



'What a book!
Brutal and funny
and full of love.'

ALICE PUNG

THE EULOGY

JACKIE BAILEY

This is a work of fiction. While I may have drawn from my own life and recollections in creating this work, all of the characters and events portrayed in this novel are products of my mind or are used fictitiously.

I live and work on the traditional lands of the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation. I pay respect to Elders past and present and acknowledge Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's Traditional Owners, Custodians and First Nations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this novel contains the name of a Yugambeh man now resting in the Dreaming.

THE EULOGY

JACKIE BAILEY

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Hardie Grant acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the country on which we work, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and recognises their continuing connection to the land, waters and culture.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

For Allison

PROLOGUE

It's my job to write your eulogy, but every time I try to think of an amusing anecdote that sums up your life, I find myself asking, *How did we get here?* Not in a general sense, but specifically *here*, with me sitting in a car I have been living in for the last twenty-four hours, a husband on my blocked caller list, an airtight Tupperware container filled with the finely blended powder of three hundred sleeping pills in the glove box; and you, or what is left of you, currently in transit from the Logan Hospital morgue to Angel Companions Funeral Home.

I left the hospital an hour ago and have spent the time since sitting in my car, staring at a blank laptop screen.

It's not as if your death was unexpected. That's not what confounds me.

My mind keeps returning to a study I read years ago when I was a psychology undergraduate. A team of doctors in San Diego surveyed almost twenty thousand adults and found a statistically significant, graded relationship between adverse childhood experiences and cancer. At the time I dismissed

it as so much humbug. Without triangulated evidence, the researchers only had people's self-assessment as to whether they had experienced psychological, physical or sexual abuse.

It turned out that I was right to be dubious about the San Diego research: magnetic resonance imaging has since shown that negative events stimulate activity in the emotion-processing regions of the brain that lead to the creation of memory. This may be an evolutionary survival technique – we remember bad things in order to avoid them in the future – but whatever the rationale for the tendency, the fact is that people's memories cannot be trusted.

Yet here I am, trying to work out if the general conflict of 1983 – because there was certainly enough mayhem to go around; I do not claim sole licence to suffering in the Bradley household – was enough to trigger one cell, then another in your brain to turn radioactive? I suppose I am asking – for twenty-five years I have been asking – did you get sick to protect me?



PART 1

CHILDHOOD

As much as possible, include personal memories to illustrate the deceased's story. It is the little details that really bring the past to life.

How to Write a Eulogy

I startle awake, drool sliding down the side of my chin. I must have nodded off for a few minutes, because the hospital day-shift workers are starting to arrive: I can see the pale blue of nurses' uniforms and the bright pink of the maternity unit smocks. I fumble on the seat next to me for last night's coffee. The tepid bitterness of the burnt beans kicks me awake, which is good because I need to get moving, but when I try to sit up, I can't.

This is interesting, the calm part of my brain says, taking mental notes. I have read studies about the physiological impacts of bereavement. They include neuroendocrine activation, altered sleep, immune imbalance, inflammatory cell mobilisation, and changes in heart rate and blood pressure. This explains why I feel exhausted but can't sleep. Why my fuse is short and my heart shivers; why my stomach clenches as if something terrible or wonderful is about to happen, or I am about to throw up. My heart genuinely aches; my body is labouring with less air, under more strain. Waking feels like acclimatising to high altitudes, because I am doing exactly

that. These physiological responses are greatest in the early months after bereavement. In some cases of extreme sorrow, survivors have been found to experience increased mortality. In other words, dying of a broken heart is real.

After a few minutes of deep breathing, and before anyone comes to tap on my window and ask why a strange, unkempt woman is sleeping in the hospital carpark, I am at last able to start the car. I head for a playground not far from the hospital. An early morning jogger plods the perimeter, but there are no harassed mothers chasing gleeful toddlers, so I make my way to the toilet block. Technically I am not in breach of the protection order if there are no children in sight. I splash my face, brush my teeth and give myself an all-over spray of deodorant.

The funeral home is situated in a light industrial area of Logan City, just off the southbound freeway. As I take the service road exit, families and young couples stream below me on the A1 freeway, headed for the Gold Coast with surfboards and dreams of sunnier, happier versions of themselves strapped to their roof racks. The A1 highway circumnavigates the entire continent of Australia – an estimated 14,500 kilometres of bitumen, winding ever onwards. You can go anywhere on that road, become anyone you want to be.

I contemplate the prefab building with ‘Angel Companions Funeral Home’ painted in cursive font on the concrete wall before me. ‘Funeral home’ is such a ridiculous term. I suppose it would sound a bit too commercial to call it a funeral *shop*;

but *home*? I prefer the old-fashioned term, ‘parlour’, conjuring images of creaky furniture upholstered in faded velvet where countless bottoms have farted during countless cups of stewed tea and triangular sandwiches. That’s my idea of a send-off.

My siblings begin to arrive in their separate vehicles, a horde of Bradleys descending upon the unwitting funeral directors. Here comes Doctor Trish in her ten-year-old Mercedes, the one she refuses to upgrade even though she probably makes more money than the rest of us combined, because it still works, doesn’t it? Barb is in her zippy Honda hatchback with the personalised licence plates: ‘BARB01’ they say, with a little picture of a pink bunny rabbit on the right-hand side. I wonder where she got the money for that; she always cries poor when we pass the hat for Mum’s bills. Brian is in yet another of the endless parade of Japanese four-wheel-drives that have passed through his garage since he married into Anglo-Aussie suburbia; and Val is in her sleek white company car. Last but not least, Bev arrives, with Mum in the front passenger seat. I have already heard from Barb all about Bev’s car: a metallic-gold Ford purchased with her late ex-husband’s life insurance.

