

# MOURNING A STRANGER

It's at the funeral of a man she met just twice that **Claire Halliday** is forced to acknowledge her place in his world — and his in hers.

**I**T TOOK the death of my father for me to start learning about his life.

He died on Wednesday but it is Thursday when I get the message telling me to call Emma — urgent — and a Tasmanian phone number.

When I dial and identify myself, it is Emma whose voice catches with tears and tells me: Dad's dead. She repeats it three times to my unresponsive silence. My dad had already died, four years before, in Adelaide. I don't know an Emma. I want to tell her that she must have the wrong person but there is a sense that her sadness is too real to refute. I don't immediately realise that the man she is referring to is my birth father — her father.

"I'm sorry," I say, eventually. "I don't know who you are talking about."

It's 97 kilometres to Devonport from Launceston airport. I discover this when the woman at the Thrifty counter apologises for the delay in fitting a baby seat to the rental hatchback, and finally hands me the keys.

My father's funeral will start in 45 minutes and, even with the car's speedometer edging over 110, I will be late. While that information would not surprise anyone who knows me in Melbourne, here, this morning, as I drive along the unfamiliar roads to join a family I have never met in commemorating the passing of a man I have never truly known, almost anything about me can be new.

In Melbourne, my radio never wavers from the talkback programmed into my pre-sets. Here, I let the tuner settle on a top 40 station and sing along to songs I don't even know. My baby sleeps with the flaccid exhaustion of a newborn — already worn out by a day that has only just begun. I have left two older children back in Melbourne — being led about their routine of kindergarten and school by the other people who love them. I will be back, after dark, to tell them all about the day. My daughter, still young enough to be caught up in the gasping drama of darkest fairytales, has always been fascinated with the story of my adoption and how the Gramps and Nana she knew were not the same people who conceived me. When I tell her that I am nervous about going, she tells me that it will be OK. I talk to her about funerals and how they are a chance for people to come together and share memories of people they will miss. Tell me what he was like, she says, the night before. I promise that I will.

The chapel is crowded when I finally get there, but my recognition of my father's family has nothing to do with familiarity. They are simply the people sitting in the front row moving with that achingly fluid sway of grief. A head lolled that way onto another's shoulder, a hand swimming out towards a waiting lap. My brother, the wife, another brother, my sister.

Strange, to learn about someone's life only after they have died. To hear short stories of small moments put together like an episode of *This Is Your Life* — all

glowing and glistening with tears.

His cousin tells the 300-strong congregation about the long, sticky summer days of childhood and that he liked the Beatles. I do too. The lady from the funeral home works from a speech which that paints a picture of someone who was outgoing, helpful and guileless — someone who didn't mind playing the fool to make everyone laugh. My father won a singing competition at a pub, once, she says. He had sung Tom Jones' *Green, Green Grass of Home* and only found out later that the quest was to find the worst singer. The people in the chapel smirk as they nod their heads with the silent knowledge of familiarity.

She asks that we think of his family in this difficult time and I hear my name read out as one of his children with her added "and we hope Claire is here".

I stare at the front row and watch the family, still grieving, and realise that they do not know what I look like or that I have managed to negotiate Tullamarine Freeway truck crashes and dawdling rental car sales staff to really make it here in time. I still have a chance to slip away without facing this odd family reunion and part of me, despite my daughter's assurances, still wants to.

**Movies, plays and novels never really told me that people like me had birth fathers, too. Or that I should care about mine.**

Another funeral home worker takes his cue to hit the play button and Tom Jones starts crooning from the speakers as the congregation is urged to stand up and reflect. "Sing along — join in. He would have liked that," we're told.

Later, a colleague who sat with him on the local council talks about my father's tenacity to fight for grassroots issues. He uses the term "little Aussie battler" and as I breastfeed my baby girl in this Devonport chapel, amid these hundreds of strangers and their memories of my father, it doesn't even make me cringe. The man speaks about compassion and tells the story that my father was helping a constituent sort out some council business when he dropped dead of a heart attack beside the car in their driveway.

"It looked like he was helping change a tyre."

No one talks about his illness but it was, I think, as I sit listening to the words of the people who loved my father, all that I really knew about him. He had told me about the bipolar the first time I met him, and it was the bipolar that made me dread his feverishly ranting phone calls and letters and wait six years to meet him again.

