

Thoughts from some who took a deep breath and turned the page.

“It is deeply moving but not trite and answers questions I didn’t even realise I had about dying. I cried, laughed and it made me assess my own relationships.”

“It made me want to spend some wine fuelled evenings with the Curtains”

“This is a love story. I feared that my own experience of loss would make reading about the intimacy of dying too painful but it is done in a way that I actually I found it comforting.”

“I love reading books you just can’t put down and this was one of them!”

“It’s like a two way experience. An extraordinary feeling and I felt healing for my own grief. That’s quite an achievement.”

“I never re-read books but I know there will be a time when I will want to re-read this one.”

“It had me sucked in from the very beginning and I read it like a speeding train.”

“I am heading out to buy myself a new lipstick today.”

What will I wear
to your funeral?

Kellie Curtain

About the Author

Kellie Curtain is a mother of four has a degree in nothing but may well hold a Masters in Procrastination. An Australian former television news reporter with a passion for telling other people's stories, she never imagined that if there indeed was a book inside of her it would be about the death of her best friend, her mother.

This wasn't a search for inner peace or a deeper meaning to anything; the first words were written one night after the wine and excuses ran out.

The story itself is not unique; the dialogue however is a little different and it may just start a conversation that many are fearful to have.

Names have not been changed to protect identities, most have simply been left out in the interests of not mentioning one act of kindness or friendship over another – they were all special.



Published by Middle Page Publishing
www.middlepagepublishing.com

First published in 2017
www.indeliblemarks.net

© Kellie Curtain 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission from the publisher.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

Cover design and illustration by Karen Greenberg

ISBN:
978-0-6480436-0-7 (AMZ)
978-0-6480436-1-4 (ING)
978-0-6480436-6-9 (e-bk)

Yesterday is history, tomorrow a mystery, today is a gift
Eleanor Roosevelt

Prologue

It came just as I knew it would but not when I was expecting it, my new kind of normal.

The beach house that we'd rented in far North Queensland required a long day of travel from our home in Melbourne, where it was still cold despite it officially being spring. My husband and I walked out onto the balcony that overlooked the sea as our four children ran down the back steps that ended in the sand, and already we felt the trek had been worth it. There was nothing much to do here but after the events of the last six weeks a whole lot of 'nothing' was what we needed.

The sun had begun to fall behind the sea with a magnificent orange hue. We grabbed a bottle of red and two glasses and strolled out to the foreshore. I had plonked sweet baby James on the sand beside us

What will I wear to your funeral?

and was laughing at the 'Kodak' moment of our little girls dancing on the water's edge of the mile-long beach, which was all but deserted. They skipped and cartwheeled as the pretty cotton nightdresses Nana had made them mushroomed in the wind, three mops of hair blowing in all directions as they laughed and chased each other.

I was smiling at them, enjoying the glimpse of sibling harmony, when my new normal snuck up on me as suddenly as the waves they were trying to outrun. It was the realisation that I had no one to call.

Never again would someone be waiting for me to phone, wondering if I had got to where I was going, wanting to know I had arrived safely, because that's what mothers do. That's what my mother did and she was gone.

The ritual of ringing Mum to let her know I was safe began in early adolescence and it was non-negotiable. Even at forty years old with children of my own it continued, especially when it involved long travel. I would ring her and debrief with trivial pieces of information, mostly about the children: who was the best behaved, who was testing my patience, who bit whom. This would be followed by a description of what the accommodation was like, the weather, and

Prologue

which night my bins needed putting out at home: all the stuff that no one is really interested in hearing; no one but your mother.

And so there it was, picture perfect setting shattered, triggered by the void of a single phone call. The heavy weight of reality was tangible, as if my mother had at that very moment dropped dead in front of me. It had been three weeks since her death but it was a defining moment that I hadn't expected. The permanency of her absence was revealed for the first time and it was a loneliness I could never have imagined.

