### **Paper Flowers**

By Bethany Keats

he real estate agent had left the previous owner's keyring on the keys; a small, scratched disc indicated membership of a local sports team. What I assumed were two front door keys and two back door keys were tucked into the inside pocket of my backpack as I rode my bike towards my new home. I was trying to forget the rude welcome from the real estate agent; safe in the knowledge the house was settled, she could say whatever she wanted.

"Another city slicker makes a sea change," she had said, handing over the keys.

"Oh, I'm not from the city," I said, trying to establish rapport. "Where I'm from we also get city slickers wanting a sea change."

"It's all the same though, isn't it, down south," she replied.

"No," I said. "It's-"

"Bet you like the house prices too," she cut me off. "Although you're starting to drive them up. Which is great for locals who want to sell, not so good for locals trying to buy though."

"Where I'm from we also suffer from people in the city buying up the houses," I said.

"You're good for business at least," the agent chuckled to herself, ignoring my attempt to establish common ground.



"Can I just sign for the keys?" I asked, wondering what happened to regional solidarity.

"All business in the city," the agent said, handing me a pen. "Never time for a chat."

I'd signed my name, wondering if I'd made the right decision by doing something as long-term as buying a house here.

The ride took me past the old cemetery. Headstones of all shapes and sizes nestled under a loose canopy of frangipani trees that were starting to come into bloom. Despite the recent

rain, the grass was tidy. I turned down my new street and felt a gentle push on my back. The prevailing wind; perfect for riding home after work.

I coasted my bike to a stop outside the front gate and took in the view. It really was ugly. But nothing re-opening the verandah wouldn't fix. It needed a few other touch-ups, but the front veranda was a priority to make it look like a cottage again. I fumbled for the keys in my bag and guessed at the correct one. The inside was stuffy after not being lived in for months. I looked down the hallway to the back door at the other end and knew that opening it up would invite the breeze.

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I sat on the back verandah sipping a cup of tea and feeling grateful I'd prioritised opening the house up. The breeze flowed gently across the patio, through the front entrance, down the hallway, and out the back door. When I opened the windows in each bedroom as well, the breeze circulated through the house, clearing out the hot air and cooling it in minutes. I'd barely used the air-conditioning since I'd been here.

I watched two magpies hop in circles under the mango tree in the middle of the yard. The magpies here are thinner. Familiar, yet not. I've never heard them warble. The two resident curlews were standing alert under the cane palms by the fence, their sad eyes staring straight at me. I'd hear them at night with their mournful wail. I finished my tea and rode my bike into work, past the cemetery and its grove of frangipani trees getting ready to flower for the wet season.

I watched a magpie lark fight its reflection in the café window as I waited for my morning order.

"I bet you're excited by all the interesting birds we have here," Kristy said, appearing suddenly beside me and gesturing to the one-bird fight. "I bet you don't get many where you're from."

"We have those back home," I said. "They're found all over the country."

"No!" she was shocked. "Really?"

"We also had lorikeets in the trees back home."

"I didn't think you got birds in the city," she said.

"But I'm not from the city," I said.

"Yes, you are," Kristy said, matter-of-factly.

"I think I know where I'm from," I muttered.

Kristy picked up *Better Homes & Gardens* from a pile of old magazines and thumbed through it, stopping at an article about country-style decorating.

"I love how the houses on those UK real estate shows have mud rooms," she said. "They're so quaint. You have them down south, don't you."

It wasn't a question.

"I don't know anyone with a mud room," I said. "It's not a thing back home."

"But isn't it always cold and raining?" She

thumbed through the magazine, looking at photos of cottage gardens.

"I grew up in a drought," I said. "And even when it wasn't a drought, I lived in a rain shadow. Similar to here."

"But it can't have been a real drought," she said. "Not like we get here."

"It was called the Millennium Drought. It was a pretty big deal."

"Guess it doesn't really matter in a city anyway." She put down the magazine.

"I'm not from the fucking city," I snapped.

"Cap, no sugar?" The barista held out my cup.

"That's me!" I walked over to collect my order, glad to be rid of the conversation.

My route out took me past the magpie lark, who stopped fighting and stared at me, turning his head to follow my path. I looked up to see his mate perched on the guttering, watching me leave as well.

