

1. DEATH IN LAKE MULGA

The old woman died just before eleven on that Thursday morning in her eighty-eighth year, sitting in the cane chair on the front veranda of the dilapidated house in Lake Mulga as she had throughout every morning of the last two decades, and to look at her no one would have noticed that this was any different to any other day.

Old Ruth took to her chair just after dawn each morning and remained there overseeing the minimal to-ing and fro-ing in the town until the noonday sunlight encroached along the rutted broken boards of the verandah floor to touch her ankles, whereby Maggie would come and help her inside, seating her behind the venetian blinds in the front room from where she could continue her vigilance until after dark.

It was said that nothing ever happened in Lake Mulga without Old Ruth knowing about it and that might have been true, but it also might not have; that she never communicated her observations to anyone was for the very good reason that a stroke suffered some years earlier had deprived her of her power of speech and, it was rumoured, most of her other senses. But whether she saw and heard or not was really quite irrelevant, for everyone else in the town knew that she was there and might have been watching and listening, and so they always tended to conduct themselves in accordance with that knowledge whenever their activities fell within the supposed optimum of her sensory capabilities.

She sat on the verandah and watched over the town with a gaze so relentless that it was often taken for hatred and perhaps it was. Her face was such a mass of crevasses and ridges that its features were merely more pronounced wrinkles, and of such texture as to suggest that the face itself had gone and left only this crumpled shed skin as a remnant. Hugely fat, she invariably wore a simple floral dress and a faded apron, her flabby arms folded on her lap when she was not swatting listlessly at flies, and otherwise the only indication that she was still alive was the gentle intermittent heave of her monumental bosom. Her elbows rested on the arms of the chair and her legs were planted loosely apart, offering no support — only her sheer bulk seemed to hold her in the chair. The squinted slits beneath her brow might have possessed no eyes and yet somehow her gaze seemed to pierce right through the unsuspecting, penetrating the defences of their deepest secrets at a glance. That gaze was a glare across the decades of a woman who had lived her best years when the world was different to now, and despised all humanity for daring to make changes.

So she remained, day in, day out, until that Thursday morning in her eighty-eighth year—just eight years older than the Century she had grown to hate so mightily—when all of a sudden her heart failed, and she was dead.

At first there was no visible sign, and no one to see it anyway. The expression did not change, but somehow became totally vacant. The barely perceptible heave of her breast ceased. A fly landed on her face and waited for the customary hand to swipe languidly, became bored when it did not, and flew on again. And then one of her hands fell from her lap to dangle at the end of her swinging bulbous arm, more and more slowly, until it was still. The death was ended.

There she remained, on the verandah of a house so poorly maintained that it might barely have outlived her—the timber desperate for a coat of paint fifty years ago, the garden overgrown with weeds and creepers, the tin roof rusted and sagging. To her right was the open window with its venetian blinds behind which she would never sit again, to her left was the open front door, the flywire screen shielding against the increasing swarms of flies. It was one of those houses where you could see in the front door and all the way down through the dimness of the interior to the rectangle of light that was the open door at the back. For a moment all was still in there, and then a figure appeared in silhouette, to pause, advance lethargically up the hall, open the squeaking flywire, and step out into the heat of the verandah. Maggie looked down upon her mother, and saw that she was dead.

If she ever lived to be eighty-eight, along which weary journey she had advanced just exactly halfway, Maggie would grow to strongly resemble her mother. This was a fact of which she could not have been more acutely aware—she even wore the same sort of floral dress and faded apron and her hair was permed in quite the identical style. For the moment, Maggie was a bulky woman—not yet fat but in increasing danger of it—and already her face was beginning to take on the first traces of that intense lattice of wrinkles. She too had that stoic expression that seemed to see and understand everything and think nothing of it, and this was the expression she now used as she gazed down upon her dead mother.

Stooping, she took hold of the fallen arm by the wrist—not to check the pulse which she probably could not have found even if there had been one—but simply to return it to its rightful place on her lap. Then she straightened, glanced out across the street to assure herself that no one was watching, and finally abruptly turned and disappeared back into the house.