I'd lost my father a few weeks shy of my twenty-second birthday after he died from a heart attack. Even though I was grown, I was now officially an orphan. I was no longer somebody's daughter.

I picked up my phone anyway and punched in the name of one of my brothers. It rang just a few times and then answered with a familiar and laid back 'Hiii'.

Ceremony isn't our family's strong point. Growing up with three brothers required rough and tumble; we're definitely more the 'call a spade a shovel' kind. My brother knew who was calling so I skipped the formalities of asking how he was and launched straight into my reason for ringing.

What will I wear to your funeral?

‘Hi. Look, I know you probably don’t give a toss but it’s just occurred to me that I have no one to call and let them know we have arrived safely, so I’m ringing you.’

And just with the right amount of humour came the reply: ‘You’re right! I don’t give a toss . . .’ and he began to laugh ‘. . . but I’m glad that you have arrived safely. How is your place?’ And the conversation continued.

Life without the family lynchpin was going to take a lot of getting used to, I knew that, though it was the little things that were catching me off guard and having the most impact. Finding one of her lipsticks in my bag would simultaneously console and crush me. I had applied more bright lipstick in the last few weeks than in my entire life.

We opened a second bottle of red on the balcony that night as we sat listening to the ocean. We had booked the holiday seven months ago and I’d asked Mum to come with us but she’d declined the offer. I’m sure she had a sixth sense of what was going to happen; she always did.

The next morning I woke early to the loud and joyous sounds of wildlife. Lying in bed looking through the window I spotted two kookaburras perched proudly on the balcony railing. There was no trademark laughing. Their heads made small staccato movements

Prologue

as they peered through the glass into the room next to mine. They appeared to be observing the children, who were already up and playing.

Moments later a text came through from my big brother. It simply said ‘No kookaburras today.’ In the days since Mum had been gone he hadn’t said much at all, but I knew instantly what the three-word message meant.

It was a reference to a pair of the native birds that had been coming to his backyard on the Victoria coast every morning since Mum died. He was certain they were the same two that he and Mum had been feeding months before. They would come first thing in the morning and occasionally return in the afternoon or if it rained. If no one was outside when they arrived they would wait – they knew eventually someone would come out with a slice of meat and would happily take food from their hands.

The thought that somehow Mum was connected to the birds I was looking at was ridiculous and yet I couldn’t help but take a strange comfort. On the first day the kookas didn’t pay my brother a visit I had two looking through our lounge window.

I texted back: ‘No, the kookaburras aren’t with you today because they are with me, it’s Mum checking to see I am safe.’

Some time in the 70s

Studying every move, I would gaze upward and watch. She would pucker her lips and expertly guide the lipstick tip from one corner across the bow to the other side. Her mouth would then open a little more and she would stretch her lips into a stiff smile, glide the bold colour across the bottom lip from one side to the other then back again for good measure and then she would always rub her lips together.

There were so many different shades in her collection, more than anyone would need yet she would buy more, even duplicates of her favourites, although she was also eager to try something new. Her preference was for those with a 'blue' base, though it took me years to understand what that meant. There was a drawer full of them and every single one was Revlon. It was a lifelong loyalty; she insisted every other brand made her 'itch'.

Some time in the 70s

She was never fully dressed until lipstick had been applied. One to match every outfit, even mixing them to get the colour just right, and over time each one would be moulded to an arch shape with a pointy tip.

The ladies' magazines revealed that where the user had created a pointy tip to their lipsticks, this signified someone who was adventurous, complex and would make a great detective. She was certainly adventurous when it came to lipstick shades, though there was no room in her drawer for token tints or barely-there colours.

Who knew there could be so many different colours? She did. Who would remember the quirky names that separated one hue from another? She would! Wine with Everything, Kiss me Coral, Sly Red, Plumalicious, she was partial to any that had a shimmer effect.