I made a beeline for the stairs, keen to avoid an awkward elevator ride with Kristy. We arrived at the same time to find the director introducing the new manager to our team.

"I think I saw you earlier," the new manager said to me. "Did you ride your bike in?"

"Yes," I said. "I ride most days."

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"I live around the corner," I replied. "Just near the old cemetery."

"But where are you really from?" he asked again.

"Down south," I said quietly.

"Explains the bike," he said, turning to the next workstation as part of the tour of the floor.

I turned back to my computer, cheeks burning.

Kirsty walked over to lean against my desk and took a sip of her coffee.

"It's nothing personal," she said. "It's just that you're never really from here unless your grandparents are buried here."

I heard James swivel around in his chair.

"Well, I've got problems because all of my grandparents are still alive!" he laughed.

"Look at your surname," Kristy said, tipping her coffee cup right up to get the dregs. "We all know you're from here."

"Back home I could have guessed someone's connection to the region by their name," I said. "Just like James. I went to school on Philips Road with members of the family the road was named after."

"That's just a coincidence," James said. "Not like me. I am actually related to the person the park outside the courthouse is named after."

"It wasn't a coincidence," I protested. "Their family farms were still down the road."

"Don't pretend you have farms," James scoffed.

As soon as it hit 4:30 I gathered my things to go home.

Kristy walked past me as I made my way to the elevator. "We're having drinks at The Grand

tonight, if you want to come," she said.

"Thanks," I replied. "That sounds great." Maybe she felt bad for this morning.

"No worries," she said. "We'll be there from 5:30."

"See you then," I said, trying to not sound inappropriately excited.

I arrived at The Grand at 5:40, carefully timed so that I didn't look too eager but also avoiding being fashionably late. I went straight to the bar for a beer so I could have a prop while I surveyed the room trying to spot them. I'd been here a few times before, mostly with friends visiting from back home and I had an idea where most of the nooks and crannied favoured by groups were. I walked around the corner to the final cosy seating area and came face-to-face with a hostile group of blondes with cocktails. Making my apologies, I turned around to try the beer garden.

I stood awkwardly in the centre of the courtyard, trying to discreetly look at each face individually, desperately hoping to recognise someone. No one. I went back inside and walked the room again. Perhaps everyone was trying to be fashionably late and 5:40 was too early. I claimed a table near the door so I could easily see people coming in and they could see me. Trying to avoid looking lonely, I opened my phone and scrolled through Instagram. Friday night drinks stories were starting to appear in my feed. I quickly tapped through stories from people back home; seeing my old friends enjoying themselves without me was too much. I kept tapping until I saw a boomerang of people at The Pier. Kristy, James and a few others from neighbouring teams raised their glasses in a cheers motion on repeat until the story flipped across to an ad for insurance. 5 minutes ago. My heart thumped heavily and I felt the tears start. I skolled my beer and was glad my proximity to the door gave me a quick exit.

I'd stopped crying by the time I got home. I didn't open the windows and instead cranked the aircon and curled up on the couch. I called Mum.

"Any plans for tonight?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I think I'll just read on the couch."

"But it's Friday," she said. "No after work drinks or anything like that?"

"I've told you before," I said. "They never invite me. Tonight they did but they changed their mind about the bar and didn't tell me so I sat there on my own like an idiot wondering why no one else was there."

"I'm sure it's nothing personal."

"But it is personal." I started crying again. "They hate anyone who isn't from here."

"Honey," Mum protested.

"But it's true!" I said. "It's like they assume everyone new is going to be transient, so they don't make friends because they think you're temporary and not invested in living here, which means they're cold and shut you out, which then means you have a bad experience here, and you

want to leave, and then you leave, so they can say 'well I always knew she wasn't going to stick around' and they justify their attitude!"

"Breathe," Mum said.

I paused.

"Actually," I said. "That's it. That's the word; cold. People here are cold."

"Just keep trying," she said, ever the optimistic one.

"But I have been trying! How long am I supposed to try for? What's the point when they clearly don't give a shit?"

"You never know."

"I'm going to start looking for jobs back home again."

