

## LAKESIDE REFLECTIONS

It is the perfect spot for a funeral, for this funeral. The amber coffin gleams against a bank of dark green rushes. The clumps of sad-eyed mourners gather round the celebrant as he speaks by the still pool. Behind him, water cascades quietly down the rock face, a focus for contemplation. The sun shines on our necks.

Here she played as an exuberant child. Here she learned to love nature and beauty as the old quarries across the road from her home were gradually transformed to a tranquil oasis of urban bushland. Here she chose to die. Here I found her.

As I listen and learn about this girl I hardly knew, I ponder the relationships of those gathered to farewell her. That must be her father, with his new wife. What role did he play in her life and death? There's Marg from Outlets, and Val from the Urimbirra Committee, and Barbara who lived near Nan. Where do they fit into the mosaic that was her life? There are all the other members of the 'Friends' committee. We share wan smiles: we know where we fit in. I found her.

I think, too, of the complex intertwinings of relationships that bind me to this place, the links between this funeral and the others. Tendrils stretch out across time and place, across death, creating a random web of interconnection around these lakes.

Like Amy, I grew up nearby, back in the days when quarry blasts shook the houses regularly at 4pm. Like Amy, I played in the abandoned wilderness when it was forbidden. And like Amy, I've followed the transformation from wasteland to parkland and grown to love Newport Lakes as a place of peaceful retreat. I've fought for their right to exist, worked to enhance and preserve them, gone there to soothe my soul.

In the year that Geraldine was Mayor, a little boy of four wandered away from the house he was visiting. He safely crossed two roads, found his way through two fences and fell to his death down a

high quarry wall. A sad and tragic death. And a very significant death: the lakes nearly didn't survive it. There was pressure in the town, pressure in the council, to fill the old quarries with garbage, and their future hung in the balance. The death of a little boy added a safety argument to the weight of the economic ones, and Council granted a permit to fill that hole with garbage. But the people of the area had been promised a park. They wanted a park, a park with cliffs and lakes, not a flat dry park on top of an old garbage tip. Geraldine supported the people, and I supported Geraldine. As Councillors, we joined the people in their fight against Council at the Appeals Tribunal. We lost that hole but won the park. While the north-west hole was being filled, the other holes were reshaped, made safer, and planted. The groundwork for the beauty that followed was set in place and the blossoming began.

Years later, after my Jenny had died and Geraldine had moved to Adelaide, I joined a group of energetic local people in the formation of 'Friends of Newport Lakes' and my interest in the area became more focussed and intense. I could help make a difference here.

Then Geraldine died and Di brought her back to Melbourne. There should be a memorial to Geraldine, we thought, as our only woman mayor and such a worker for the city, and where better than at Newport Lakes, the beautiful area of bushy parkland that she loved and helped to save. Council gave permission and placed a boulder at the chosen place, and one fine November day, a group of her friends gathered for a picnic in the amphitheatre, by the boulder, to mark the placing of a memorial tablet on the stone and the scattering of Geraldine's ashes around its base. Di spoke tenderly and warmly of the public and private Geraldine we loved and admired.

I passed the memorial just now as I walked through the amphitheatre to join the crowd at this service. It hurts to see how the brass tablet has been so quickly and savagely defaced. Was it just mindless vandalism, or maliciousness? Not everyone loved her.

My husband gave me this dress, a late Christmas present, and all I've worn it to is funerals. Nothing but funerals. Three funerals in a little over a week. How does this funeral link to the other two? Loose threads really, but part of the amazing web.

Old Dr Long had been part of the town for so long he's linked to almost everyone. Maybe he even delivered Amy. No, he was too old by then, but he could have delivered her mother. Everyone has a Dr Long story to tell. He was on the council years ago, and his son, Michael, was on the council with Geraldine and me when the fight to save these lakes was on. I forget what his position was: probably on the fence. Dr Long was such an honourable and kindly man. I remember being touched to see him at Jenny's funeral, almost transparent in his ancient frailty, but so alive. And, of course, his funeral was on the same day as Mrs Mac's.

Dear Mrs Mac. I don't think she had any connection with these lakes until the day she died. For nineteen years of Mondays she cleaned my house and we chatted over lunch, and when she retired we kept in touch. She was my friend and my patient, and in those last horrid weeks of pain and confusion in that hateful nursing home, she constantly called out for me. "Mary? Mary! Are you there Mary?"