Even if she wasn't leaving the house she had lipstick on. Every bag, and she had a closet of those too, had a few rolling around inside and there were also several on standby in the car console. A fresh coat of lipstick signalled that she was armed and ready for anything or nothing in particular, it was never too early to reapply and a mirror not essential. Driving along, eyes still on the road, with one hand she'd ease the top off a lipstick cylinder, place it between her teeth and twist it around once to reveal the wax stick. A quick once over the top, a swipe across the bottom lip, then the lip rub and it was done, she was ready.

She wore Sandstorm

May 2009

The phone was answered with a cheery ‘Heello,’ though she knew exactly who it would be.

‘Hi, Mum. How did the scan go?’

I knew she had a girlfriend over for dinner but wanted to ask how her mammogram went because she hadn’t been feeling a hundred per cent for a few weeks and her GP just wanted to make sure. No big deal, ‘old age’, they guessed, though at sixty-nine she didn’t look or feel old.

‘It was fine but I have to go back next week as they didn’t do it properly.’

She wore Sandstorm

‘OK, great, speak to you tomorrow.’

I had started to flick through the TV channels when I replayed her answer in my head and realised I’d heard that line before. I immediately grabbed the phone and pressed redial.

‘What did they find?’

Quick as a whip but in a non-chalant manner she replied ‘Nothing! It just has to be done again.’

I reminded her that she’d used that excuse on another occasion when she didn’t want to cause alarm; the split-second pause betrayed her.

‘Oh,’ signalled her surrender, and she knew I was on to her.

Whether it was my pregnancy hormones in overdrive or a sixth sense, in that moment I knew it was going to be bad. I started to cry whilst Mum sat helpless on the other end of the phone. She was trying to keep calm and not let on to her friend that something was wrong as she made a futile attempt to reassure me. ‘We won’t know anything until next week.’

I hung up the phone, rested my head on the table and sobbed.



What will I wear to your funeral?

A few days later it was Mother's Day. The line-up for lunch included my three brothers, their wives, and six children under six. Anywhere our family gathered was where Mum was happiest – it had always been that way – and the banter was as fluid as the wine being poured. But it didn't take long before Mum addressed the elephant in the room. 'I just want to tell you all that if it's cancer I'm not having treatment.'

'Like hell you're not!' was the collective response, though no one spoke. The silence wasn't because we were lost for words – our family is never lost for words. The quiet moment was nothing more than a gesture of respect for the matriarch before we began the gentle assault on her no-treatment position.

'Let's just wait and see what the doctor says this week,' said one of my brothers in an effort to break the lull in conversation, but Mum was having none of it. 'I'm not going through that again.'

The word 'again' slapped us with a stark reminder of how much we didn't know the first time she had battled the disease.

I was fifteen when Mum was first diagnosed with breast cancer; old enough to know that death was possible, and yet I don't remember ever fearing that she would die. 'It will all be fine,' Mum had said, and she

She wore Sandstorm

was usually right. Everything remained as it had been and for the most part I have no memory of anything being out of the ordinary apart from her having a few days in hospital to have the ‘lump’ cut out. We had been told that she’d have chemotherapy, and a very expensive wig was made in preparation for her hair loss, but it never fell out, which served as a fortuitous diversion from the seriousness of her condition. The radiotherapy left nasty burns and scars on the skin under her arm but she played that down too so the impact on us was almost nil. What we did notice was the sudden addition of soy milk, dairy-free butter spread and yeast-free bread to the fridge, but not much thought was given to the reason why. How blissfully ignorant we were.

Every year Mum had quietly celebrated the call that gave her the all-clear, but as the five- and ten-year milestones passed, the clean bill of health never really seemed a reason to break out the champagne – rather they were marked by a chorus of ‘Good to hear, Mum’. After more than two decades of being cancer free we arrogantly assumed that Mum had well and truly won her fight – clearly she hadn’t. It was back.