"Don't give up just yet," Mum counselled. "Like I said, you just have to keep trying."

"So, I have to pretend I like rugby and fishing and agree with them that I'm from the city?" I snapped.

"Maybe you need to give that a go."

"But that's erasing who I am!" I protested. "Why do I have to pretend something I'm not just because they can't read a map?"

"Then I don't know, honey," she said as I heard the oven timer beep in the background. "But tea is ready so I have to go. You'll come up with something, you always do."

I hung up the phone and started crying again. I didn't know what to do. I hated this fucking place but I didn't want to let the arseholes win.

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Staring out the kitchen window the following day,

I kept re-visiting the conversation with Mum in my head. Returning home would admit defeat but I was at a dead end here. I opened all the doors and windows to let the air in, feeling guilty I'd been running the aircon since the night before. The afternoon breeze was cool, forgiving my transgression and inviting me on a walk to clear my head. I followed it to the cemetery. The frangipani trees were now in full bloom, the breeze carrying their heavy scent beyond the gates, inviting me to visit.

You're never really from here unless your grandparents are buried here. Kristy's declaration swept into my mind.

What she really meant was they set the rules and the rest of us had to play by them. "But what if I cheated?" I wondered, as I closed the wrought iron gate behind me.

The sun beat down as I walked the rows of the cemetery, past headstones weeping with decades of water stains. I stopped to look at one half-covered by fallen frangipani blooms.

> Alice Katherine Delaney Beloved wife, mother and grandmother 31 July 1926–2 February 1998

That was my answer. I needed a grandmother. No, I needed a great-grandmother. One generation removed to avoid people having memories of her but not so far that it would deem me no longer a local. With any luck, it might make

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me seem more of a pioneer to go back that extra generation.

Reading the names on the headstones I wondered how many of them were still remembered. I'd seen people walk their dogs through here, but very few stop to consider the graves. Occasionally someone, usually a very elderly person, would bring a bunch of flowers; but they didn't stay fresh for long, not in this weather.

I thought of my own family tree, my real one, and counted the years and generations back. Like Alice Katherine Delaney, my grandmother was born in the 1920s, so her mother would have to have been born around the turn of the century. I was looking for the grave of a woman who was born then and, assuming a typical lifespan, had died in the 70s. It was unlikely I'd be discussing my family connections to this place with someone who had clear memories of them.

I started to pay attention to each headstone I passed.

Eliza Henrietta Maycomb Loving mother and wife 6 November 1900–1 March 1978 A reasonable contender. I pulled out my phone and did a quick search. I had to make sure she wasn't CWA president or anything like that. I needed a complete nobody. The search didn't yield any results, but I didn't celebrate too soon. I made a note of her details so I could look her up in more detail later and kept moving.

### Florence Rose Martin 7 May 1898–4 April 1969

No personal inscription. Did that mean no immediate family? A clean slate without descendants running around to contradict me. I wrote her name down with a star next to it.

The sun was getting low, and I knew the gates would be locked soon, so I finished the section I was in and called it a day. There were five names on my list for further research and checking the entire cemetery would only result in more work.

A frog watched me as I unlocked my front door. It sat on a rafter, front feet together, back legs tucked in, eyes watching. There was always a frog watching me when I went outside at night. I wondered if it was the same frog each time.

I grabbed a beer from the fridge and made

myself comfortable on the couch with my laptop. Outside, the curlews gave their first mournful cry of the night.

*Florence Martin*, I typed into the National Library's newspaper collection and filtered the results by location and date.

### No results.

I tried a variety of other terms until all I could find was her death notice. Plain. Unadorned. Official. Not the kind written by family who had been left behind.

The curlews cried again. And I had my greatgrandmother.

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On Sunday, after the heat of the day, I went back to visit Florence. To thank her for being a part of my family. Flowers would be silly and look out of place on such an old grave, but I gave it a tidy and flicked decomposing frangipanis aside. Crouching down to smooth back the long grass I uncovered another headstone. Smaller and flat along the ground. I pulled the grass back, ripping it at its roots and throwing it aside.

