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## First Love

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## First Love

### **Abstract**

Emma put the lilies down on the gravestone. Pale-edged on the bulletcoloured slabs, they lay there, momentary fragile offerings. She stepped back with some satisfaction. Lilies for the dead. The creamy, magnolia-tipped curls of the lilies, with their hard bright stamens, were fitting. Jug lilies, of course. Years ago, when she was a child, her mother had discovered that jug lilies meant death, and she had thrown them all out of the house, tipping out the tall vases, so that the white and gold lilies shot arching into the long grass. Then she had rooted them out of the front garden, from the narrow strip that ran along the verandah, and they later lay in a pile of broken jade leaves and stiff waxy faces turned up to the sun.

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That same year her father had slipped away quietly into death. 'So it hadn't done any good, had it Mother?' she'd asked in her child-voice, not knowing then that even the most practical of people can have their little superstitions.

Her mother was a practical person. So was her sister Kate. Her father, she wasn't sure of. She'd been so young when he died. She remembered him as very big and tall, but probably he was no more than ordinary height. He'd worked all his life in Dawson's grain shop, coming home one lunch time to complain of a headache, after which he went to bed to sleep and never woke up again. The doctor said it was something to do with his brain. From then on she was afraid every night before falling asleep, and pleaded with the sky

'If I should die before I wake  
take me to heaven for Jesus' sake.'

Her mother coped. Sold the house, bought a smaller one, took in a couple of lodgers (nice young schoolteachers) and gave more piano lessons. Later she ripped out the flowers and grew vegetables and sold them to the local shops. Sunday was a day of rest, however, with church in the morning and a visit to their father in the cemetery in the afternoon.

So Emma knew the cemetery quite well. For over fifty years she'd been coming here once a week. Things had changed since then. Expansion. The council had bought a couple of farms at the back of the cemetery, and the spires and spikes of new graves rose up in the distance. Styles of gravestones had changed, too, for another thing. Once they'd all been pale angels, cherubs and marble-like saints with harps and gently folding drapes. Now they were brisk and trim no-nonsense grey blocks where the occupants could lie sedately waiting for Judgment Day.

Not that she was really religious, despite all her churchgoing. She knew the Book of Common Prayer off by heart, but it had never helped her in a crisis. She had never felt the Hand of God, as people called it, on her life, unless, as she sometimes joked to herself, it was the particularly heavy hand of God. She played the organ every week in the church, helped arrange the flowers (growing flowers was one of her passions), was present at all the festivals and fetes, but still she felt apart. As she played in the church, she would look up at the other worshippers at prayer or at hymn, and wonder if they had this dreadful emptiness as well. She would look at the minister, seemingly so convinced, his face rapt as he delivered the blessing

the peace of God that passeth all understanding

and wondered if he had his doubts as well. Perhaps they all did, and never admitted to one another, and kept going in this vast wash of conspiracy.

Despite all this, she was happy that the family grave was in the old section of the cemetery, amongst the harps and angels. It was more beautiful for her taste than the functional new section. And having somewhere to visit, to place her thoughts, was somehow comforting, so she continued to bring her masses of flowers, and she often felt closer to her mother and sister here, than she had when they were alive. She could almost hear their voices in the still crystal air, commenting on her life, on her thoughts. Particularly on hot days, she thought, when one is inclined to feel a little light-headed anyway. Recalling this, she was glad that she had brought her sun-hat and her thermos of iced tea, because the sun was beginning to steam up, and she didn't want to overdo it. She sat down on a slab and unscrewed the top of the thermos, and poured out a cup of black sweetened tea, and started to sip it. The only trouble was, tea made you wee a lot, so you had to take it easy. Fortunately, their section was near a ladies' lavatory, although she wouldn't like to use it, unless in an emergency, because you heard dreadful stories of killers dressed up as

women and lurking in lavatories, or else drug-runners, also dressed up as women, who would whisk you off to the white slave market. She sighed and took another sip. She supposed she was a bit old for the white slave trade anyway. But she was cheered by the fact that, when she'd arrived, she's seen the backs of two gravediggers going into the new section. They would be in earshot, if she screamed. She took another sip, settled back and relaxed.

But as she sat there drinking, she had a sudden urgent need to go to the toilet. She would have to brave the spiders and the men dressed up, and use the public lavatory. She hurried over, casting an anxious look towards the new section where she hoped the gravediggers were still working.

Neither creepy crawlies nor strange transvestites lurked in the loo. It was perfectly clean. It probably didn't get used much, of course, she mused. In her time she had known a good number of cemetery attendants. 'I like it,' one had said. 'Nice quiet job.'

'Couldn't get much quieter,' she'd agreed.

