

Return to the Bay

Gary pulled into the jetty car park. Feeling less than enthusiastic about the task ahead, he checked his bag for sunscreen, hat and bottled water. The most important item was carefully placed in the middle of the bag, packed in with an old beach towel.

'Hey, over here you slacker!' called a familiar voice.

'Hi, Bob. Sorry I'm running late. It's hard to escape the kids sometimes.'

Bob greeted him warmly with a firm handshake and a bear-like grip of his shoulder.

'Don't look so glum, mate,' said Bob cheerily. ' You know you'll feel better when we've done the deed.'

Gary managed a smile and said, 'Thanks, Bob. Let's get on with it then. You know I've been dreading this day.'

'Let's head out past the island,' suggested Bob.

It was more of an order than a suggestion but Gary was happy to go along with him.

'Six months from diagnosis to cremation didn't give me much time to get used to Dad not being around.'

'Perfect day for it,' Bob interrupted Gary.

'Yeah, it's always good to get out on the bay. You take it for granted a bit when it's so familiar. All those times you used to bring me out here when I was growing up.'

'Familiar? You're not kidding. Andy and me used to spend most of our lives here when we were kids.'

Gary was beginning to relax and enjoy the feeling of the tinny breaking through the waves and the taste of salt on his lips. It was still quite early and the only sound was the steady purr of the outboard, occasionally interrupted by the splash of a wave or the shriek of a passing seagull. He wondered about his mum pushing the issue of time with Bob. He wondered about Bob and his dad. He'd never seen them as close but they must have been as kids.

'This used to be one of our favourite fishing spots. We spent hours here dangling a line. Even caught a few. We were always so chuffed when we could go home with a bream or two for dinner. Sure we had arguments. Who caught the biggest, who caught the first, who got to captain the boat, whose turn it was to clean the fish when we got back. But we had a great time overall.'

'I don't understand, Bob. How come you and Dad didn't see much of each other as adults if you were so close as kids?'

Bob shifted in his seat, looking suddenly uncomfortable. Dressed in his uniform of stubbies, weathered t-shirt and thongs, he seemed to develop a keener interest in navigation than conversation.

He finally broke his silence, saying, 'Mate, it's not something I like to speak about, especially today. "Don't speak ill of the dead", they say.'

'Come on, Bob, you can't offend him now. You're my last link to Dad, with Mum gone as well. You've got to help me understand him. Something serious must have happened.'

'Goes back a long time, son. Your old man always did better than me. Top marks at school, good student at uni. He's been hobnobbing around universities ever since.'

'But you've done all right for yourself, Bob. The building game seems to have been pretty good to you.'

'Yeah. I've worked bloody hard, though.'

'Well Dad did in his own field, too. You're both successful in your own right. Was there something else? It wasn't about money was it?'

Managing a chuckle, Bob replied, ' Nothing so simple. No, I suppose it goes back to me feeling he was always dealt a better hand than me. I did National Service but because he was at uni Andy was able to defer his service. Like a lot of my Nasho mates, I did it pretty tough. The tour of duty was bad enough but life afterwards was even harder. I was in a march past in front of the Sydney Town Hall, but guess who was in the front row yelling at us as we marched by. Yeah, your old man. I never forgave him. Still don't.

I'd been going out with Kathy before going overseas.'

'Mum?'

' She wrote to me often. I loved getting those letters. Kept me sane. We got together briefly when I finished my service and I thought we were sweet. Turns out Andy had moved in on her while I was serving my country and they got married later that year. I always wondered if you... Anyway, life afterwards was really tough. Now here I am with no family and I still have the night sweats and rotten bloody dreams. He didn't

have to join up because it was all over by the time he finished uni. I always suspected his honours year was just to avoid the call up.'

The outboard pattered to a stop.

'Throw out the anchor, mate. This is the spot I told you about. One of our regular haunts as kids.'

The sea sparkled as the early morning sun bounced off the waves and the two men sat in silence waiting for each other to make the next move. Gary rummaged in his bag and took out the urn.

'Want to say anything, Bob?'

'No mate. I'll leave it up to you.'

Gary held the urn for a moment gathering his thoughts.

'All the words were said at the funeral, Dad. Love you.'

He took off the lid and slowly poured the ashes over the side into the waters where Andy and Bob had had happier times.

They sat quietly for a few minutes as the ashes drifted away but the silence was broken by the outboard kicking into life. Gary hauled in the anchor as Bob turned back towards the jetty and couldn't help but notice him wiping his eyes on his sleeve as he blinked into the bright sunlight.

The End