As our Mother’s Day lunch wrapped up there were none of the usual arguments over whose turn it was to clean up; everyone was looking for a distraction,

What will I wear to your funeral?

even if it meant clearing the dishes. The grandchildren were oblivious to the dark cloud looming over our family, and their light-hearted antics and toddler squabbles kept the mood from plummeting, but I was suddenly preoccupied with the thought of the frightening knock to her mortality she'd shouldered all those years ago, the prospect of leaving behind four children the youngest of whom was only four at the time.

Lying in bed that night I was kept awake by visions of two decades before that I had never actually been exposed to. I wept for my mother and what must have been a crushing loneliness as she put her own rest and recovery aside because her priority was to shelter my brothers and me from the vomiting, fatigue and other painful side effects of her treatment. But I also cried tears of shame at not properly acknowledging her annual victories, which had eventually clocked up twenty-four years.

When I collected Mum for her oncologist's appointment the following morning she was waiting for me on her front veranda dressed in a smart warm coat to keep out the May chill, her short hair coiffed and perfect make-up. My mother was beautiful to look at; I was biased but I could tell from the way others admired her. A petite five foot two blonde with ice-blue eyes,

She wore Sandstorm

her facial features were in perfect proportion with a slightly imperfect nose. The skin on her face was like silk although almost everywhere else had suffered the effects of a lifetime of itching stemming from childhood eczema that never left; her hands were badly scarred and she was forever embarrassed by them. She didn't like her teeth either. In just about every picture she would hide them behind her perfect lips that were a flawless canvas for a bold or bright lipstick. That morning they were painted in a deep, rich, somewhat serious 'don't mess with me' colour, which might have been Rum 'n' Raisin.

The twenty-minute journey was filled with conversation about the kids and a debrief of the family gathering the day before. As we neared our destination she issued a reminder: 'Now, I've told you, I don't care what the prognosis is, I'm not having chemotherapy!'

'OK OK,' I said defensively, but in truth I was not even a little bit 'OK' with her stance. I knew Mum wanted me to support her decision, to present a united front, but my need to have her alive was greater. Of course I didn't want her to suffer unnecessarily but if the gain from any pain was to have her around for a few more years then I wanted her to fight.

The doctor had come highly recommended though she was younger than we had expected. My bulging belly,

What will I wear to your funeral?

incubating my fourth child, was an easy conversation starter; she was also a mother of young children. Opening the file the oncologist looked down at her notes. 'So, Pamela . . .'

I felt compelled to take the pause hostage. 'It's not good, is it?'

It was a knee-jerk reaction to demonstrate that we didn't need a gentle delivery of bad news.

'No,' the doctor confessed. She explained that the tests couldn't determine if it was the original cancer returned for an encore more than two decades later or a new breast cancer. Contemplating the how and why was irrelevant; the cancer had advanced and spread to her liver.

I cut to the chase. 'Can it be cured?'

'No,' was the gentle but firm answer.

The doctor proceeded to explain possible treatments that could slow down the progression of the disease when Mum interrupted. 'No thank you, been there done that. Never again!'

'I understand,' the doctor said sympathetically 'But you would be amazed at how much chemotherapy has changed.'

We sat and listened to the options that would only delay the inevitable. Mum looked unconvinced

She wore Sandstorm

and no more receptive to the idea regardless of medical advancements. There was only question that hung in the air. I grabbed it and threw it abruptly into the mix of medical options. 'How long does Mum have?'

My sensible self knew that despite the oncologist's experience and expertise she didn't have a crystal ball, and the answer was going to be an educated guess but one that we would hang off anyway. 'With treatment a year to 18 months.'

'Without treatment?' I asked.

Her response was immediate. 'Six months.'

Despite the careful and considered delivery the verdict was a complete shock and felt brutal. Even Mum looked stunned that death's door was so close.

In another impulsive reaction I reached for black humour. 'Geez, Mum, bet you're glad you gave up the Whisky a year ago, fat load of good that did! It was probably keeping the cancer at bay.'

'On the contrary,' the doctor interrupted with a serious tone. 'Cutting the alcohol out is probably why she is still here.' She turned her full attention to Mum. 'Pamela, perhaps you could just give it a try? You can stop at any time.'