A nice quiet job, that's what she'd had in a way. A nice quiet life. Only it hadn't felt happy at all, safely stitched into a nice quiet life. Only it hadn't felt happy. She had been as flattened and as dead as a sardine in a tin. Today, she had done the most adventurous thing of her life, murder and mayhem and maybe a fate worse than death by using a public lavatory, which would have shocked her mother had she known. For her mother had advised caution in this area, stressing that only Myers Emporium in Melbourne had safe toilets on the fourth floor, where men didn't dress up as women. As a result, they'd all developed weak bladder sphincters from walking miles in search of a suitably safe lavatory.

At least, she thought, returning to the lilies, with her family she had somewhere to come, an altar for her feelings. With Reggie, there was no such altar, and yet she needed it. When her father had died and her mother had explained that he'd been taken up to Heaven by God, she could only imagine it as a wisp of smoke escaping from the wood, and floating high in dandelion puffs to scatter in the wind. That was the soul unseen in all of us, that could slip like silk into the void. Where was Reggie then? Not securely encased in a family tomb. But somewhere on a beach. Or a desert. Or a jungle, or anywhere. Missing in Action was his official destination. Somewhere, whitened bones. For years, she had prayed that he would come back, like some other soldiers had come, walking back into their old lives, to wives and sweethearts and mothers. She had prayed to the proud, absolute God of the Book of Common Prayer, but the only answer she had got was 'God's will'. Had Reggie

died in order that God's will be done? Was her life God's will? She supposed a truly religious outlook would say yes. God's will, fate, destiny, in the hands of God. And yet, she thought, as she drained the lid of the thermos flask that served as a cup, there was something human and wild and primitive in everyone that cried out, 'Why me? Why me? I want something better.'

will ye no come back again?  
better lo'ed ye canna be

The children's voices had floated out across the high-scholl hall for years after the war, singing the songs she'd taught them as their music teacher, and each time she'd played certain songs she'd thought of Reggie.

better lo'ed ye canna be  
will ye no come back again?

In fact, she often chose the songs deliberately, to allow herself some private release of emotion. She had no one to talk about it with at home. Kate and Mother hadn't liked Reggie much. Moreover, Kate didn't go in for boys and Mother, while still wearing mourning for father, was convinced that only he, as a truly remarkable man, was worthy of such emotion. Other men, she often said, 'you could take 'em or leave 'em, and preferably leave 'em.' In films, of course, there were happy endings. Even Missing-in-Action men came home, to bands and flags and ticker tape. In their small country town the five men missing never came back. And yet their relations didn't stop hoping for years. It was better to be missing in action than definitely classified dead. With missing in action there was still hope. That was the way she'd first heard it from Mrs Gough.

'His mother's just got the news. He's Missing in Action. Course, there's always hope. He might be a Prisoner of War somewhere. They'll have to wait until the end of the war, of course.'

After the first shock of fear, there came the wave of wild hope. Yes, he could still be alive, somewhere. And because Mrs Gough didn't know about her and Reggie, she didn't want her to see her tears so she'd rushed off home. Mother wasn't in when she'd got back, but Kate had just got in from the garden and was pulling off her gardening gloves. Kate was busy in those days, having just started a poultry run, selling eggs and chickens to the local shops, and she had mostly taken over the

garden from their mother. She spent the day in a smock with a scarf wrapped tightly around her head.

Kate's first words seared her.

'Well, he was never much good to anyone...'

And as she had stood there, frozen, in the little kitchen, Kate had even gone on,

'Except, perhaps, to Aileen Hobbs.'

Her horrified look must have been noticeable, even to Kate, who said impatiently, as she rinsed her hands at the sink

'Come on, Em, don't pretend. You know what I'm talking about.'

She'd gone to bed that day with a sick headache, and for the first time in her life she'd wished that, like her father, she'd never wake up. But she did, and when she did her mother said that work was the answer. So mother ordered a new copper plate for her, to go underneath hers on the door. It read,

Miss Emma Whitehead  
Music Teacher  
Pianoforte and Organ  
Beginners and Advanced.

So she had gone on teaching music, dreaming her private life. She felt somewhat envious of the married women she knew. Of course, marriage gave status. And intimacy. Sometimes she felt she was stepping out of her life and looking at it, a celluloid fantasy, as one would a film. Did other people feel like this from time to time, she wondered? She supposed that this must be one of the distinct advantages of being married — you could share all sorts of intimate secrets with another person and he with you. Another person's private vision. You would be privileged to share that. Sometimes the loneliness and intensity made her want to lean over towards strangers in cafes and say things like,

'I'm lonely, are you?' or 'My life didn't turn out like I dreamed it, did yours?'

