

Patchwork

by Marisa Herbert

The surface of the river was a maze of circular ripples as it carried away the ashes of Anna's best friend. The rain drops fell heavily on the mourners, soaking hair and clothing, chilling exposed skin. Mel had only passed away a week ago but it felt like forever, and like no time at all. Anna turned away from the others, walking back up the pathway to the park, leaving her friends behind her. She heard footsteps and turned to see Jack, who had hurried to catch her. Behind him Mel's family and other friends followed in apparent slow motion, heads hung low, every step laboured.

"It was a lovely service", Jack said, and Anna nodded.

They walked in silence a while, past the boatsheds where Mel and Anna had spent so much time after rowing training. The rain was just a very fine drizzle now, barely perceptible, just enough to make your skin tingle. Anna held her hand out in front of her, feeling the tiny droplets touch her skin. "It was two years ago today, you know."

"What was?" Jack asked.

"The day she told me", Anna replied. "It was raining then too, and we ate lunch under the awning outside the library. That's when she told me she was sick."

She sensed Jack watching her, but didn't really want to say anything else. "I'll see you at Uni after the holidays", she said.

"Right," Jack replied, "can I give you a lift?"

"No", Anna shook her head. "It's not far to the dorm from here. I'll walk. Thanks." She looked at him briefly before turning away and quickening her steps. Feeling a vibration in her pocket, she pulled out her phone. It was Nan. Ringing to check up on her again, she supposed. She let the phone finish ringing, put it back in her pocket, and kept walking. Nan had asked Anna to come and stay on her property over the holidays but Anna hadn't yet given her an answer.

When she reached the college Anna could see Patrick sitting on the bench seat at the entrance. She hesitated, unsure if she really wanted to see him now or not. Their on-again, off-again "thing" was off right now, but she knew he wanted to change that, and she wasn't

sure if she could cope with him right now. But before she could turn around he looked up and saw her there, and stood up to wait for her. She had no choice but to keep walking.

As Anna walked up Patrick just stared at her with a worried look on his face.

“I just wanted to make sure you were ok, after...” his voice trailed off.

“I’m fine”, Anna lied, “just tired.”

“I’ll buy you a coffee. Come on”, Patrick said, and Anna found herself following him to the café on the corner, the one with great coffee and terrible sandwiches. They sat by the window and sipped in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. Patrick seemed hesitant to say anything, and Anna just didn’t have the energy.

“I’m really tired”, Anna said, pushing aside the empty cup as she stood up from the table. Patrick followed her back outside and up the footpath to the entrance to the college.

“Call me if you need anything”, he said.

“I will”, Anna lied again.

Halfway up the steps inside the dorm she stopped, sat down on the concrete, and started to cry. Silently she sobbed, tears pouring down her cheeks, leaving trails in her makeup, washing away the face she’d put on this morning. Her chest heaved so much that it hurt, and she leant her head against the brick wall of the stairwell, exhausted. Eventually, once all her tears had run out and the muscles of her chest ached from the effort, she dragged herself up the last few stairs and walked down the corridor to her room. There was a package propped against her door, something bulky but soft.

Inside her room she took off her shoes, put down her bag, and looked at the parcel more closely. It was only then she realised it was from her Nan. Opening it, she pulled out something soft wrapped in layers of tissue paper. She lay it on the bed and unwrapped it, unfolding it carefully. It was a quilt, handmade, obviously the product of many nights’ work under the old lamp in Nan’s sewing room.

For a moment Anna wondered if Nan needed new glasses, because there was no discernible colour scheme. There were patches of all different colours, and even different sizes. But then she saw it. A large patch of blue cotton with the remnants of an emblem long faded. It had been a favourite t-shirt of her Dads’ for years. Reaching out her hand she touched it, and its softness instantly reminded her of times she’d spent sitting on her dad’s lap

as a small child, scared of a storm or a bad dream or something else little girls were scared of, and being comforted by his warmth and softness and ‘bigness’. Next to the piece of t-shirt her eyes were drawn to a square of old quilted fabric, white with faded pink roses. It had been an old bedspread her Nan had pulled up over Anna’s shoulders when she’d come for a sleepover. In the corner of the quilt was a piece of spotted fabric Anna recognised from a favourite dress of Nan’s from years ago, and beside it what looked like a remnant of the cream safari suit that Pop had considered so stylish, and had worn so often before he died. And perhaps most beautiful of all was a piece of blue floral silk, taking pride of place in the centre of the quilt, a remnant of the dress Anna’s mum had worn to her daughter’s christening. In the photos Anna’s whole family had been gathered around her, and now, sitting here on the bed with the quilt in her hands, Anna felt them around her still.

She picked up her phone to make the call.

“Hello?” Nan answered.

“It’s Anna, Nan,” she said. “I got your present.”

Anna could sense the smile in her grandmother’s voice as she spoke, “I hope you like it, sweetheart. Perhaps you’d like to bring it with you when you come to stay in a couple of weeks?”

“That would be lovely”, Anna said, and smiled back.