

To forestall the inevitable questions I took a chance and turned to Mrs Lacey. ‘Sorry about Mr Lacey.’

‘Thank you dear. When Fern described their home burial, it brought it all back.’ She gazed wistfully into the distance. ‘Fern made it sound so peaceful and intimate, outdoors, and no one rushing you and a lovely willow coffin.’ She looked back at us, tears in her eyes. ‘Arthur’s funeral was like a conveyor belt, they wanted us in and out as quick as possible so the next lot could start. The vicar didn’t even know him, and it did strike me at the time that there was a lot of good wood going into the ground. What with the rainforests and poor orang-utans without a home. I wish I could go back and do his funeral over.’ Mrs Lacey pulled out lacy hanky and dabbed at her eyes.

*Note: but we are still telling rather than showing so even better would be the next extract where Tim and Lori are invited to a funeral, following the inquest. Here, there is no preaching, instead we inspire the reader by showing a natural funeral.*

There was a collective gasp of surprise and delight as we stepped outside. Long willow rods wedged high between opposing trees provided a natural curtain rail which hid the hole in the ground from sight. From the rods hung colourful twines, strewn with daisy chains and scented creamy white clusters of elderflower from the tree that had come into bloom. Photos and mementos were tied into them. Spring flowers squeezed into glass bottles hung from willow, elderflower and hazel trees. Vegetable snacks were set out in coconut husks on the homemade table, a huge bower of pussy willow, adorned with an abundance of spring flowers created an archway that was buzzing with life. I edged towards the snacks for a quick bite. Daisy bounded over and gave me a hug, brushing aside my condolences. ‘Look at the flowers, do you recognise them?’

‘Lily of the valley, forget me nots... oh yes, here’s the lungwort and there’s the grape hyacinth.’

‘They’re the ones you recommended for the bees, and they love them.’

‘Who’s this?’ Lori picked out a photo entwined in the willow. It was a young couple with flowers in their long hair, he was holding a guitar and wearing a kaftan and she had multi-coloured bell bottoms and a tie dye t-shirt strewn with beads.

‘That’s grandad and grandma. I wish I’d have known her.’

‘Your mum looks just like her.’ We looked over at Fern who was laughing and showing Carla photos hanging in the willow curtain.

‘She’s so different now, it’s weird.’

I explained to Lori. ‘Fern was quite, well severe, sorry Daisy, obviously I saw her at a bad time...’

‘No you’re right, she was.’

‘Is it strange having her change like that?’ asked Lori gently.

‘Yes, I’ve lost grandad, but I had time to come to terms with it, and now it’s like I’ve lost my old mum and got someone new. I mean, I’m glad obviously, she looks so happy and before she was brittle, like so unyielding. But it’s weird that’s all. Still at least Uncle Brian will never change.’

‘Don’t you just long for a burger rather than all this rabbit food,’ Brian appeared by our side.

‘Uncle Brian, try the asparagus. Grandad grew it himself,’ Daisy handed him a spear.

‘If I must.’

Now that snacks were officially open, I grabbed a plate and filled it up and passed it to Lori. We stood there, quietly for a while, feeling the gentle spring sun on our skin, taking in the scene. Brian looked over at us, decided against talking to us and cast his eye round for his next victim, moving quickly over Carla, whose pink hair gave her away as having hippyish tendencies. He honed in on Paul as his best bet and barged in on the conversation he’d been having with Samudrapati.

‘So what do you think of your wife turning into a hippy?’ we heard him asking.

‘He’s like a wasp,’ murmured Lori in my ear. ‘Just when you’re beginning to relax and everything’s lovely, he comes buzzing around.’

‘Wasps are important predators of greenfly, and they pollinate too.’

‘I knew you were going to say that.’

The intermittent sound of fiddles tuning gave way to a proper tune, and gradually the chatter subsided and we all looked towards Andrew and Katie as they started to play.

‘What’s going to happen now?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

Andrew and Katie brought their fiddling to a graceful close and we all stood before the curtain of flowers and willow. Brian’s voice still taking to Paul was discordant in the sudden quiet, and he bumbled to a sudden halt.

The music of the garden took over from the fiddles. Undeterred by the crowd, a tiny brown wren, tail cocked in the air, trilled its liquid song from the new willow fence. Nearby, a chiff-chaff chanted the repetitive call that gives it its name. A queen bumblebee burred, her legs loaded with balls of pollen for her hungry offspring. A brimstone butterfly fluttered by, investigating the flowers on the willow bower, its bright yellow wings like a flash of sunshine.

A roar of a plane flying overhead reminded us that we were not in the deep countryside, but in a suburban small garden, underneath the flight path from the airport a few miles down the road. When the plane had passed, we tuned again into the sounds of nature. After a few moments Fern nodded at Andrew and Daisy and together they carefully lifted the willow curtain down from the branches and walked it to the end of the garden.

