

THE QUARRY

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Plastic flowers don't die

December 31, 2011. Squeals, tinged with tipsy bravado. 'Jump!' She hesitates. Strips off to her lacy g-string, takes a few shy running steps and splash. She's in the harbour surrounded by midnight, not far from the ferry wharf. She's my daughter, but I'm not there.

April 30, 2008, around midnight. Near the same Balmain East Ferry Wharf other sons and daughters gather, continuing celebrations. Celebrations tinged with slight regret. The Manager, Gene Robson, some friends and Commercial Hotel staff, are finishing with private drinks, displacing disappointment with party-mode brashness. Tomorrow there will be new management and all new staff. Gene needs to go to Watsons Bay to hand over the keys. Wanting to avoid the police booze bus that often patrols down at White Bay, he asks his mate Matthew Reynolds if he can take him by boat. Meanwhile, word of the party spreads and some friends gather at Pandy's place.

Michael, Lizzie, Gene, Jessica, Percy, Savanna and two Alex's are there. The carefree group wanders off to the wharf. Chloe, Jarad, Edmund, and Thanawat – 'Ice', join them. Matthew and his girlfriend, Ashlie will be there soon. They are borrowing a relative's workboat. Stacey finishes her shift at The Unity Hall Hotel. She is twenty-one and has moved to Balmain from the Wollongong district. With her infectious laughter, Facebook-confessed burps, and sense of fun she is adopted into the Balmain Peninsula community. Down Darling Street she skips, feet tripping to a tipsy tune, on

the footpath, on the road, don't step on an ugly toad ... a gnome on its swing nods as she passes by. She hears the bus behind her. Quick, better get off the road. She sniffs in fishy, sea-y salt air, reminiscing the 'Gong. Probably there's oil as well. A ferry is coming into the wharf. She hears the reverse moan of the motor. She ambles down the last section of steep road towards Gene and the others as she hears the clank! Down comes the plank. People get off. She won't get on. No, she and her friends have a private boat to ferry them across the harbour.

Stacey stands slightly apart from her group. She waits excitedly. No reason to be excited. Just is. The harbour is mesmerising on this moonless night. She looks down into the green verging on black. Stillness is contained, waiting for passing boats or the ferry, to set the surface in motion. She looks out. Bobbings. Blinkings. Busy boats. Night boats. The bridge. That beacon tower. Luna Park, a mass of white light with a fun-filled mouth, is grinning wider than the Cheshire cat's. She holds her face out to the soft, cool, salt tinged air. She is brushed by an invisible lover's gentle breath.

There are night fishermen on the wharf. Her friends are jubilant nearby but she stays apart like a lone boat sloshing in a reverie of imagined stories and stray Polynesian rhythms, wrested from her stepfather's people. She has the whole night harbour for her daydreaming. Bump. She feels the jolt as it travels through the concrete. A friend has plonked the box of beer and some spirits beside her. Splat, the seawater dumps itself onto the concrete steps, preceded by a rushing sound, an undercurrent. Whoosh, then crashing and splashing up the steps. This body of water is filled with purpose as it spills upon the wharf. It doesn't hold back. Part of the harbour encroaches upon the wharf, overriding the constant gentle lapping. Plop. Backflow, then the lapping returns, laced with night black and a few refracted lights. Distant motors, distant sounds. 'Ah, our boat's coming. Here's our boat'.

Today, I sit by the Plastic Flowers Memorial. I am lulled by the kerplap, plap, plapping. Splat, crash! I'm startled, like Stacey, at the sudden rush, as water dashes against the wharf and wall. I have been away from Balmain, away from Australia, but still I am puzzled that this is the first time I have seen the plastic flowers riveted to the waterfront rail. I frown, aware of their significance. Four years ago, that long ago, a group of young fun-lovers jumped into a small workboat, eager to reach their

destination, intoxicated with alcohol and youthful exuberance. The scene now before my eyes is like an Alfred Hitchcock thriller. Shot in black and white. Symbols strewn.

Today, I am conscious of the blacks and greys. Everything is dark except the plastic flowers – a relief of colour wafting on the penumbra of my vision. The sea pulsates in crosshatched mercury-green batches, slinking in random repeat patterns. The sky leers down steely-grey. Clusters of clouds rumble, too distant to be heard. Flashes of spume spray and fall backwards whenever a ferry or a boat sends a current of waves rushing towards the stone, sea wall. A pure Hitchcock moment forms. A glimmer edges out from a central tower of high, dark clouds – a cream spotlight beams on the plastic flowers. They are from the two-dollar shop, plastic yet poignant. Too perfect to be real; too real to be plastic.

