

Griffith

Griffith was stuck halfway up the Westgate Bridge, trying to stay alert. His thoughts had already drifted off twice, until the blaring horn of the black Lexus behind him brought him back to the present. There was no exit and no possibility of turning around. A concrete barrier separated the eastbound from the westbound lanes, and a row of orange cones encroached from the left. *Roadworks*, the sign said.

Griffith knew all about the statutory requirements regarding health and safety, but there was no visible work going on just here. He hunched one shoulder, then the next, and pressed his fingers into his eyeballs. The horn sounded from behind again and he shoved his foot down hard on the brake to stop rolling backwards. Eventually the road opened in front and he cribbed ten metres forwards before it closed again.

He thought of the water a hundred metres below. How long would it take for a car to sink? How many cars were on this bridge, bumper to bumper? He crept forward another few metres and came to the top of the arch. To the left he could see the petrochemical works in Spotswood and to the right the rooftops of Yarraville; million-dollar houses trapped on Melways map 42. There were trucks streaming along Francis Street full of newly imported Christmas merchandise – landfill by Easter. Finally the road cleared, and he set forth towards the rocky plains of the west with their cheerfully named new suburbs. He was twenty minutes late already. He knew what would happen when he got there. His siblings would be sitting up the front, Warwick with a protective hand on Mum's arm, Joy sobbing quietly into her tissue, her burly husband and son filling the pew. They'd turn around when he walked in late, the chapel door squeaking as he tried for a noiseless entry. No, maybe he'd fling it open, let it bang against the wall and bounce back. After all, the old man could hardly leap up with a swift backhander across the ears. Griffith flinched as if he was still ten years old. He put his hand to his left ear until the throbbing subsided.

He got as far as Sunshine before the traffic slowed again. There was another row of orange cones, one man with a SLOW sign, another with a STOP sign, a piece of heavy machinery and two men staring down a hole.

His neighbour, Wes, was digging a hole in the backyard.

'It's a bunker,' he'd shouted.

Griffith had poked his head over the fence to see what the noise was. Wes had hired a mini-digger and was operating it himself. Griffith knew the regulations regarding licences and earth-moving vehicles but didn't mention them on this occasion. Wes had a manic look about him. Griffith saw Missus Wes peering through their kitchen window, on the phone to someone, their daughter maybe, or that emergency squad that deals with social malcontents. The hole was like a grave but without the sharp edges and neat corners. Griffith wondered about the sewer below and the shed above, now slanting dangerously to the left.

Luckily his non-conversation with Wes had been cut short when Georgia had called through the wire door.

'Your brother's left a message on the phone. You better come and listen to it.'

And that's how they found out his father had died, or as Warwick put it, 'passed

away'. They listened a couple of times before they'd realised the message was left the Friday before. By then it was Tuesday and the funeral would be on Thursday back home. Georgia couldn't come, with such short notice, and her students anxious about their exams.

So here he was, alone in the car on the first Thursday in November, heading west to his home town. The horn of the same black Lexus startled him again and he put his foot down on the accelerator instead of the brake. The man with the SLOW sign stepped backwards and showed Griffith the length of his finger.

He was only eleven minutes late, having made up some time speeding for the last fifty kilometres. He pulled into the car park and calculated where the shade would be in an hour, then reversed into the most likely spot. The other cars were all clustered under the trees where it was shady now.

'See, Dad,' he said, 'that education wasn't entirely wasted.'

Fuckin' smartarse know-it-all, his father said, inside Griffith's head.

As the engine ticked he closed his eyes, kept perfectly still and counted backwards slowly: ten, nine, eight ... but his father's voice was relentless.

You're late, as usual. You'll be late for your own funeral.

'No, Dad, but I am late for yours. How do you like that?'

The chapel door was still open. Warwick's boy Josh was manning it, handing out programs.

'They've saved a space for you up the front, Uncle Griffith,' he said. 'Dad said to keep the door open cos you'd be late, and that there'd be no way he'd want you to miss out.'

'Very thoughtful, your dad,' said Griffith.

He glanced toward the front. Warwick was there next to Mum. Joy was on the other side, with Ron and young Ronnie filling the pew just like he'd thought. Warwick's wife Lucy was behind him with their two skinny girls. Warwick turned and waved, indicating a spot next to Lucy.

'What about you, mate?' Griffith said to Josh.

'I'll be good up here,' said Josh. He closed the door and sat down in the empty pew, spreading both arms across the back, then looked up at Griffith with that familiar family smirk. He could imagine Georgia muttering *manspreading*, which is how she describes men on the train on the commute home after work.