But of course, only mad people spoke like that, so instead she leaned forward and asked people to pass the salt, please, and hoped that they would strike up a conversation which they didn't or if they did pass a remark, it was about the weather.

There was once an exception to this. Once a man had come and sat at her table in a cafe. She had never seen him before, and thought him an uncommon person for the countryside; more like a university person or a

social worker she thought, studying his longish hair and dark beard and old duffle coat. Not a farmer, definitely not a farmer. She was surprised when he leaned over towards her and said,

‘It’s wet and depressing today, isn’t it?’

She hesitated.

‘Er..yes. It is.’

‘A good day for a suicide.’

Perhaps he’d been drinking, she’d thought. Better humour him.

‘I mean,’ she went on, ‘it’s depressing but not bad for suicide.’

‘How bad does it have to be for you to do yourself in?’

‘Pardon?’

‘I suppose you’re one of those happy types. The sort that builds their life on compromise.’

‘Well, er no..’

She had stared at him, not believing the conversation. The conversation of her life had arrived but he was a bit drunk. She could smell alcohol on his breath.

‘Happiness is not what we mortals are destined for. Only we don’t find that out until we’ve broken our backs trying to get it.’ His voice was getting rather loud. ‘Do you know that one of the lessons of life is to learn to do without dreams? Yes, it is. Once we realize this, we must go around stamping them out, one by one, like the birds’ nests that boys find in the long grass and grind out with their heels.’ His voice was very loud now.

‘Could you speak a little more quietly?’ she whispered.

‘And the thing is, I can’t live without my dreams.’

Nor can I, she wanted to cry. But instead she said,

‘Oh no, surely not.’

He got up quickly.

‘Well, no point going on about it to you. You don’t understand, obviously. Anyway, it’s a good day for it.’

‘For what?’

‘For finishing it all.’

Everybody was looking at them by now.

‘Stop. Don’t go,’ she said, but he was already out the door. She wanted to run after him, to stop. But everyone was looking at her. They’d think she was mad if she ran after him.

She never forgot him. Perhaps she could have saved his life. A man was fished out of the Yarra the next day, and his description was broadcast on the wireless. It fitted the man in the cafe. And all the time that she’d been listening to him and agreeing with him silently, he’d thought he’d been alone. Which brought her back to marriage. It seemed

to her that this was the only place where one could be perfectly frank. Sometimes she watched couples in cafes, seemingly enjoying this sort of intimacy. She preferred couples of her own age. But usually their conversation, when overheard, was mundane. Except once a woman with a sad white face and a shock of grey hair around her like a spider's web, had said as Emma passed,

'But the baby died, and I never had another one, no matter how hard I tried. I was depressed for years.'

Emma had been jolted by the open confession, unable to imagine herself talking so freely. She wondered who the elderly man was that the woman was telling. Not her husband, obviously. After, Emma went home to conversations with Kate and Mother about potatoes and poultry and pianoforte.

Sometimes, she wondered why she was different from Kate. Kate had never worried about being plain and unloved. Kate had never even had a Reggie to dream about. Kate never dreamt. Even as a child she had only accepted what she could see, refusing to play the games of fantasy that Emma loved. 'It's not true, it's not real, it's not a real fairy place, it's only a tree,' she would say.

Meanwhile, Emma kept on choosing songs for Reggie, for her high school girls.

vair me o-or-o van o  
vair me o-or-o van ee  
vair me o-or-o  
sad am I without thee

The children sang out obediently. Sometimes she chose brighter tunes, but still on the same theme.

skip we gaily on we go  
heel for heel and toe for toe  
arm in arm and round we go  
all for Mairi's wedding

As time went on and Emma became an unmarried lady of certain age, she wore dark sober clothes and some of the high school girls used to ask her why she'd never got married. She let it slip deliberately that she'd had a young man but he'd perished in the war. She put hyacinths on the piano in memory of him. In some ways, this revelation boosted her in the eyes of the girls, as she knew it would. She wasn't just any old maid. On

the other hand, she caught them sometimes exchanging sly, malicious grins as they launched into her favourite songs.

sad am I without thee

Then a new generation of teachers had come to the school, resilient young women, bright and fearless as daisies, who said it wasn't necessary to have a husband to be happy. Some of them were wild girls, she believed, and lived their lives like Aileen Hobbs. They should have come to a bad end, according to her upbringing, yet they survived. She envied them now. Perhaps her life would have been different if there'd been feminists in her day. Perhaps she would have spoken to strangers in cafes, left home, even had a close friendship with a man. But it was too late for her now. Now she grew flowers and crocheted bedspreads for the church fete, and visited the cemetery once a week.