Time is suspended in Hitchcock sequences. Death is not delicate. It stretches across the screen. You are confronted with a long, agonising scream, a slow trickle of blood. Red oozes out of a black and white film.

Down here, beside the East Balmain Ferry Wharf, the plastic flowers remind me of roadside memorials I have seen lovingly constructed in country Spain, in gypsy Serbia, in forgotten Macedonia. Roads curving towards snow-capped mountains, buttercups in fields, then a white cross and bunches of plastic flowers leap out from the picture postcard scene. Death jumped out just as unexpectedly as a summer squall, to a son or a daughter on such a road. Sometimes, the roadside plastic flowers are planted in an urn.

I am saddened by thoughts of carefree young people meeting death suddenly. Darling Street itself comes to an abrupt end. It runs down the spine of the Peninsula. The road and the buses terminate at the harbour's edge. Sandstone buildings are on one side, a small park with English rose garden in manicured lawn, is on the other. A terrace step down and the iconic view of Sydney Harbour and the city is laid out before you. You can hop on a ferry and be in the city, Darling Harbour or Milson's Point in ten minutes. The plastic flowers, though small, grow large and out of proportion in this panorama. On this grey day I am drawn to the blur of colour.

A surprise. They are not plastic, but silk. Not really silk, but known as silk. Up close, tucked in amongst flowers I see a small plaque – *In loving memory of The*

Sydney Harbour Crash Victims – black lettering on a white background. The flowers are mostly budded roses with white baby's breath. On one double bunch someone has pegged a photograph of the plastic flowers scene shot with this harbour background. Odd, and I wonder why. All except one bunch of full-bloomed apricot azaleas that is tied on with tape are riveted to the rails. The rivets are rusty but look to be firmly in place. The plaque and six small photos form the shape of a cross.

The marine blue rails are faded to greyish blue now. White shows under peeling paint. Patches of rust are dotted along one section. Up the hill workmen are beautifying the footpath, laying granite and concrete pavers. Painters may be here soon. If so, I hope they will be considerate of the plastic flowers memorial.

I breathe in my silent salute to the non-existent sun. I should go. I hear the gulls gwark. 'Don't go,' I would have said. Fishermen warned them from the wharf, 'Your boat's too small. Don't.'

They clambered into the boat. Fourteen. They brought more wine, more beer, a bong, some cannabis and cocaine. They made it across the harbour to Watsons Bay. Gene handed over the keys. The girls on the boat asked if they could use the facilities at the house. The boys went to the park, nearby. The celebratory atmosphere still prevailed as they re-embarked. They sped through the water and stopped at a bright marker light, named in honour of its shape, the wedding cake. Some climbed it in frivolity. Matthew sprayed the structure in a 'rooster tail' effect with the powered, raised propeller. Once back on board they decided they would not have any more stops. They would go straight back to Balmain. The boat headed towards the turn at Bradleys Head. Percy took over the helm and saw a fishing cruiser, *Jordans*, 'lit up like a Christmas tree.' He didn't see that the two boats were headed towards each other. He didn't know that at such times, boats should pass each other 'port to port'. The sturdy fishing cruiser was chugging through the water at 8 knots an hour, while the smaller twenty three foot, blue-hulled workboat planed through the mirror smooth sea, three times faster, with its bow raised and stern low.

May 1, 2008, approximately 2.00 a.m. BANG. 'An isolated very loud sound,' a Bondi resident from miles away reported. Metal crunches. On impact, the port side of the small workboat's stern is sheared off without any significant damage to the fishing cruiser, *Jordans*. Blackness. Black inside. Black outside: velvet shroud of liquid

black. Groans caught in the ripping process. Why that crack, thought Stacey, when the wham's enough to plunge everyone into pitch black?

May 1, 2008, about 2.30 a.m. Voices call. She's frightened. Cold. Wet. Why wasn't it a splash? A frolic splash, without the red? Voices drifting above and below through the wet and the black. What's that? She swims through the shaft of light. Like a dancer swirling, twirling, lighter than substance. A dream sequence flashing, filtering forever up into the light. Away from the black. Breathe in fishy, sea-y gulps. She smells the oil but the night has become darker, way past midnight, another time. She didn't want to jump in the water. But she's in.