I steeled myself to look. But it wasn't the deep, dark, rectangular coffin-shaped hole I'd pictured in my head. The hole in the ground was just as I'd left it, pond-shaped and three feet deep, except now Grandad, as I thought of him, was laid out in his baggy trousers and a colourful knitted jumper in the willow coffin, surrounded by the bones of his wife. I exhaled with relief. This was absolutely right. The shallow pond-shaped hole was like nature's opening arms welcoming them back to the earth.

'I helped to weave the coffin,' I whispered to Lori. She was gazing open-mouthed at the dead figure in front of us. To the side, much as I'd left it, was a mound of earth, with several spades dug in.

'Morbid isn't it.' Brian appeared behind us, sipping at a fresh glass of raspberry vodka.

'I think it's magical,' said Lori. 'I thought it would be creepy, but somehow it isn't.'

Daisy jumped down into the hole, stepped carefully over the bones, kissed her Grandad's cheek tenderly and then pulled down the lid of the coffin. Her father helped pull her out. Fern reached over and held her hand tightly, and spoke.

'Thirty years ago, I buried my mother right here. Dad played a song on his guitar, we wrapped her in her knitted shroud and placed her gently in the willow coffin that we'd woven ourselves, and just like today, it was a beautiful spring day, I would swear even the same wood pigeon.' We laughed softly hearing the ever familiar cooing. 'When mum died, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to follow her wishes and bury her in her beloved garden. We didn't question it, well Brian did.' Fern glanced over at her brother who was sipping his vodka blank-faced. 'But mum and dad seemed so certain, and they'd done all that knitting. Then when mum was in the ground and we couldn't even plant a tree to mark the spot because dad wanted to be buried next to her, it didn't seem so great. I became a bit of a loner to avoid questions, like from people like Geoff. Brian had always rebelled against their way of life, but I'd loved it, but the secret turned it sour and I was angry about it I suppose at some level, and I changed. Although I called my daughter 'Daisy', Fern gave Daisy a warm smile and hugged her close, 'so I suppose I was always waiting to return to the person I'd been before, once it was safe. And now it feels safe, thanks to Habitat Man.' Fern looked at me. 'It's thanks to you Tim that the secret is out, and I'm sorry that you and Daisy never got to dig your pond, but I'm glad you tried.'

I'd noticed a spot by the willow tree in dappled sunlight that would be perfect for a washing-up bowl sized mini-pond. It would provide the aesthetics for Daisy as the sunlight glinted over the water, and a bath and drinking spot for passing birds and hedgehogs. Reluctantly, I decided this wasn't the time to mention it, and contented myself with a self-deprecating smile.

'Without you spilling the beans,' continued Fern, 'I'd have done to Daisy what dad did to me and she doesn't deserve that. Daisy you deserve a life lived in the light.'

Daisy hugged her mum back and gazed at the coffin. 'I love you Grandad.'

Fern handed Daisy a spade and with it she threw some earth onto the top of the coffin. Fern handed me a spade and offered one to Brian who shook his head and

stepped back, glugging his vodka. Samudrapati and Carla also took a spade and Fern kept one for herself.

‘Bye Dad,’ she said simply and threw another spadeful of earth onto the coffin.

Andrew nodded at Katie and they started to fiddle with a rhythmic tune that kept pace with the spadefuls of earth being shovelled onto the coffin. I joined in, and passed the spade to Lori who added another spadeful. Samudrapati, Paul, Daisy, Carla, Fern, everyone except Brian took turns. Andrew picked up the pace of the music and earth got thrown in faster. Katie started to sing, a keening, high note that blended in with the music and the birds and bees and expressed in wordless harmony the bitter sweet recognition that a precious life had passed. I looked up into the sky and saw swifts had arrived, they were swooping and swirling like arrows through the sky. Katie noticed and she stopped her bow and just sang, her voice swooping up and down like the birds above, while Andrew’s rhythmic fiddling provided the underlying pulse. As the shallow grave filled up with earth, she let her voice soar, getting thinner and higher. She took up her bow again and drew it along the strings so that her voice and the fiddle blended into one and it was impossible to hear which was which. Suddenly, emerging out of the long final note came a wail. I was impressed. How had she done that without moving her lips? But it was Brian. He’d come out of the stupor he’d been in since the digging had started and grabbed a spade and started shovelling the earth back out.

‘Oh my God!’ he howled. ‘Nooooo.’

Everyone stood back to give him space as he gave vent to his grief. He looked a ridiculous figure in his formal black suit and tie, wailing and digging red-faced. But there was nothing ridiculous in his grief. He cried and howled and dug. ‘Oh My God! Daddy!’