Griffith wiped his hands down his trousers. His shoes squeaked all the way up to the front, reminding him of his first wedding. That was one event he never wanted to attend, frog-marched there by the old man.

Her dad's been round, he'd explained. *You've been in her bed, now you can make yours and lie in it, so to speak.*

He was always one for rearranging a metaphor.

The wedding didn't go well; the marriage played out like a Carver story. Her dad paid him to leave. He hasn't seen the kid since.

He squeezed in beside Lucy and she patted his arm.

'Sorry about your dad,' she said.

Griffith nodded, his dad rushing to mind as if he'd stepped back forty-five years. This particular image was of him unbuckling his belt and Mum pleading with him not to

use the buckle this time.

Griffith trembled as if those welts were still red raw. He put a hand to the back of his leg, the scar still raised.

Lucy patted his arm again, perhaps imagining him to be suffering from grief.

Warwick turned around. 'You're late,' he said. 'We've all been waiting for—' he checked his watch '—sixteen minutes now. The cleric's got another funeral at eleven.' He turned back to the front and nodded to the funeral director, a Dickensian type with a cheerless expression and slim-fit black suit.

Griffith listened to the cleric, then to the representative of the care home, then to his brother and finally to his sister's son, young Ronnie, and wondered if they were talking about the same bloke he remembered. It turns out the old man was an upstanding Christian, a hero who'd served his country, a great sportsman and team player, a lovely charming gentleman, the best father ever, and a much-loved grandpa. Griffith lowered his head at the appropriate times along with the rest of the assembly and murmured *Amen* only a half-beat behind them.

Griffith was required to take his share of the weight of his father and the coffin on his right shoulder; he and Warwick at the front, young Ronnie and Josh in the centre, Ron and one of Dad's drinking mates at the rear. It was the same shoulder that had been dislocated that time when the old man hauled him out from behind the tank. It had developed an ache recently. 'Probably a touch of arthritis coming on,' the doc had said. 'You're a bit young, but if it's an old injury, well ... Did you play sport as a youngster?'

'Could call it that,' Griffith had answered.

He could feel it now, a sharp pain surrounded by a dull ache. He imagined it to be a spot of bright red with a light switch next to it and concentrated on switching it off with his imaginary thumb.

They followed the funeral director and the cleric down the aisle while the mourners stood in their pews, possibly thinking ahead to the refreshments to come.

'Fuckin' keep in step,' hissed Warwick across the coffin. 'It's left right, left right – right?'

The six of them made it to the door and out into the unseasonal heat then slid the coffin into the back of the hearse. The funeral director stood to the side and nodded briefly at their effort. He closed the two doors with a click then climbed into the passenger seat.

The truth came out in the car park before the hearse had even left.

'You were always his favourite,' Joy said.

Griffith felt obliged to query that. 'What?'

'It was you that got the education,' she said. 'And then you wasted it. All Dad's hopes on you.' She paused to wipe her eyes. 'What about me? I never got a chance.'

'Well, you did get a chance,' Griffith said, quite reasonably he thought. 'You could have passed your exams, instead of failing them.'

Joy's wailing brought Ron and young Ronnie over.

'What did'ya say to her?' said Ron. 'You don't think she's upset enough? You want to upset her more?'

Griffith wasn't sure that these were questions, so didn't answer them.

'Well?' said Ron.

'He said it was my fault I failed my exams,' she said.

'Hardly fair to bring that up,' said Ron.

'Sorry, sorry,' said Griffith. 'But don't tell me I was the favourite.'

'Well you were.' Warwick had tuned in to the dialogue and turned towards them.

'Dad parading you around with your fuckin' school report. Fuckin' smartarse know-it-all.'

Griffith put both hands up. 'How about we leave our childhood traumas here and see that the old man is well and truly buried.'

He headed towards his car, now covered in shade.

'I'm leading the procession,' Warwick shouted after him. 'You follow me.'

Griffith steeled himself for a punch to the middle of his back like Warwick used to deliver, but he had rushed back to his car, shouting at his wife and daughters to 'fuckin get in.'

The drive to the cemetery was comparable to a state funeral. Griffith suspected that the route had been pre-determined during a conversation between Warwick and the funeral director. They took a devious set of streets that included the length of the main road, the numerous public houses where his father drank, and the golf course where he was known for being club champion for five consecutive years, and more recently, for shooting under his age. As the convoy meandered around the town, members of the older generation paused on the footpath and took off their hats. The younger generation stared at the stream of cars with their headlights on in the middle of the day. The middle-aged continued to rush about their business, harried by responsibilities and deadlines, no time to consider death till it stalks one of their own.