### Margaret Lily Martin 7 May 1889–12 September 1910

I looked back to Florence. 7 May 1889. A twin. Did she arrange all those years later to be buried next to her sister who died so tragically young? I made a mental note of the details to look up when I got home. I grabbed my laptop to sit outside in the breeze. I opened the National Library's website to search the newspaper collection for my new great-grandmother and great-great-aunt.

### MARTIN—on the 7th inst. at "Malua" Mrs P. Martin of twin daughters.

Focused on the light of the screen, I hadn't realised it had become dark around me. The frog was perched on flowerpot, tucked in so that its front feet appeared clasped, watching me. Its throat pulsed in and out.

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I looked out the kitchen window while I waited for the kettle to boil. I watched the pair of curlews stand motionless under a cane palm. The air was as still as the curlews except for a single palm frond dancing to its own eddy of breeze. The kettle clicked off and the branch stopped moving.

I took my tea to my usual spot under the front verandah and surveyed the street. The frangipani on the nature strip was so full of flowers you could barely see the green of the leaves. A tree of white, like a cloud on a trunk. The breeze kicked up and set a patch of flowers shaking on the tree. I waited for some to fall but they all clung on. Not their time. I knew that in a few days the nature strip would be carpeted in white.

My attention was called away by the toaster beeping its announcement that breakfast was ready. As I got up to check it, a movement caught my eye. Against the gentle movement of the breeze, a child had darted across the street. By the time I'd turned, they'd gone.

Despite the early morning heat, I rode my bike into work. Slowly, and downhill, to avoid working up a sweat. I rode past the cemetery and its grove of frangipani trees. There were so many flowers this year the carpet of fallen flowers had spilled out onto the side street.

I parked my bike at the racks outside the office, disturbing a bird perched in the tree above. I turned away from the entrance and crossed the road to get a coffee.

"Of course the southerner got coffee," James greeted me when I walked into the office ten minutes later.

I looked at the takeaway coffee cup on his desk and looked back at him, my eyebrows raised.

"It's your influence," he mumbled, turning to his computer.

In the early afternoon, I heard a koel's loud *woop* noise from outside my office.

"Storm's coming," Kristy said.

I looked out the window. The deceptive sky was that of a perfect summer's day. The glass between me and it masked the oppressive heat and humidity.

"As long as it comes after I get home," I said.

"That's what you get for being a bicycleloving hipster," Kristy said. "Good luck with that." The rain started as I was packing up my desk. Thick heavy drops that soaked through in seconds. I was about to check the radar to see if it was worth waiting out when I heard laughter behind me.

"That's why we drive," James said, seeing me stare out the window.

"My great-grandmother didn't drive and she did just fine," the words were out of my mouth before I realised what I'd said.

"Well, yeah, in the city," James said. "That's easier."

"No, here," I replied.

"Your great-grandmother was from here?" He looked confused. "Why did you never mention it before?"

"Guess it never came up," I shrugged, grabbing the last of my things and heading for the door.

I'd done it. It was out.

I rode the ten-minute bike trip home through the pouring rain. The heavy rain had filled the gutters, sending cascades of frangipani flowers down the streets and towards the river. I hoped there'd still be some flowers on the tree outside my place surviving the downpour.

I was soaked through by the time I turned into my street. Through the rain the street was a blur, but I could just make out a shape near my front gate. As I rode closer, I realised it looked like a young girl, watching me navigate the slippery pavers. She stood completely still, between my

gate and the frangipani tree, her blonde hair plastered to her head in the rain. As I reached the house before mine, she turned and ran in the other direction, her white dress clinging to her in the rain so tightly I was worried she'd fall over.

I startled a curlew as I wheeled my bike around to the back verandah. From the corner of my eye I saw it sprint from the mango tree to the fence line, where it froze when I turned my head.

"You could have stayed under the tree," I said to it.

Its mournful eyes stared back at me through the rain.

With nothing else to do I decided to hit the online records and see what else I could find about Great-Grandma Florence. *Nanna Florence*, I told myself.

Instead, I found myself searching for September 1910.

A death notice stared out at me from the screen.

MARTIN—Margaret Lily on 12 September at home. Daughter of Patrick and Joan, sister of Florence. Aged 11 years.