The 'OK' I had given Mum in the car to refuse chemotherapy was in my mind already null and void, there was simply no other effective option on offer.

What will I wear to your funeral?

I bit my tongue and hoped I wouldn't have to beg her to try, Mum inhaled a deep breath and then looked at me. 'OK,' she said.

The war against cancer was to start first thing the next day and despite the lack of conviction in Mum's response I grabbed the baton of hope and charged ahead. Already I was feeling buoyed and began to think of researching supplementary ways to beat the odds. As the doctor walked us to the door, I wanted to know if there was any way, short of a miracle, that Mum could expect to live longer than a year. 'So if the treatment is positive and works well what could we be looking at?'

'About eighteen months, maybe two years,' she said.

I was caught off guard that the best scenario wasn't really very good at all. 'That's it? Do many people go past two years?' I asked, pressing the specialist to look closer into the non-existent crystal ball for any glimmer of hope that might turn the bleak and black future into a shade of grey.

Her tone was kind and warm but the answer was the same. 'No.' And once again she turned and redirected her focus to Mum. 'You are feeling well now, Pamela, and hopefully you will for most days in between treatments but if there are things you have been wanting to do, now is the time.'

She wore Sandstorm

As we walked into the mid-morning sun carrying a virtual death sentence, I felt a seismic shift. From the moment I was born it had been my mother protecting and caring for me but in the space of an hour our lives had been irrevocably altered and the roles would soon be reversed.

Six months. It was worse than either of us had expected. If Mum had been told that with no treatment she might have one good year left then I was certain she'd have walked away from medical intervention, but six months? She wouldn't even see Christmas! It was glaringly obvious to me and I reasoned to myself that it was equally clear to Mum that there was no choice but to accept the doctor's recommendation, though my rationale didn't prevent the guilt I suddenly felt, as if I had somehow betrayed her. An hour earlier I had agreed that there would be no chemotherapy, the decision had to be hers; I knew I had to give Mum a way out.

'Listen. If you are happy to tell me that you're comfortable with having celebrated your last Mother's Day and your last Christmas then we will cancel the appointment for tomorrow.'

It was a high-risk strategy. What the hell was I going to do if she took the 'out'? Thankfully she didn't but there was one condition she insisted was not up

What will I wear to your funeral?

for negotiation. 'I'm going to try. I'm not worried about losing my hair, but if my quality of life is no good I might as well be dead. I promise you that I'm going to give it my best but I want you to promise me that when I say 'I've had enough' then that's it.'

'Oh sure,' I thought to myself; Mum wanted me to agree to sign off on her death, and I couldn't do that. It would be OK for her if she was dead, but it would be me left behind. I didn't have it in me to honour such a deal – I was too selfish. How could I ever make such a promise? But I was mentally dealing with one figurative bushfire at a time. 'Agreed.' I nodded, knowing full well I was lying.

She wore Fire and Ice

Death had never been a taboo subject in our family; even when I was a young child death was never sugar coated or dismissed as something not to worry about. 'Dying is a part of life,' Mum would say, and she never dressed it up as anything more than 'We all have to die some day.'

My father was a thoroughbred-horse trainer and on weekend mornings after he'd gone to supervise early morning track work I'd crawl into my parents' bed next to Mum for a cuddle and chat. Every so often I would notice her staring out of the window, quite visibly locked in a moment. Whenever I asked what she was thinking the reply would be 'my mother'. Little Nana, as we had called her, had died in her sleep when I was five but I grew to recognise those reflective pauses; they diminished over the years but never ceased.

What will I wear to your funeral?

The harsh reality of death had hit our family on the cusp of my twenty-second birthday when my father died from a heart attack; the man with a large six foot two frame and larger than life personality simply dropped dead at the racetrack one afternoon. To the uninitiated death is a concept hard to grasp. Parents, regardless of age, somehow seem immortal. There was no warning when Dad bent down to tighten the girth on one of his horses. The stable hand noticed him leaning against the animal and had asked if he was OK. There was no reply. It was quiet and quick.