The cemetery was a ten-minute drive out of town so as not to remind the living of the dead. It had been serving the local community since the gold rush, Catholics on one side and Protestants on the other. There was a small historic Chinese section, but no evidence of any diversity since. They turned into a gravelled parking area alongside a row of peppercorns. Griffith meant to wait until he'd counted ten slammed car doors, but he was only up to six when Warwick knocked on his car window.

'Wake the fuck up,' he said. 'Come on.'

To see the old man lowered into his grave should have given Griffith some closure, as his therapist put it yesterday. He wasn't sure that he was getting value for money there.

They were lined up around the gaping hole like it was the opening scene of a small-budget Aussie movie. All the usual tropes were there: eucalypts, cicadas, dust, flies, glaring sunshine and gloomy shade, the possibility of a brown snake lurking among the decrepit tombstones, remnant patches of kangaroo grass, a family of watchful magpies, a sinister looking fellow (Josh) with his reflective sunglasses and a gorgeous woman (a nurse from the care home perhaps) in her cherry sundress and oversized straw hat.

From tragedy comes comedy, thought Griffith, remembering his undergraduate film studies. He looked around to see the most likely source. The cleric droned on in the

usual monotone, his lacy frock slightly tattered around the bottom. The funeral chap was standing stooped and gloomy with his hands clasped in front of him. Warwick stood at the head of the grave, assuming the role of head of the family. Lucy was to his right with the girls beside her, neither quite dressed for the occasion. Joy and Ron stood together, arms about each other, heads bowed. Griffith was opposite them with Mum clutching his arm. Josh and young Ronnie had slipped to the back, keeping their distance from the preceding generations. Josh held his phone low in his left hand, his thumb flicking across the screen.

The other mourners were standing away from the family, but close enough to provide a Greek chorus of sorts, murmuring agreement with the cleric as required, pulling out tissues when appropriate, pulling out their car keys when the end was in sight.

Griffith stared down on the coffin, thinking of his father nailed in, resting peacefully as the cleric had suggested, his hands no longer weapons, his voice silent. He could hardly believe it. He listened intently, but there was only the sound of cicadas, and his mother's sigh beside him.

Soon enough it was over. They had all thrown a handful of dirt onto the coffin then wandered back to their cars. The refreshments would be provided at Mum's house. Griffith wondered if he should have brought a plate. Maybe he would just offer Lucy some cash. Surely it would have fallen to her to do the honours.

Griffith took the river road; the same one he had always taken as an unlicensed teen. The curves and dips were so familiar that he fell into musing. Here was the bend where he'd found the brown dog. Two weeks he'd had him before the old man thought of a better plan. Here was the water hole where he'd spent that summer with Tina. Here was the spot where he used to take her parking. There was an old-fashioned term, he thought, *parking* – to *take a girl parking*. Still, that's what you did in those days. He thought about Tina back then – sixteen and pregnant. He'd take a different view of such a matter these days, now that he had a daughter at home. No wonder his dad took the position he did. *Fuckin' come back here and I'll fuckin' shoot ya*, he'd said, showing him the two barrels at the back of the wardrobe. He wondered how Tina's life had panned out. Christ, she'd be fifty-six now, and the kid would be coming up for forty, probably with his own kids. Griffith silently wished them well but felt no eagerness to get in touch.

He was only slightly late to Mum's place, but the hot finger food was already gone, only flakes of pastry left and the stale smell of trans fats. He picked up a sandwich and took a bite. It might have been ham. He thought better of handing some cash to Lucy.

Everyone was standing in closed clumps: the care home people at the window, the drinking and golf mates around the table where young Ronnie was acting as bartender, Josh and the cherry sundress girl chatting on the veranda and Warwick's daughters in the yard, together but apart, both checking their social status. Griffith observed them through the window – too skinny both of them, too anxious, too all sorts of things. He imagined what Georgia would say about them – *anxiety disorder, maybe an eating disorder*. They were standing near the grave of the hapless brown dog, still marked by the pile of stones that Griffith had arranged, what, forty-four

years ago. He didn't want that old scene to play out in his mind just now. Ten, nine, eight ... He forced his attention back into the room.

Warwick and Joy and their spouses were in a tight little circle with Mum. All Griffith could see were backs – creased shirts and skirts, shiny trousers and worn out shoes.

Mum turned around at last and came over to him.

'I'm sorry about your dad,' she said.

Griffith looked down at her. She was such a small woman now, shrunken, wrinkled, a stoop to her back, no colour at all left in her hair.

'I should have left him.'