That last time was just months ago and, when he hugged me goodbye in his driveway, he had told me that he loved me. I had hugged back but only said "thanks" in reply.

Back in Melbourne, there is an emailed press release in my inbox, promoting Joanna Murray-Smith's play, *Love Child*, in which

the drama of adoption is told through the relations between two women. It's a drama I have, in part, played out myself in the search for my birth mother. But movies, plays and novels never really told me that people like me had birth fathers, too. Or that I should care about mine.

So when the funeral home lady ends the service with what she says was my father's favourite song, and my tears start to fall to the sound of John Fogerty's *The Old Man Down The Road* as I watch the pallbearers carry the coffin to the waiting hearse, it surprises me when I realise that I do.

At the local football club, where I have quietly announced my presence, women I have never met claim a kind of aunty status over my six-week old daughter and pass her around, between them, for hours over lemon squash and beer and lamingtons. They look at her, then they look at me and then they take photographs and talk about my eyes and my father's eyes and how they never knew about me. The only one who did — the cousin from those distant summers — had thought that I had stayed with my mother.

"He loved all his kids," she says. She takes a hand from its

cradle around my baby to stroke my cheek. "If he knew that you'd been given away for adoption, he would have wanted to get you back. He never would have wanted you to go away."

I smile, nod and wait a moment before I ask for my baby back and excuse myself to stand outside and watch the smokers puff at their cigarettes. My sister is there. We have already met outside the chapel, after the service, and now she smiles a slightly inebriated apology and tells me that she will be able to talk to me more when we all the other well-wishers have gone. One of my brothers introduces himself and then tugs the second brother towards me.

I reach out to shake his hand and tell him that I'm sorry about his father.

"He was your father too," he says.

When it's time for me to leave, we exchange email addresses and phone numbers and promise to stay in touch but even if we don't, it's already been enough. At home in Melbourne, when my daughter asks me what it was like, I tell her about the Beatles and Tom Jones and my father's eyes and how, maybe, there are parts of him that might one day reveal themselves in parts of her. My children have already shown signs of empathy, kindness and daydreamy craziness.

And it is in this one day, where I was given the chance to publicly acknowledge my place in my father's life, I finally realise his place in mine.

## SECRET CITY



## Bar culture looks to the East

By TIM RICHARDS

WHEN Indiana Jones grabbed the golden idol out of that lost temple in 1981, young Andre Bishop mistakenly thought it was fashioned in the shape of a monkey.

Decades later, in 2005, Bishop helped preside over the opening of Golden Monkey, pictured, a Hardware Lane bar. He says the Hollywood inspiration had been rattling around his brain for years. "I just imagined the sort of Shanghai bar that Indiana Jones would walk into, meeting some dodgy antique dealer."

Bishop and co-owners Adam Ong and Michael Cheng met plenty of antique dealers as they created Golden Monkey's distinctive look. "We went over there, on a crazy trip to the antique shops in the back alleys of Shanghai. A few of the pieces are reproduced, but most of them are the original thing. Some of the signs we've got are hundreds of years old."

And Golden Monkey is not the only CBD bar with an Asian theme.

A Thursday night visit to tiny Double Happiness, on Liverpool Street, reveals a more modern take on Chinese history, via movie posters from the glory days of Chinese communism. From on high, red-star-wearing proletarian heroes strive against the odds as a ceramic model of Chairman Mao looks down from a ledge on the wall.

The crowd this night is young, relaxed and chatty, and the short cocktail list includes mouthfuls like Dictatorship of the Proletariat, with a smoked paprika and fennel-infused vodka base.

Upstairs through an unmarked door is New Gold Mountain, the name Chinese miners gave to the Australian goldfields in the 19th century. It's a visually appealing bar dominated by soothing green vertical stripes. Further upstairs is a red area divided into nooks and crannies sufficient for anyone to get lost in; you could meet Brian Burke here and no one need know. The Asian theme is tenuous but you can order Japanese food from the restaurant next door, several Asian beers and a Sour Number 3 cocktail made with plum wine.

Deeper into the heart of Chinatown lies Manchuria, upstairs off Waratah Place. This is another evocation of the glamorous Far East, with a dash of the West. Soft jazz plays over the speakers, and European style chairs fill a series of candlelit alcoves divided by lattices and beaded curtains. It's quiet on a Thursday evening, and the cocktail list is filled out by a series of mini essays on classic drinks, including a full page on the martini. One of the house specialties is the Zombie, a secret blend of five rums that is restricted to two per customer per night.