Now, at the graveside, Emma fanned herself with a lace handkerchief she took from her pocket. Suddenly, Kate's voice came sharp as a file.

Emma was always a bit of a romantic fool. Even when we were girls together and she was making cows' eyes at that awful Reggie Green. He wasn't interested, that was plain enough. Although he did hang around a bit for a while, looking for what he could get. And all the time running around with that dreadful Aileen Hobbs, with Em pretending not to notice. She could talk herself into anything, a proper romantic fool.

'That's not right, Kate,' she said aloud, into the still warm air. 'He did love me.' She thought back. Their love had been pure. He'd respected her. Not that he hadn't tried anything, of course. But she hadn't given in. He'd respected that, she knew. They were all taught what men thought of women who were easy. 'Easy meat,' her mother had said one Sunday night, about Aileen Hobbs, while picking up the sharp knife to carve the remains of the cold Sunday roast. Sliver, sliver, the dark brown slices had shuddered onto the plate together with the piles of slimy green gherkins and blood-red tomatoes, their cold cuts and salad for Sunday evening. 'You seem to have lost your appetite,' her mother had remarked, noticing her untouched plate.

'Lovesick,' Kate had said, slyly.

Her mother's words had put her off trying anything with Reggie. She'd always regretted it afterwards.

She was suddenly aware that she had spoken out loud and she looked

around nervously. Fortunately, there was no one around, or they'd think she was touched. Of course, it was a habit, talking to oneself, a habit you got into when you lived alone, and she supposed the voices were the same sort of thing. They weren't real voices, of course, like Joan of Arc heard, speaking from God, or like the greengrocer or ordinary people, and she knew her mother and Kate were dead and buried. Yet when she sat here she could hear them clear as bells on the night air.

Her mother struck up then, vibrato.

Of both my daughters Emma was the one I worried about most. Kate always had her head screwed on right. Feet on the ground. The practical one. And yet, funnily enough, when they were girls, I didn't worry about Em at all. She was the bright one. I had hopes for her. Kate was fairly good at the piano, but slower at picking things up. But as Em grew, I started to worry about her. Head in the clouds. Always day-dreaming. Crying for the moon, I suppose. Made her discontented.

'Look Mum, angels! Can they fly?' a small voice broke her thoughts. Emma looked up and saw a man and a woman with a little boy walking through the old section. Time she went home, she thought. Her ankles were swelling in the heat, and her head was starting to ache. She got up stiffly. If Reggie were here with her, they would probably drive off somewhere together, perhaps go for a picnic. Instead, she would climb into her old Morris Minor and go back to the town to do her watering in the evening. She remembered the lodger Dave who used to do the watering for her of an evening. She'd taken him in after her mother and sister had died. He bore a remarkable resemblance to Reggie. She was very happy with him pottering around, and tinkering with his motorbike, but then he started bringing girls home to stay the night and she reluctantly had to ask him to leave.

She turned heavily to make her way back. An uncanny resemblance, Dave and Reggie, she thought, as a man came towards her. She peered through the bright sunlight and then blinked and peered again. It was Dave. No Reggie. Don't be silly, of course it wasn't Reggie... Yes it was, the same face, the same slope of his neck. Her eyes were playing tricks on her, she told herself. She'd had too much sun. She hurried forward. Yes, his features were sharper, clearer, those of Reggie. At the same time she told herself to stop thinking and go into the shade, and have some rest. But her head was spinning. She started to run.

The young gravedigger, coming back from the new section, where he'd just finished digging a grave, told his boss what had happened.

'This old lady came running towards me, calling out «Reggie, Reggie.» I looked behind me, thinking there must be someone else she was waving to, but there was only me. As she got up to me, I started to say, «My name's not Reggie», but she threw up her arms like she was going to hug me, and as she did that, she must have tripped, and she went flying. She hit her head on that rock over there. I ran to get help, but when the doctor came he said there was nothing that could be done. After she fell, she never moved. Funny though, she just lay there, looking peaceful, sort of smiling to herself.'

As he turned away, his eyes caught on the lilies, arranged neatly on the gravestone. He disapproved. People always brought fresh flowers which died off so quickly. These lilies, for instance. Although they looked strong and waxy, like the plastic flowers he preferred, they were already turning yellow in the heat, tingeing on the edges, curling into an orange frill. It was sad. Nothing lasted.

## Katherine Gallagher

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### FIRSTBORN

For years I dreamt you  
my lost child, a face unpromised.  
I gathered you in, gambling,  
making maps over your head.  
You were the beginning of a wish  
and when I finally held you,  
like some mother-cat I looked you over —  
my dozy lone-traveller set down at last.

So much for maps,  
I tried to etch you in, little stranger  
wrapped like a Japanese doll.