'Could you have?' he asked. 'Could you have left him?'

'I did once,' she said, 'but he came and got me before I'd made it to the bus stop.

Anyway, where could I have gone? No job, no money, three hungry kids and no one to offer a helping hand.'

'No need to leave now, Mum. He's gone. You've got all the money, if there is any.'

'And he liked the other two,' Mum went on. 'I couldn't take them away from their dad, could I?'

Griffith hadn't heard this story before. He'd heard the stories about how naughty he was, how he deserved it, how he was the favourite but a great disappointment with it. He'd heard all those, over again. But not the story about the old man liking the other two. He hadn't heard that before. He looked across at them, the other two – Warwick and Joy. Warwick turned then, as if he could feel Griffith's eyes on the back of his sunburnt neck.

'I should have stopped him,' Mum went on. 'I should have stepped in when he—' Griffith nodded. He put his arm around her.

'You did once or twice, Mum. It cost you though, didn't it?'

She pulled an ancient hanky from her sleeve then and wiped at her eyes.

Griffith tightened his arm around her, surprised at how close to the surface her bones were. He saw Warwick cross the room, dragging Lucy by the hand. He had a half smile on him, ready to say something. He had the look of the old man about him, the tilt of his head, the muscular shoulders and chest. Lucy drooped like a rag doll he'd picked up off the floor. She looked at Griffith from behind Warwick, across his shoulder.

Griffith closed his eyes and put his hand to his forehead. He knew that look. He'd seen it on Mum's face at times when he was a kid. So, this was how it was for Lucy. Now it was Lucy who needed a helping hand. He opened his eyes and gave her a slight nod, nothing Warwick would notice. He was busy offering to oversee Mum's financial matters.

There was no urgency about the drive back. The sun was sliding towards the west now, glancing off his side mirror. Dry paddocks of brown sheep flashed by, then golden crops of canola, and occasionally a few optimistic rows of wine grapes with their fresh green leaves. He wouldn't see any orchards till he was closer to home. The first time he'd made this trip was as a nineteen-year-old hitchhiker with all he owned in a backpack and fifty-three dollars seventy in his pocket. That trip was away from home to an unimagined future. This time it was towards home, with those suppressed memories of his bobbing up like turds off Altona Beach. He'd have to

deal with them, so his therapist had said on various occasions, but for now he would just count backwards: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four ...

It was Georgia on the phone.

'How'd it go?' she said. 'Is he buried?'

'Yep, dead and buried,' said Griffith. 'But Warwick's channelling him now.'

'Could have guessed that.'

'And Joy feels aggrieved cos I was his favourite.'

'Lucky for her she wasn't. Did you tell her that?'

'Nah, why ruin her misery? Anyway, I'll take the scenic route home, through Coburg – avoid the bridge. What about Wes next door? How's the hole going?'

'It collapsed,' said Georgia, 'with him in it. Up to his chest in black dirt. Any deeper and it would have been his grave.'

'Crikey!'

'I heard Missus Wes calling for help, so I felt obliged to jump the fence and dig him out with the trowel.'

'Shit eh! Lucky I dropped it there among the milk thistles.'

'Yep, and lucky I found it. And lucky she'd called the paramedics.'

'So, no bunker, next door.'

'Not this year anyway. The site has been fenced off by the health and safety squad – it's a designated hazard.'

'Thought it might be.'

There was silence for a while as Griffith navigated the entrance to the freeway. He checked for any aggressive drivers in black vehicles. There were none just yet – only family sedans and a few nomads. A third-hand Astra appeared in the next lane, its paintwork faded and blotchy. Griffith noticed the single teenage occupant with his back seat full of household goods, setting off into the future. Good luck to you, he thought.

'Are you still there, Griffith?' asked Georgia.

'Yep, still here,' he said. 'Hands free, on Bluetooth.'

There was another pause.

'Lucy's in a bit of a situation with Warwick,' he said.

'Not surprising,' said Georgia.

'I've given her the spare key to our back door,' said Griffith.

'Righto.'

'She might have the girls with her.'

There was a pause in the conversation. Griffith focussed on the traffic. The speed limit might have been a hundred, but a few drivers were not cognisant of that fact. They sped past him, dirt bikes swaying in trailers, loads on roof racks inexpertly strapped. *Organ donors* Georgia might have called them. He could almost hear her thinking, counting the beds in her head, including the fold-out couch they'd impulsively bought on spec that time, working out how not to disturb their own girl, half way through high school.

'Might bring the dog, too,' said Griffith. 'Save it getting kicked.'

'Okay, love,' said Georgia. 'See you soon.'