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Flower Girls

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Abstract

When the big man died people began arriving at the gates at five in the morning, waiting to be called at daylight, shifting in their coats and rugs and passing the envelope. Cigarette tips spotted the dark. While one group was being called, more cars and buses would arrive and another group would prepare itself. This kept up throughout two days from early morning to nightfall.

PATRICIA GRACE

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While one group was being called, more cars and buses would arrive and another group would prepare itself. This kept up throughout two days from early morning to nightfall.

The women doing the calling and the men making the speeches had to have a rotating system so they could have time to eat and sleep. The cooks never got off their feet, nor did those who were cleaning and setting up tables every hour, and nor did the ones who were bringing in supplies.

Once it became obvious that the usual facilities wouldn't cope with the numbers of people arriving, a marquee was put up as an extra dining room and truckloads of mattresses were borrowed from another marae and put down in the assembly hall of the local college.

Both out on the marae and in the house many words were spoken about the man and his work. The family itself, as well as the managers of catering, accommodation and protocol, made sure that nothing that could be done was left undone in order to honour the man at the time of his attaining his ultimate chieftainship. Visitors came with full envelopes to put down.

The big man wasn't big. He was small in build and stature, and the brothers and nephews who carried him into the meeting house held a light load.

When the lid was removed, and beneath the flow of words from the minister and as the cloaks, ornaments, photographs and flowers were placed, there was satisfaction expressed that a good job had been done by the undertakers. This husband, father, brother, cousin, friend, who had become a bone of his usual self during his illness, now appeared as if in reasonable health. In fact he was young and smooth again, round-cheeked almost. His jaw had been frightened into a suggestion of a smile to show that he had died peacefully.

His sister and sister-in-law were the ones who had seen to it that he was dressed in his best for his final journey and that his badges, service medals and ribbons were displayed in a suitable way amongst the more ancient treasures on the casket.

So everything was all right. Everything was as it should have been for such a man – that is, except for the blight of his daughters all named after flowers. They were Hyacinth, Violet, Lilac, Verbena and Marigold.

Hyacinth was the most un-flowerlike. Summer and winter, over her great pod of a body, she wore sleeveless tent dresses splitting beneath pouchy underarms. Curved under her bluish rolls of feet she wore sandals no matter what the weather. Her face was a great round cake. In fact she had two faces, the large cake-face being centred by the little face that had been hers when she was a girl. She was butter-coloured, untouchable, and she wheezed in late on that first day smelling of mutton and cabbage, crying hideously for Daddy.

No one would have thought it inappropriate for Hyacinth to cry and call out for her father if she's been anywhere in sight during the time of his illness. But he'd been in hospital, dying, for some weeks before being brought home to spend the final week of his life. In all that time she'd visited him just once. That one time she'd been up and down, in and out like a fretting animal. So calling for Daddy now, splashing tears, keeping the minister waiting, didn't go down very well with those who knew.

And afterwards, instead of staying there by the man, Hyacinth left the meeting house and went to the dining room, where she bungled about getting in the way of workers who were trying their best to respect her as a bereaved daughter. Two aunts came out and cornered her at last, spoke hard in her ears and took her out to the house, where they put a rug round her shoulders and sat her by her mother. The sister and sister-in-law managed to keep her there, shut up, for the rest of the day.

Violet came in at dusk on the first day wearing a full-length leather coat with fur collar and lapels, dosed to the eyeballs and unable to manage her own two feet. She had left home at fifteen to tote herself up and down the waterfront. It was an easy way to make money, though it wasn't money she wanted then. If she had been asked what it was she wanted, she may not have been able to bring to articulation the word 'forgetting'. But it was 'forgetting' that being laid, paid, robbed and jabbed with cigarette ends could help her do.

At nineteen she married a man of moderate means, and in the five years after that had three children.

But she had a habit as well. In the end she left the children with their father and went back to business. In spite of all this, deep inside herself she knew she was half sensible. She could feel it sometimes. One day she'd beat the habit, find Roxy, Maadi and Palace, who would love and adore her, and there'd be a new life for all of them.

When this Violet came in, strung between two friends, it was some younger cousins who managed to put the coat and her belongings into the boot of a car for safekeeping, roll her in a blanket and put her into a corner amongst the pillows, out of the way, faintly snoring.

Lilac was the one who had been saved by the Lord, but it was only her soul that had been saved. Sickness was eating away at all the guilty places of her, and the women had made a bed up for her by the man and helped her to get comfortable there. Medication allowed her to sleep, and each time she woke, the aunts washed her face and hands, tidied her hair and propped her up on pillows.

The one called Verbena had become unhinged years before, and during the time of her father's illness had had to be readmitted to hospital while the family coped. No one could stop her from laughing. She wasn't brought in until the evening of the second day, tranquillised but still giggling. However, people knew they should tolerate this. Verbena was a loved one, a special one, as was Lilac too. This was mentioned several times in speeches so that everyone would understand.

Marigold, who was the youngest, had run away to save herself when she was ten. She'd been encouraged to do this by Lilac, the good one, and had spent two years living on the streets, sleeping under bridges and in old buildings. She'd learned to steal and sniff glue, but somehow she felt this wasn't really her style. One day she went looking for Violet, of leather and fur, who took her in, gave her clothes and thirty dollars and told her to go and get a room, a job as a waitress and to work herself on from there, which she did.

Her first job was in an all-night café, midnight until eight in the morning, and what she liked most about it was being warm in the night and eating. At the time of her father's death she was working as a receptionist-cashier in a restaurant specialising in deep-fried family meals. Sometimes for this job she was required to wear clown clothes, pirate outfits or animal suits, and to paint her face in different ways. This was something she enjoyed. She was beige-coloured and had eyes like sea anemones. She had a boyfriend too, and a taste for top shelf.

Now she was twenty and, though she came home fortified with bourbon, she was, at least, on her own two feet, which were in their own diamante stockings and in their own spike-heeled shoes. She was the last of the sisters to arrive. Because she had left home at such an early age, she knew nothing of protocol and strode onto the marae in her skimp of a skirt and sat at the end of the paepae, chewing. But she was put into place after a while, with only the next day to go.

All of the flower-named ones had been beautiful and sister-looking when they were little girls, was what everyone said. The aunts were nearly exhausted as they went about doing what they could to make the behaviour of the sisters less conspicuous.

It was the mother, wife of the man, that everyone felt sorry for. She deserved better in the way of daughters, especially at a time like this. She'd been a true support to the man in all that he did. She'd been a loving mother. It was said over and over again.

Actually the aunts could've wished for a little more responsiveness from their sister at this time. The occasional trickle from their sister's eyes they thought insufficient, really, though when they thought about it they realised she'd always been pasty. And they didn't think the smock and cardigan appropriate either for such a big occasion, but they were kind and didn't say so. After all, their sister was exhausted after their brother's long illness and there was not one daughter with sense enough to be of use to her.

However, on the day of the burial they insisted on lending her some clothes. They couldn't let the newly widowed sister send their brother off dressed the way she was, not when he'd always been so particular. It was bad enough the daughters being circuses.

They helped her while she dressed, and locked themselves either side of her when the time came to follow the casket to the cemetery ahead of the large crowd.

At the graveside the mother just waited the time through, letting go a thin sigh as the shovels mounded the last of the earth over the big man. After that she allowed herself to be taken back to the wharenui, and allowed herself to be cheerful when it was the right time.

She was the only one who knew what good girls her daughters really were. They were good girls, deserving of the names of flowers, who had kept the secret of themselves and the big man - kept the secret, kept the secret, kept the secret.