I felt a deep loneliness in the pit of my stomach. Florence had lost her twin sister on the cusp of adolescence. I looked for the same date ten years later.

#### IN MEMORIAM

MARTIN—In loving memory of my dear sister,

Margaret.

No name of who placed it, but it had to be Florence. I searched for the following year.

### MARTIN—My dear sister, Margaret. Never forgotten.

I wondered how many she'd placed. I looked up 1968, the final anniversary of Margaret's death before Florence's own.

#### MARTIN—My sister Margaret, always in my heart.

The next anniversary, Florence would be next to her sister. I returned to the death notice for Margaret. Scanning the page, I noticed a death notice for another child the same age. I flicked to the papers for the surrounding days and I realised the notices were mostly children between six and twelve. I virtually turned the pages to the news section: "More Lives Lost In Measles Outbreak." I changed my search terms to "measles" in August 1910.

I scrolled down the search results page until a photo flashed up. I clicked it. *Measles outbreak at Sunday school picnic*, read the caption. Grainy sepiatoned faces stared back at me. All the women were wearing wide-brimmed hats. All except one girl in the front who was holding hers in front with her two hands. Blonde. About eleven.

Outside one of the curlews shrieked. She stood shoulder to shoulder with the girl

on her left. The second girl's wide-brimmed hat hid her face, but I knew it must be Florence. The two girls at the ill-fated picnic. One would survive it, the other would live one more month. Did they both get sick, or only Margaret, I wondered.

My phone buzzed, pulling me back from my thoughts.

Drinks 5:30, read a text from Kristy.

I replied with a thumbs up emoji.

The rain had eased, but it was still unpleasant for riding. I could always take an Uber home if I needed and pick my car up in the morning.

I drove into the city, realising it was the first time in months I'd driven such a short distance. Rain isn't the problem, I told myself, poor clothing choices are. I parked around the corner from the pub and grabbed an umbrella from the back seat.

When I got to the pub I scanned the room for the others, finding them congregated around two large barrels that were being used as tables. I grabbed a beer and went over.

"You found us!" Kirsty said. "I realised I didn't tell you which pub we were at."

"Oh, I knew," I replied. They obviously didn't realise how frequently after-work drinks featured on their Instagram stories.

"James says your grandmother or someone was from here," Kirsty said.

"Great-grandmother, yes," I said.

"You've never said anything," she exclaimed. "Guess it just never came up." I shrugged, taking a sip of my beer.

"Why did your family move down south?" James asked.

"Work," I said, automatically. "My greatgrandfather worked for the bank and they kept posting him to different branches. I guess once my grandmother and her siblings came along it was too hard to move back." It sounded plausible.

"And yet here you are!" James said, raising his glass.

I clinked the top edge of my beer to his and smiled.

The frog was waiting for me again when I came home. This time, it was watching from the top of the outside light I'd forgotten to leave on for my return. Its big eyes stared as I fumbled for the key. At least the rain had eased. I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket, the surprise of it making me drop my keys. I squatted down to pick them up and paused. A slight breeze danced at the back of my neck, sending goosebumps down my arms. I rose slowly, resisting the urge to turn around, and inserted the key into the door to release the lock. As I turned to close the door behind me, a flash of white caught my eye.

I checked my phone while I brushed my teeth: Sunday session at my place byo drinks and food for the bbq. It was James. Sounds great, see you there, I replied.

Out the front, Kristy texted me.

"Look after the house while I'm gone," I said to the curlews under the cane palm as I locked the back door. They stared back at me, unmoving.

I grabbed a bottle of wine and a tray of sausages from the fridge and zipped them into a cooler bag before heading out the front door. It had been windy earlier and there were browning frangipani flowers scattered over the nature strip. I picked up one that had freshly fallen and absentmindedly put it in my ponytail.

"Who was that girl at your gate?" Kristy asked as I got into the car.

"When?" I said.

"Just before," she replied. "She ran off just as you came out of the house."

"No idea," I said, my eyes darting to the wing mirror expecting to see a running child in the distance. "Thanks for the lift."

"Not a problem," Kristy said, pulling away from the kerb. "And, just to warn you, James doesn't do low-key Sunday sessions."