As she made her way down the dim hallway past rooms off to right and left, Maggie three times utilised a characteristic gesture she had of running her left hand through her hair. When she reached the kitchen at the end, she leaned against the wall just inside the door, and did it again. She tilted her head back to gaze sightlessly at the flyspotted ceiling and remained so for some little time—she did not know how long. For fifteen years she had waited, with mingled dread and hope, for this moment but now that it had happened, for all its anticipation, there was only a single thought whirling numbingly in her head... “Too late,” she murmured aloud, “Too late.”

She might have stayed in her trancelike state indefinitely had it not been for old Norm Cullen who passed by about this time every day, heading for a snort in the pub, and paused as he always did to lean on the gate and smile his toothless smile.

“Mornin’, Mrs Kragg,” he called in his croaking voice.

Of course there was no reply, but the old man was unconcerned, since there never was. But deep in the house, out of sight, Maggie was jolted back to reality by the voice and glanced that way in panic. If Old Norm was to discover what she already knew, Maggie might well have two corpses on her front doorstep, when one was more than enough.

Out there, as always, Norm Cullen was contemplating the sky.

“Turnin’ inta another scorcher,” he said.

And then, after most careful consideration, added. “Yep. Nother scorcher awright.”

His meteorological observation of the obvious complete, he would smile again and thump the gatepost with his palm, as if he truly regretted that he could not stay and chat longer.

“Well, gotta get on,” he said, and toddled off.

“Keep smilin’,” he always called before he was gone.

Maggie breathed. Silly old coot—but it was a close thing and it did make her see the need for action. She paused only for a moment longer, looking this way and that, before launching herself off the wall and into the fray.

At the sink there were a few dishes that she hastily washed, dried and put away. Then off she charged through every room of the house, swishing the feather duster, straightening the beds and the rug and the couch. There were newspapers that she gathered and dumped in the garbage, after which she inspected the carpet, but she had vacuumed the day before and it would be right enough.

Then back to the kitchen to sweep the floor and into the bathroom to remove a few stray spots of toothpaste from the basin, and check the supplies of spare soap, the provision of clean towels, the extra rolls of paper in the dunny. She checked the cupboards and the fridge and jotted up a quick list of all things lacking or in short supply—somehow she would have to fit a shopping trip in later...

Thus she bustled back and forth until every part of the house was spotless. And when it was done, she stood in the middle of the kitchen, assuring herself methodically that she had thought of everything. Soon there would be people—

relations, neighbours, undertakers, even strangers, all over the house and she was damned if she was going to be found domestically wanting after all these years of unappreciated toil.

She even went to the backyard to pull the washing off the line even though it was not yet entirely dry. Most of it belonged to the old woman anyway, so it didn't really matter anymore. While she was there, she checked that the dog had adequate water—there might not be time to think of things like that later on. The dog, a shaggy bordercollie, lay at the end of its chain, watching all this unlikely activity with grave suspicion. Maggie paused in her onslaught momentarily to pat its head—that was even more suspicious.

Finally she was done—the house was ready for even the most severe inspection, but then, she knew, it needed to be. She took herself into the spare room, where on the far wall she kept a roadmap of Victoria, mounted on a board and hung on the wall. Piercing the map at various farflung locations were a number of large pins, each with a label attached and on each label minute writing. These she now removed and placed in an envelope and that in her handbag. She paused, running her hand through her hair. Time to go.

Again she stepped out onto the verandah, her handbag slung over her arm. Naturally enough, the old woman remained quite as before, but the flies, being flies, were finding her far more interesting now that she was dead than they ever had when she was alive, and amongst their species, the word was getting around. Maggie confronted the swarm with grim dismay.

Resolutely, she darted back into the house for a moment, to re-emerge clutching a can of insecticide and, without the slightest compunction, set about giving her mother a thorough spraying. The propriety of treating her newly dead mother in this manner she carefully shut out of her mind.

“That'll hold the buggers,” was all she allowed herself to think.

This done, she slipped the can back inside the door and, with only a brief final glance at the old woman, marched down the path, out the gate, and headed across the pitted bitumen road on the diagonal.