Before this morning, I had not seen Bev for eight years; not since Dad’s funeral. I watch her alight from the gleaming vehicle and imagine his ghost circling it, kicking the tyres and nodding his approval. Dad had been a Ford man through and through and would have advised me against the nearly new Subaru that Evan and I bought last year. I would not have

listened. I had done my research. An image of Evan shaking his affectionate head at me as I trawled the internet for the safest car in our price range pops into my mind, but I block it like his calls.

Val was the one who tracked Bev down. It wasn't nearly as difficult as when we had to track Val herself down, back in 1983, when you had just been diagnosed with cancer and everyone thought you only had a year to live. All Val had to do this time was log on and search for Bev's children on Facebook, and there they all were. 'How r u? Nice to hear from u again ;-)'

Seeing Bev flash a smile with her new dentures, also courtesy of the insurance money, I can't help but feel a tiny bit disappointed. What had I imagined? That miraculously, through a change of location and a failure to share her phone number with the rest of us, she had escaped the mediocrity of her projected life? The babies smelling of air freshener and cigarettes within minutes of emerging from her womb; the ex-husband who finally died of an overdose, by accident or on purpose no one will ever know, although based on my recollections of him, I think I can hazard a guess?

It turns out that Bev and her family left the caravan park they had been living in and drove up the A1, the road where you can go anywhere, become anyone. Our sister stopped in Bundaberg, a small city merely five hours north of Brisbane, and stayed there for the next eight years. What is that, if not a drastic failure of imagination?

Now here she is, the prodigal sister, seated next to Mum with just as much right to be present as any of us, I suppose. I walk over, give her a kiss. She is soft, a black polyester cardigan warming layers of beautiful fat. I am transported to you, Annie. It's her cuddliness, the obliging give of her body in my arms. Flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood.

The funeral director has to fetch more chairs.

'So lovely to see you *all* so involved,' she says.

We blink at her, the Bradleys, glazed and dazed with sleep deprivation and grief, yet still radiating a kind of collective heat, an energy born of being together. It's because we bring out the best in each other. Or the worst, depending on what is at stake.

Packets of tissues have been artfully arranged in a basket at the centre of the meeting table. While the director is out of the room, Barb leans forward. Hand halfway to her handbag, she suddenly remembers that we are all there with nothing else to do but watch her, pocketing the free stuff.

'Look,' she says. 'Tissues.'

'I think they're for people who are crying, Barb,' Val says.

Barb extracts one and dabs at her eyes.

When the funeral director comes back, Val begins talking about buying a new outfit for you to wear. We all agree on a cardboard coffin (which costs \$2000 – the nerve of these people), so that we can decorate it ourselves. Val and her kids will paint the coffin in a floral pattern.

'Annie would have loved that.'

‘Yes, Annie would have loved that.’

‘Whatever happened to Annie’s gold crucifix?’ I ask Barb.

‘What crucifix?’ Barb asks. Annie, *you* know the one I mean. It was only nine-carat gold but with a detailed figure of Christ on the cross. Trish gave it to you for our trip to Lourdes in 1988 and you wore it right up until you were moved into the aged care home. The last time I saw it, it was dangling from Barb’s neck as she kissed you goodbye. By then, you were unable to make a sound. ‘I’m looking after it for her,’ Barb told me when I confronted her. ‘In case it gets stolen.’ Which is ironic, when you think about the tissues.

Now I stare at Barb carefully, searching for her telltale tic: when Barb lies, she can’t stop the tiniest of smiles from flitting across her face. But she looks genuinely puzzled. I wonder, is it more galling that she took this most sacred memento of yours, for God knows you had little enough to call your own, or that she cannot even remember doing so?

I take a deep breath. The crucifix is not the priority, I tell myself. The priority is the funeral. There was not much I could do for you when you were alive, but what I can do is this: I can give you the funeral you would have loved.

Val and her family are already doing the decorating and her boys can be pallbearers. Barb can do a prayer of the faithful, brief enough that she can’t steal the spotlight from you for too long. I’ll let Bev do one as well. I ought to involve her. Her boys can also be pallbearers and her daughter can do the

offertory procession with Brian's kids. Each of our siblings has a role, just like you would have wanted.

Brian, Trish and I are doing the eulogy. Trish will open with something about you as a little sister. Brian wants to tell the story of your life in chronological order and I think that is a good idea: it gives us a narrative structure, a spine to which I will add the flesh. I will take the bones and make them giving and forgiving, like you, Annie.

I make myself turn away from Barb and focus on Brian. We agree to meet with the priest to talk through the service, Brian because he knows the priest, and I because I know you, Annie.

Although how well can I say I really knew you by the end? When was the last time I spoke to you and you spoke back? Even before the stroke, the one that landed you in the aged care home, your speech had been getting more and more slurred. It might have been because of the meds that kept your seizures in check, or it might have been the hemiplegia. Whatever it was, I can't actually remember the last time we spoke in dialogue; you know – me, then you. You, then me. I miss that. I miss the sound of your voice.

After the meeting I head to the nearest servo for fuel and a one-dollar cup of coffee. It's one of those modern petrol stations with a swooping roof and a food court. A group of teens loiter in front of the Macca's storefront. They look too old to be covered by the protection order against me, so I should be fine.

I idly scope the carpark but dismiss it as a potential sleeping place tonight. Too many bright lights. I pull out my laptop and stare at the screen.

Childhood. More specifically, 1983, the year it all began.

The Eulogy by Jackie Bailey

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