

Time to catch up

Year 0

Memories of you licking snails, you jumping onto Mum's lap as if baby Damian wasn't there, you waking up in your cot singing your song, 'away, away went the tiger'. You could always hold a note, but were known as agile rather than musical. I'm sorry I pushed you down those steps and blamed Margaret. But you forgave me. Thanks for that.

You bounced back and we had some great times. Both sucking our thumbs way longer than we were supposed to, until they were small and silky. Crouching on the floor in the frosted light as Deb toddled into our arms and wanting to eat her like a peach she was so cute.

Did you linger for just one second too long in childhood?

Sitting on a sea wall in Ventura with Marie, the woman you met in New Guinea, and her sisters, the night before you married. The Pacific Ocean lashed and broke against the wall as we all talked, providing a background rhythm for the next four days of festivities. For a short episode I lived as sister and daughter again.

We found Australian eucalypts in California, bigger and more regular than any at home, like forgeries. Deb and I read the gospels at your wedding. And Mum who lived out her life in Strathfield said, 'we think he'll be the perfect American husband.' Were you, like the eucalypts, to become a Californian?

No, you continued your escapades and together settled and moved and settled again in your own adventurous way.

In the November of year zero Mum waited for you to come down from Tamworth. Afterwards you helped at my place with some plumbing, but you would not be down for Christmas as it had been an exhausting few months. We spoke a few times over the holidays and you left a voicemail telling Phillip the Ducati was getting little use, let's catch up. It was time we took it back.

Things were returning to normal – our normal.

Year 1

That day in January I had afternoon tea and for the first time could tolerate the sight of a woman and her elderly mother without wanting Mum back. The eulogies were done.

I went to the movies, missing the telephone calls. Dad's voicemail said you'd been in an accident and broken your ankle, not life threatening. A message over-ridden by Margaret's information as we distracted ourselves during the long race to Tamworth to say good bye. Too late.

The disbelief.

Yes it was the Ducati. I expected to be banished, to be turned away but was forgiven. One day I might forgive myself.

The house being tweaked by you as your soul tore away. Marie cooing gently like a new mother comforting Evan, ringing her parents and sisters in Ventura and quietly keening. Taps bursting, machines breaking and lights flickering. The cat miaowing more and more urgently as she looked for you without result. Me crawling into Margaret's bed as we huddled and cried, babies again.

The gathering of family, the viewing of your body cold and heavy like a bag of stones from the bottom of the river. Marie's sisters arriving from California. We talked of eucalypts and thunder storms and a culpable teenage driver. And we remembered the night on the sea wall in Ventura.

The counsellor told me it was childlike to blame myself. But that's how we knew each other, how we always were. Children in a vast childhood, noisy and colourful, safe and unsafe. Together. All of us made it home at the end of each day.

We only ever pretended to grow up and when we gathered as adults we didn't have to pretend any more.

Now we would have to pretend without you.

Year 2

The loss of optimism. We have been through the last of the firsts, the first time the sun rose without you, the first of your absent birthdays the first incomplete Christmas. The first photos of us re-arranged.

Now we have to do it all again.

One morning as I drove Max to an exam I could hear, but not see, a motorbike over my left shoulder. It was a red Ducati. You were alive again and I was trying to find the extra second that should have been taken away to change the course of your fate. Max brought me back with a 'Mum!' as I sailed over a crossing ignoring a pedestrian. I missed him.

So the second that I would have taken from you was given to another.

You roared off on your red Ducati. It was as though you were telling me to take care of the living, you were gone, your fate sealed but I had responsibilities to my children, to others on the road, to the world.

The counsellor said it was a metaphor.

Still I go back to that day of the missed calls. I was growing up at last, a middle aged woman without a mother. A new label. Not unusual or inappropriate. I was doing what others do and Mum had taken her leave. Although I envied a woman having afternoon tea with her elderly mother I could accept that it was not for me. No more nursing home!

But that was disrupted by you and the Ducati.

Year 3

I read Joyce and decide to live for the living.

On a train out of Milan so many people seem like family. I remind myself that Mum's people were once from here, so I see my grandmother and great aunts and their cousins whenever I am in northern Italy. At concerts, in restaurants on trains I'm surrounded by kin.

A man sitting in the next seat seems especially familiar. He is about two years younger than me with glasses a book, a mobile phone and a certain agility. His hair curling in the rain. Then he looks at me as he makes his

phone calls laughing the way you did. Is his right thumb a little smaller and silkier than the other?

When he starts taking selfies I'm convinced you've come back to haunt me and turn to wipe away my tears.

I travel again. But everywhere I go I hear a deep rumbling of an engine that turns out to be a Ducati. Last time, cycling in France I feel your presence and hours later you boom by, young again with a girl riding pillion. 'Be careful' I say, 'try to be careful!' You stare at me as you speed off while I peddle in the heat.

How can I turn back the clock, get back to the minutes before those missed calls? I had worked for a week following the Christmas break. I was getting to the bottom of my in-tray. Phillip was away but life seemed to be orderly. I had big plans for the office that year and I was about to do a management course which had been postponed twice for Mum.

It didn't turn out to be a bumper year. I do remember when the dog died going into a frenzy at the office and pulling down all the photos of the dead. 'No more! I've had enough.' Being invited to go home, the office could get by without me that day. (After all, the office had been getting by without me for a while.) No I could not go home. The house was empty.