They rang at 6am on that Wednesday in early January to say that she had died in her sleep, and since I was her friend, would I like to come instead of the locum service? Died? She'd seemed to be settling at last and I'd been wondering what arrangement to make for while I was away camping. How can she have died? Black thoughts of the evils of nursing homes flashed through my mind. Yes, of course I will come. I knew I'd be upset so I took my book and binoculars, and after I'd done what had to be done — inspection (no signs of foul play) and quiet farewell, paperwork, tearful hugging of her devastated daughter and awkward discussion of funeral arrangements ( "There's Dr Long at 11 o'clock on Friday, and I'm meant to be away for a week after that, so...") — I drove up the road to the lakes for a solitary bird watch and restorative read beside the misty water. And I found a body.

Three funerals of people not really close to me, but at each I felt a little special. Selected out for notice. Michael rang to ask me to speak at his father's funeral, on behalf of the local doctors. I was reluctant and suggested Dr Standish would do a much better job, but it made me think about what I would have said if I'd agreed. It was an honour to be asked and as I sat amid the crowds in the old bluestone church he'd attended for donkey's years, listening to Dr Standish's fine words, I felt special

to have had a place in this grand old man's life and death. At Mrs Mac's service, conducted in the elegant funeral parlour by a minister who never knew her, before a score of family and friends, I was gratified to be singled out for mention as a special friend and supporter. Gratified and touched. And today, it's because I found her. People whisper and look at me.

It was only the book I was reading that made me think of a body. Over there on the far bank, something different at the water's edge, indistinct even through the binoculars. I could have ignored it as, it turns out, others had, for weeks. But the book was about finding a body and I decided to investigate. Even close up and with the binoculars, I still wasn't sure. So strangely dressed and featureless. Probably some effigy, a big scare-crow sort of thing, I thought, thrown in by someone. What should I do? I wandered on, around to the amphitheatre to visit Geraldine. She'd do the right thing. She'd tell the police. So I drove down and said to the constable, "I don't want to waste your time, and it's probably an effigy, but there could be a body in Newport Lakes."

I had to meet the police back up there. By then the day was warming up and its nature was obvious. Not an effigy. I had to wait and wait, while more and more police came and went, telling my story over and over, until at last they said they had him out ("Him? I somehow thought it was a woman." "No, a man.") and I could go to work. What a start to the morning! What a tale to tell! Some poor old hobo, I supposed, fallen in and not missed. Ironic that I, the secretary of the Friends of Newport Lakes, should be the one to find him.

So, I went to my back-to-back funerals on the Friday, and on Saturday went off camping for a week. I was stunned the next Sunday when Ron, the 'Friends' treasurer, told me the news after church.

"You know about tomorrow? At the Lakes?"

"I know about the bird hide meeting, but I thought it was Wednesday."

"No. The service tomorrow. For Amy. Ellie's daughter."

"What? What's happened to Ellie's daughter?"

"It was Ellie's daughter, the body in the lake."

"But it was a man. I found it."

"I know you did, but it was Ellie's daughter. She'd been missing for weeks."

"Oh, no. How absolutely awful!"

This was more than ironic. This was spooky. The connections that kept on connecting more and more. That I, the secretary of Friends of Newport Lakes, should find the body of the daughter of the President of the Friends of Newport Lakes, in Newport Lakes. That I, who lost my special daughter in the water, should find Ellie's special daughter in the water. They were born in the same year, our special daughters. 1974. So weird. So sad. Ellie had been so worried that her Amy would drift away like this, had tried so hard to hold her back from the brink.

And now I'm at her funeral — at the Lakes; such a courageous, healing decision for Ellie to make — thinking over all these relationships of lives and deaths, and hearing the story of Amy's rich life. Such an enchanting memorable child, so gifted and giving. So much she had squeezed into her years, before the darkness closed in. When the depression threatened to overwhelm her she came home to Ellie, and Ellie tried to help her overcome it. She found a short-term job, one of these employment initiative things they offer young people these days, at Ceres, and loved it. She bloomed there and seemed to be recovering. One Sunday in November, the Friends went on an outing to Ceres and Amy proudly showed us around, explaining all the environment-enhancing programs. I sent her an official letter of thanks and appreciation and Ellie said she was delighted. On December the tenth, the job at Ceres ended and Amy disappeared. In her big heavy boots and her strange peasant clothes, she walked into the lake. For all those weeks, through Christmas and New Year, while knowing full well, Ellie persuaded herself she had gone off somewhere again, picking interstate perhaps, and would turn up in time.

"I knew I should have told the police to search the lakes," she said to me. "But somehow I couldn't. There was still hope you see, if I didn't." Until I found her.

We haven't been mates, Ellie and I, just workers together on a Committee, but we hugged long and hard, over there near Geraldine's rock, and I gave her a copy of my book about losing Jenny. Maybe one day she'll be able to read it, and maybe it will help.

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