Her objective, the post office, was always in view, and conversely Sam Parker the Postmaster, where he stood behind the counter tallying his stamps, could have, had he wanted, glanced back over his shoulder and seen not only Maggie's determined advance, but also Old Ruth on the verandah beyond. As a result Sam was very much one of those members of the community who went about their business in a fairly constant state of paranoia, and it was probably for that very reason that he did not look over his shoulder, and therefore was taken completely by surprise when Maggie came stomping in. He dropped his stamps, lost his count, but even so managed to smile. Unlike her mother, Maggie was one of the better liked people around the town.

“Good Mornin', Maggie,” he beamed at her.

“Not really,” Maggie said flatly, dumping her handbag on the counter. Better liked... even if she did tend to be curt with everybody, almost all the time.

As it happened, Sam was having one of those days when everything he said and did seemed to be wrong. He left the stamps in a hopeless pile in the drawer, and cared to be polite and conversational.

“Bit hot fer yer mum terday,” he said brightly.

“I doubt it,” Maggie said coldly.

So coldly in fact that the temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees, and Sam did not need to be particularly perceptive to know that the best thing to say next was nothing. But Sam was even less perceptive than that, and was opening his mouth to say god-knows-what when Maggie cut him off with a sharp gesture and then said, very clearly. “She's dead.”

Sam panicked. What else could he have done? He flung his head around toward the window behind so violently that his glasses flew from his face and clattered on the counter, and therefore he saw nothing but a blur. Deftly, Maggie caught the glasses

as they attempted to slide off the counter and onto the floor and handed them back to him. As he tried to snatch them from her, she did not release her grasp immediately, and the hesitation did calm him somewhat, although still he was so flustered that he poked himself in the better of his eyes while trying to put them back on with his shaking hands.

At last he looked out the window again and saw Old Ruth sitting there, quite as she always was. Sam had been rotated to this post office only five years before, but still he knew well the ways of the town. When he looked back he saw Maggie was smiling but still he could tell it wasn't some sort of joke. For Maggie often smiled, but she never made any sort of joke.

"Really dead," he had to ask.

"Dead as a doornail," Maggie replied.

"Well...er...don't yer think we...oughta do...somethin'?" But even as he said it, he was realising that Maggie was, after all, standing before him and therefore, presumably, something was in the process of being done.

"I'll use your telephone to call Doctor Stacey, if that's alright," Maggie said evenly.

Sam rushed sideways to lift the flap and admit her behind the counter.

Maggie did not move. "Use the one in my office," Sam offered persistently.

Still she did not move. Leaving the flap open, Sam returned to his rightful place behind the counter, directly in front of her.

"No hurry," Maggie remarked, "Doctor's never around at this time of day anyway. And I want to send telegrams to the kids, first of all."

In a flash Sam had his telegram pad on the counter and pen poised. There were deep dimples in Maggie's cheeks that flickered with amusement.

"Sure you don't wanna try the doc first?" he asked, mainly because he was beginning to feel foolish.

"No. The kids'll want to hear about it before anyone else, so now I'll be able to tell 'em that's what I did."

"Good," Sam said, "Good." And at last he was able to smile. "The Kids' they were always called by everyone, but Maggie was in her forties and the youngest of them, "Same one to all ov 'em?"

"Yes," Maggie said and then rehearsed it in her mind for a moment. "Ah...Mum passed away eleven am this mornin', Maggie. That okay?"

Sam nodded and wrote it, and Maggie watched until it was complete before she added, "Make that, quietly this mornin'."

Sam crossed it out, tore off the sheet, wrote it again. "Lotta telegrams," he said.

In reply to that, Maggie opened her handbag, removed the envelope and emptied the pins and labels onto the counter. Sam stared. Maggie smiled at his simple curiosity. "I keep a map. Addresses, birthdays, names of their kids and their birthdays. They were always amazed that Mum never forgot to send 'em a card on the right day, but it was always me that sent 'em."

Sam picked up one of the labels, examined it, and then another. In the district there were many large family groups but none so large as the Kraggs. Still he had to ask, "They all your family? All these?"

"Every bloody one of 'em," Maggie laconically replied.