Which brings us to Robot on Bligh Place, the granddaddy of the Asian-themed bars and another of Bishop's projects. "I've always been what the Japanese call otaku, a geek," he says. "I took everything out of my lounge room, put it in a box in the city, added a bar and that was Robot."

The robots are still in place above the bar, and an anime film is shown every Tuesday, though the screen is no longer the far wall of the alleyway. It's a red-hued, modern space with a clientele ranging from amorous couples to boisterous groups on this Thursday evening, and the late humidity and skyscraper glimpses through the open front window lend the illusion of actually being somewhere in Asia. So does the Bloody Robot on the cocktail list, a Bloody Mary with wasabi added.

So why are Asian-themed bars so hot? "There's a growing interest in pop culture from Asia, and that's reflected in many forms here," says Bishop. "Bar culture is one of them."

PHOTO: NATE COLLAS

## SOMETHING PERSONAL

## Forget the simple life, enjoy the silence

Defining country life is more complex than you might think, writes **Louise Le Nay**.

OUR new home is in the grazing belt between two highways. Our nearest neighbour is kilometres away. We're glad. We've come looking for silence.

Around us, real farmers raise real wool. Their farms are sweeping parklands, studded with redgums. Sheep camp in their shade. Lambs are creched in the shelter of fallen timber.

On our farm, which is not a farm at all by our neighbours' standards, there are spotted gums and messmates and spiky xanthorrhoea. Our "stock" is wallabies. We have three dams, and spoonbills wade in them, solemn and stately and absurd. We have some pasture. It's called "phalaris". One of our neighbours

tells us this, and we look the word up quickly so that we can throw it into conversation. "Mostly phalaris," we say, casually. We like to be asked.

By day we work. We collect up discarded snarls of wire and twine, wooden pallets, polystyrene boxes, feed bags. In one of the machinery sheds we find an old chandelier hanging from the ceiling. We leave it there.

In the evenings we sit on the veranda and watch a thousand corellas heading home to roost. At night we behold an effervescence of stars.

Our town has a general store, a pub, a bowling green. I go to the post office to pay the rates and the postmistress explains that there is no Eftpos facility. I come outside and tell my husband. We are standing in the middle of the main street. There are no people. There is no traffic. Nothing. There is no mobile phone coverage and no Eftpos. I can't stop smiling. We are living in the country. This is what it is like.

I'm wrong, of course. Defining country life is much more complex. I learn this by stages. Our weekends are taken up entertaining city friends. They drive up and exclaim as they disentangle themselves from their phone cords, emerging from their cars in a clatter of dropped CDs. "It's so far! How can you bear it?" We explain about the silence. That we're looking for it. We drink champagne with them, and spot satellites. They trip over in rabbit holes and ride around on the tractor. They leave after two exhausting days — rarely more — proclaiming the beauty of our spot, the wisdom of our choice. They promise to return for a longer stay. But they won't and don't come back. We understand this, now.

The gap left by our absent friends, is filled with locals. They were biding their time at first. And suddenly (it seems) we are on committees, in the CFA, going to parties in shearing sheds. We find ourselves waving to everyone we pass in the street.

We've stopped telling people we're looking for silence, too. I think we'd have to live at the bottom of a mine to achieve that. Our place fairly crackles with sound. Sometimes,

standing on the hill near our house I feel a momentary hiatus in all this, a hesitation, as if the earth has taken an intake of breath. Then there is a sigh, far off, which becomes a whisper and that circles me like a shawl and nearly lifts me off my feet. That, I think, is the closest thing to silence I've found.

We reject the term "tree change" although it describes us. It sounds derisive. It suggests hamlets where tourists come on the weekends to drink good coffee and potter through antique shops. Our town is not like that. We realise we are ridiculous to the generations that flank us. They are like the highways, to our north and to our south, purposeful and directed, while we fall around. Trying to stay still.

We lie in bed, side by side, holding hands. Holding our breath. Hearing the thud of a kangaroo passing through the garden in the dark. We are here, after 25 years of marriage, two children, many jobs. We are here. Our awe is the silence we've been looking for.

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