The counsellor implied it was self-centred to blame myself, childish. Everyone does it though, no matter how outlandish, they put themselves next to the departed. If only they'd issued a warning, confiscated the drug, stopped the person from going surfing in the rain, made them walk to school that day. Hugged them one more time. If only they'd done one tiny thing, taken one tiny second to delay, to put the beloved in a different spot at that fatal moment, out of harm's way.

So I have to believe, that I'm not at all to blame. You were self-determining. Dad had not texted me from Tamworth that Christmas, 'survived the Ducati', you had not left a message on my answering machine saying it was time to return it. I had not foiled Phillip's plans to collect it from you late that January.

Year 4

I want to think it through without catching my breath in disbelief.

The counsellor said the trauma will last for at least a year, maybe two and she was right. But it's been longer than that. When will it finish? There are whole patches I can't remember, what on earth did I say and do in those blank spaces. Who knows?

I begin to distinguish Mum's passing from yours. Let's be honest you going on that motorbike certainly obliterated the pace of grief for her more timely death. But don't ask me to separate your burials. The same golf club for the wake, the same cemetery - although to be fair you did come all the way from Tamworth to Rookwood. It rained cats and dogs, for both. In my memory it was just one long wet funeral starting in November and finishing in January.

And there was one difference, at your interment the old priest rushed through the service in an insulting hurry and would not let Damian finish his eulogy. Phillip and my boys' umbrella shook as they laughed at the rude haste. You would have laughed too. We would have all giggled until our sides split; defying Mum's stern looks, knowing for the time being we were out of reach of her disciplines.

In Tamworth Deb and I had read the gospels again. Before we left your big country house the gathering watched a lifetime collection of photos. You were the master of the selfie. Then there's the photo of you standing on a burial plot, unknowing. Dad took it only weeks before to show Mum the adjacent one chosen for her. You point to the grave she will fill and stand on your own.

I am curious to know what might have been if that day of the missed calls had taken its proper course. A palindrome day that was supposed to finish as it began, 21 1 12. The wheels would have turned, allowing us to remember our mother in her dotage, to enjoy the gentle wisdoms of the departed, to compare notes with each other, to let her teach us from the other side how to become old, slowly.

The counsellor said there will come a point where it doesn't feel disloyal to smile again, to have some joy. To return to your old self. Am I nearly there?

Year 5

I can start to think of you without heartbreak. Enjoy the memories.

We sucked our thumbs almost until high school, battling efforts to grow us up; resisting the bribes and threats of our parents, the mocking of our peers. It would be making too much of myself to think that as long as we had each other we did not feel so odd.

We laughed as we compared those special life giving thumbs, each smaller than its counter-part, smooth and reshaped by suckling, a source of great comfort. Then we got older and lost such simple comforts.

Among my rich memories of life with all of us there were your wry jokes, your ability to keep a note, to do anything you set your mind to – ski, play sport, cook a meal, read a classic, build a plane, repair a car.

The light and lightness of being that surrounded you in childhood came with you into adulthood, although interceded by darkness at times, allowing you to range fully across the past and present. You plotted my way to Osnabruck where I rang you from a field eating the sweetest ever strawberries, wishing you had come with us.

Your 50th birthday party was fabulous. We sat around the fire with the children, neighbours, extended family and lifelong friends – the Wynn Joneses, Uncle Brian and Auntie Shirley. It turned out you were the one who set fire to the garage when we were kids, that you had climbed the harbour bridge before they started taking guided tours and you had taken a few risks with motor cycles and guns. And deep sea diving. But we always knew that.

You were a dare-devil beneath a calm and sometimes quiet exterior. You had been ravaged by malaria and dengue. There were times when you were deeply depressed and times when you flew above the rest. You certainly covered ground.

As if it had been a rehearsal for your wake, all truths were told that night.

But I didn't know that you went to concerts! Last year, I was at the Opera with Phillip. As a singer delivered an early aria I looked to the left of the stage and there you were in a balcony. You seemed a bit awkward when I

caught your eye, but you kept gazing back as if to say, 'It's been far too long - time to catch up, let's meet in the foyer'.

And sitting next to you was Mum. With her usual discipline she concentrated on the opera without distraction, did not look towards me. Even after you whispered in her ear she kept her eye on the performance, ever so slightly nodding her head in time with the music. What a dark horse.

Of course I couldn't find either of you at the interval. When we returned to our seats and you again gazed in my direction I tried to indicate, ever so discreetly, that we could catch up afterwards. Maybe have a gelato at that ice cream bar near the wharf.

Then I told myself it couldn't be you, just another mother and son each wearing your glasses, he with your typical plaid shirt, she with Mum's curly grey hair and elegant stoop. The people I sometimes see on trains and buses. They were your doppelgangers, wearing out the extra seconds given to them by fate.

But it had to be the two of you, who else but Mum would wear that cardigan to the Opera?

ORFEO:

*You have left me, you have left me
Nevermore to return, and I am yet here?*

Year 6

Today I replay the voicemail.

You say the Ducati is sitting here getting rare usage now. Time to catch up.

Dad rings to say Claire is with him and they've been contacted from Tamworth. You have been in a motor cycle accident broken an ankle, not life threatening, Marie is with you.

Uncle Brian leaves a message to say he has heard the sad news.

Jenny says she is sorry to hear about Julian from Therese – we are in their thoughts, deepest sympathy, is there anything they can do, God bless.

Anne thinks I might still be in Tamworth but let her know if I'd like a cup of tea or coffee, to catch up.

I return the label for another year, *DO NOT ERASE*.

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