sandwiches garnished with fresh parsley and small blini crowned with salmon, cream cheese and a sprig of dill were passed by teenagers garbed in black and white. Grandchildren of the departed, the legacy of three fruitful marriages. Then exquisite strawberry micro-tartlets and fresh fruit skewers were speedily inhaled as saucy anecdotes were delicately exhaled. Tête-à-tête's with people once known, familiar faces, names irretrievable. A gratified, happy throng.

A not-so-funereal parade of collective experience. All in all, it was a fitting memorial. Pearl would have approved. She would have been proud. She was remembered well.

Later that day, post-wake and at home, I'm ambushed by my own grief. Who knew funerals indeed do stimulate introspection? Memories of the most significant women in my life and the handful of years that separated their deaths replay on a loop in my mind. My beautiful sister, my cherished maternal grandmother and finally my dear mother. Who came up with that tidy five-step notion regarding grief anyhow?

My phone's pure light interrupts the night as that irrepressible need to know blocks sleep-time, a wake of a different kind. I ask Siri the question. Siri, the constantly reliable riposte to so many of life's queries.

A lightning response. Siri's robot voice drones,

“The answer I found is Dr Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, author of “*On Death and Dying*.”

Myopic eyes strain to read the i-phone's page display. I vow to study it further in the morning,

hitting the mute button.

My brain is stretched and my eyes stinging. Today's goings-on were truly cathartic, an exhausting retrospective. I thank God for Pearl. I pray for sleep to come quickly. In my dreams there are no distressed separations and insurmountable losses, but rather sweet reconciliations and meetings in other worlds. There's peace. There's knowing. And there is rest.