Katie’s bow held Brian’s wail just as it had held her voice and played it in harmony, giving it dignity and weight. Brian threw off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and dug and cried and dug and wailed. Andrew improvised, allowing the music to become less directed, but coming back again and again to the beat, providing the continuity, reminding us of the inexorable, inescapable rhythms of life and death. Katie played the high, long notes, the sweet beauty of love and loss.

Brian opened up the willow lid of the coffin and clasped his dead father in his arms. Andrew softened the tempo, and Katie kept the top notes going with her bow while Brian wept.

I felt a lump in my throat and thought about my father and how well we really knew each other. I thought of the way he veered between irritability, joviality and gardening. But I suspected the gardener in him was the real him. But was that wishful thinking? When he looked round this perfect garden would he just see a mess and want to straighten up the borders? He probably would. I wondered what I’d do with his burial. With a jolt I realised I cared deeply. My reconciliation with my mother had brought the family within reach again. I wasn’t ready to let him go.

I felt Lori’s hand take mine and squeeze it, I felt her hot breath as she spoke into my ear, ‘makes me want to speak with my dad.’

I squeezed her hand back. 'Me too.'

I felt for Brian as he held his father and wept. He'd clearly felt a similar disconnect with his family. He'd gone all the way to Australia to escape that feeling of alienation but he'd come back and I knew what he was thinking, well we all knew because he was shouting it into the grave.

'It's too late. I left it too late. I missed my chance.' The enormity of this realisation was filling his soul with sorrow and he wailed it to the heavens. The fiddles picked it up and played it out. I marvelled at their mastery of their craft. The way Andrew and Katie worked together, the music carefully designed to bring out the grief that needed to be felt, to be expressed. Andrew stopped his bow and gave the floor to Katie. Her bow picked out a melody that I would swear was improvised, wandering for a while, then getting a sense of itself and developing its own structure, tuning into the ebb and flow of Brian's grief that swelled and abated and then swelled again as the realisation hit him again and again and again. Sometimes with lesser force, sometimes with renewed vigour. We were hearing music being spun out of pure human emotion. The note dropped into a lower key, Andrew picked up his bow and boosted it with a base note and it was transcendental. The music redeeming the brutality and rawness of the loss, turning it into something exalted and sublime.

Brian let his father go, placed the lid back and shovelled the earth back in. The music played as we picked up our spades and joined in till the hole was covered again. Andrew picked up the tempo and introduced a hint of something else.

Brian jumped on the earth and stamped it down. 'You were so embarrassing, all of you, that's why I left,' he yelled at the ground. 'I just wanted you to be normal. But I don't want you to be normal now. I want you not to be dead. I want to say I'm sorry. I want to talk to you and I can't.' He struggled with his tie and pulled it off and tied it round his head. 'See I have a bandana now dad, I have a bandana.'

The music played on, and, sensing it was time, Andrew introduced another hint of something and I felt my foot tap. Brian stamped down on the ground again. Andrew repeated the motif and I tapped my foot again. Carla nodded at Andrew and he played it again, a clear hint of a jig. She jumped on the grave with Brian and took his hand. Andrew and Katie launched into the full-blown jig and suddenly they were off, Carla twirled Brian round in a circle, just as she'd twirled me, and like before, I couldn't resist. I held out an arm to Lori, and we joined in as everyone twirled and jigged on the grave to the music. We danced it out all of us, all our griefs, both for the loss of the man lying in the earth and for our own personal losses, past, present and imagined. We danced and laughed and cried and the swifts swirled overhead, heralding that the striving of spring was giving way to the warmth of summer sun. Andrew and Katie played like demons slowing us down, then reeling us back in again and again, and then when we were ready to drop, brought us home with a final flourish leaving us collapsing sobbing and laughing with the sheer wonder of it all.

Fern brought out a small fruit tree in a pot. She stepped forward and dug a hole, that reached down a few inches short of the coffin, then pulled the tree out of the pot, teased out the roots and planted it in the hole. She handed the spade to her brother and smiled.

‘Mum and dad can still give you your favourite pudding.’

‘Damson tart?’

‘And damson gin,’ she smiled at him.

Brian took the spade, filled in around the hole with the earth and patted it down. Daisy stepped up with the watering can and watered it thoroughly. It wasn’t the pond we’d initially wanted, but the tree looked right there, and as Daisy said, it was about meaning not just looks. The damson tree would take the sustenance from the earth and use it to provide creamy blossoms for bees in spring, summer fruit and a perching place for the birds, and Damson pie and gin for the family.

After that, it was time to go. We turned to leave, looked back and saw Brian still jiggling with a bandana on his head, and Daisy watching with a horrified expression.