The party was in full swing by the time Kristy and I arrived. It was a mixture of people from work and friends of James from the cricket club. Some of his cricketing mates were fresh from the field, still in their whites, the beer going straight to their heads after standing in the sun for hours.

"Esky for drinks," James gestured to a large chest. "And fridge for food, if you can find space. There's plenty to eat."

"Thanks," I replied, feeling slightly

overwhelmed by so many people. "Wine glasses?"

"Cupboard above the microwave," James pointed towards the house.

I went inside to grab two glasses, one for me and one for Kristy. The calm house a contrast to the chaos in the backyard. I relished the stillness for a few minutes before returning to the party.

I found Kristy chatting to James under a large market umbrella that was luffing in the breeze.

"Tell us about your great-grandmother," she said.

"Well—" I panicked. My story wasn't fully fleshed enough for an interrogation. "She was born at the family farm and lived a pretty boring life, really."

"What did you say the farm was called?" James asked.

"Malua," I replied, reaching to feel for the frangipani in my hair. Still there.

"I think I know the one," he said. My heart started pounding. "About twenty Ks west, along the dirt road before the river?"

"I think we're talking about the same place," I said, hoping my answer was vague enough.

"It's falling apart but the name's still on the gate," he said. "No one's lived there in decades."

My heart rate returned to normal.

"That sounds about right," I said with relief.

"James!" A newcomer to the party shouted across the yard, rescuing me from any further questioning. Kristy used the distraction to extract herself, leaving me on my own clutching my wine.

A slight breeze danced at the back of my neck, sending goosebumps down my arms. I rose slowly, resisting the urge to turn around, and inserted the key into the door to release the lock.

A white figure appeared at my left. I stared ahead, watching the dark clouds the wind was gathering.

"I don't think this party is going to last for much longer," the figure said.

"It's not looking promising," I replied turning to see one of James' cricket friends. "Good thing you got your match in."

"Rain delay might have been in our favour," he laughed into his beer.

An unseen koel started calling from a neighbour's yard.

"I think this party's going to have a rain delay," I said, feeling the wind pick up.

"For fuck's sake," James reappeared. "Time to move inside."

The canvas on the market umbrella started flapping wildly as the humidity dropped.

I caught a flash of white in the corner of my eye and felt for my flower. It wasn't there anymore. I looked down at the ground; not there either.

"Shall we head inside?" the cricketer asked. "Let's go," I replied.

It had stopped raining by the time Kristy drove me home. As we turned into the street the now familiar white figure was under the frangipani tree.

"That's the girl I was talking about before," Kristy said. "She must live near you."

"Suppose so," I said, looking down at my phone to check the time. When I looked back up, the girl had already gone.

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My phone buzzing called me away from watching the magpies hop around under the frangipani tree. The flowers had mostly fallen but there were still a few stragglers resisting the call of gravity.

Home, declared the illuminated screen.

"Hi, Mum!" I said cheerily.

"Hi, honey," she replied. "Everything ok?"

"Fine, Mum," I said. "Just sitting here watching some magpies and drinking a beer. Why?"

"We haven't heard from you in weeks!" she blurted out. "You stopped calling every Sunday."

"Sorry," I mumbled. "Guess I've just been busy."

"Finally made some friends?" Mum asked. "See, I told you it would happen if you gave it time."

"I guess." I wasn't going to tell her about my

#### lie.

"Anyway, don't let me keep you from whatever you've got planned," she said. "But don't wait so long between calls, ok?"

"Ok, Mum."

"I love you, honey."

"I love you too, Mum. Give my love to Dad and Nanna."

I hung up the phone and placed it on the table, reaching for my beer to have another sip.

The ding of a bicycle bell was coming closer. A young girl slowly pedalled her way past the fence. Two adults a step behind, walking at a brisk pace to keep up.

"Hi there!" They stopped and waved.

"Hi!" I waved back.

"We moved in down the road a few months ago," the woman said. "Guess we just haven't bumped into you yet."

"Apparently not," I said.

An impatient bell dinged.

"We'd better keep going," the man said, looking down at his daughter.

"See you later," I waved.

As they passed me, I noticed the girl's blonde hair sticking out from her helmet, dancing behind her in the breeze.