Three fishermen in other small boats come quickly to the carnage. They pull people from the water. Someone screams, 'She's not moving.' They need mouth to mouth but blood and vomit obscure the detail.

May 1, 2008, around 3.00 a.m. Helicopters dispel the quiet that covers the Balmain village. Emergency rescuer workers transform the chaos at the foot of Taronga Zoo into an organised scene of temporary triage. 'I can't feel my arms, I can't feel my legs,' a girl screams to the ambulance officer. More people have been hauled from the water. 'It's pretty grisly having to step over dead bodies,' reported a rescuer.

May 2, 2008. 'We are crying a river of tears,' says her uncle. Then he and her step-dad, raise the white coffin. A Maori haka is danced in honour of Stacey, a much-adopted daughter. 'Died on the 1st of May, buried on the 2nd of May, my Stacey, my daughter would have been twenty-two tomorrow. Next week is Mothers' Day. My heart will always be broken,' says her mother. On birthdays she visits Stacey's gravesite. 'Sometimes I call her voicemail, just to hear her.'

In Balmain, we have the plastic flowers memorial; we have gatherings in the pubs. We don't have a cemetery to visit.

Over one hundred years ago the *Balmain Cemetery* existed. Between 1868 and 1912 ten thousand souls were laid to rest in it. Mysteriously, the *Balmain Cemetery* was not in Balmain, however, all that is left of it today is in Balmain as a low wall of re-hewn sandstone blocks along Birchgrove Oval and Snail's Bay. The cemetery was

bulldozed in 1948 and eventually the space became Pioneer Memorial Park, Leichhardt, without a trace of its past evident. The rest of the rubble was carted to nearby Lilyfield. It became a grassed-over mound beside Leichhardt Oval, once home for the Balmain Tigers. Only eleven headstones were moved to different memorial sites, just one belonging to Captain Rowntree, went to Balmain.

Until last month, I had never seen inside the solid Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park, Sydney. I had passed along Elizabeth and College Streets countless times and not realised that the Art Deco monument was the Anzac Memorial. It's a soft blush of pink, a blur as you drive by.

November 1934 it is unveiled and causes a sensation, mainly because of the oversized sculpture of a nude Anzac soldier held aloft, supported by mother, wife, sister, and child. Bruce Dellit, the Anzac Memorial Architect, in defence of his controversial work, said:

The main intention of the design is to perpetuate for all time the memory of those in whose honour the Memorial has been erected¹.

There was no grand expression associated with the Plastic Flowers Memorial. No gratitude, symbolism or sacrifice intended. No unveiling. Friends placed the plastic flowers beside the ferry wharf, a departure point, in a gesture of farewell and remembrance. I visit, I reminisce, I blink hello. A battered plastic windmill pokes above the flowers. In the breeze, its sails spin a greeting back to me.

Last month, 2012. A late Balmain, Sunday afternoon. My daughter and I face a sunset that slides into a deep horizon. Day over and streetlights on, we trek home from a Woolworth's shop. My twenty something daughter has yo-yoed back 'to save' she says, but no doubt she also missed the washing, the cooking, and the cleaning. Laden with shopping-filled plastic bags we make our way along Darling Street, towards The Unity Hall Hotel. Music, and the fringe of the crowd flow onto the footpath. Down go our bags. We watch the swing dancers and sway to the sounds of a fourteen-piece orchestra and vocals. My daughter is eyeing off the dancers. She's chosen the best, well almost the best, definitely the cutest. She wriggles out of her boots and just in

¹ Brochure: **Anzac Memorial, Hyde Park Sydney**, Trustees of the Anzac Memorial, 2009, quotation from *The Book of the Anzac Memorial*, Beacon Press, Sydney, 1934

time for the band to strike up again, she's with him, on the tiny dance floor incorporating a salsa step with the jazzy jive. I am a doting admirer. It's hard not to feel fantastic in this atmosphere. Stacey worked here, loved by locals here. I smile with the thought of her. Stacey was just the girl to smile with the drinkers, the lookers, the dancers. I bet she'd join in with them when her shift finished, if it finished in time. This time, another, my daughter takes a turn. Sometimes I feel Stacey – just a flimsy, fleeting moment when a pretty girl with ponytail and a flower pinned behind one ear, moves into my peripheral vision.



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