Dad had cheated death on two other occasions with heart attacks that should have killed him. The near-miss experiences provided a short-term wake-up call to take better care of himself but long term did little to curb his love of too much food, wine and a secret but well-known affair with tobacco. From the age of sixteen I started to guard myself against his medically predicted demise, especially when I knew he didn't expect to prove the experts wrong. He insisted that my twenty-first birthday party be a big event – much bigger than I had expected or wanted. When the night arrived he told me why: 'I'm not going to be around to see you get married.'

Almost a year later, on the morning that would turn out to be his last, he stomped down the hallway after

She wore Fire and Ice

growling at me about something. I laughed to myself that the man supposedly living on borrowed time might outlive us all and indulged in a fleeting thought that he may even be around long enough to walk me down an aisle. A few hours later he was dead.

Even though his demise wasn't a complete shock it was sudden and we hadn't prepared ourselves. There were no poignant words, just 'bye'.

Dad's life in the racing industry had required him to work seven days a week, and the term work also included the social aspect. In fact, Dad just loved being social: whether it was friends or family he was the life of the party until he would inevitably fall asleep in a corner chair. Known for his big heart, big laugh and humour, everyone wanted a piece of him. During my childhood he was very much the authoritative figure, but 4.30 a.m. starts and late finishes made him largely absent. He never did typical dad things like take out the rubbish bins or mow the lawns; there was not a 'snowball's chance in hell' of him attending a parent-teacher interview let alone helping with homework or ferrying kids to sports games. Mum did all of that. The only common ground we seemed to share with other families was Sunday nights watching *The Wonderful World of*

What will I wear to your funeral?

Disney, eating toasted sandwiches with a side of Heinz canned tomato soup.

When he died I had been living back at home for ten months. A job retrenchment had put the brakes on my finances and ability to pay rent. It was during that time I was working a few casual jobs and Dad had begun spending a little less time at race meets during the week. Mum was busy running her florist shop, which she had opened a few years earlier, and Dad I would watch the odd midday movie together. He was forever a receptive audience for my cooking and we were closer than we'd ever been.

The cards of sympathy and heartfelt letters continued to fill our mailbox for about eight weeks but eventually petered out, and it was then that our family really began to feel the loneliness of death. For my older brother Robert, who didn't live at home, it was the absence of a daily phone call from Dad that hurt. Their closeness had only really developed in recent years but 'Roberto', as Dad had nicknamed him as a young boy, enjoyed a few precious years that my younger brothers didn't. Stephen was almost a mirror of his father's lovable larrikin personality, though he'd only just begun to harness their kinship when death cut it short. Dubbed 'Stevonovitch' by Dad as a boy, he was still happily washing his old man's car each week

She wore Fire and Ice

even in his twenties, although I suspect a disproportionate amount of money changed hands. Dad enjoyed tipping everyone and anyone more than was expected and at all times made sure his children had money in their pocket 'just in case'. As for my youngest brother Michael, he was only eleven when Dad died, old enough to have accrued the nickname Mick the dick but not nearly enough time for a boy to create sufficient memories of his father.

The brutal veracity of death would hit at random times as we adjusted to life without Dad's loud voice and large presence. I found myself missing the Saturday race day routine when the radio was switched to the racing station and the phone would ring all morning. I missed the smell of horsehair on clothes in the laundry and his shower and shaving ritual that included perfect pitched whistling and singing, and I missed seeing the suit and tie and freshly ironed shirt that Mum used to lay out on the bed for him. It felt somewhat unfair that the world had moved on whilst we hadn't and in many ways didn't want to. Mum's days were kept busy with her shop but it was the nights and the empty side of the bed she couldn't escape. I noticed she took to putting pillows down Dad's side, and it became a habit she never broke.