

Thirty Years On

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Missie pushed the point of a knife into fish flesh. She regularly fed a neighbour's cats and, in return, when they went fishing, they gave her part of their catch.

As the sharp edge went down through belly, Missie abruptly stood erect, nostrils filled not with the smell of intestine but with her first perfume, borrowed from a friend and worn the night she expected to end her virginity.

Without washing her hands, Missie walked to the sitting room and announced she was going to Ralph Grummet's grave.

"Right now?" her husband asked, his nose taking in only the stink of opened guts.

"I'll book in the morning," Missie replied and turned back to that unfinished fish and to the thought that she really should also visit her brother.

Bruce hesitated to follow his wife to the kitchen. Missie, who had been surprisingly amenable most of their shared life, was growing more easily irritated, although she hadn't before come up with a unilateral plan: they always shared making holiday arrangements. Perhaps this was the menopause. His sister, who had always been temperamental, had recently taken a nose dive into dramatic unreliability and blamed hormones. But Missie had not gone in for any self indulgence Bruce recognised and, as he poured himself a whisky, he hoped she wasn't about to begin. Bruce was sure he wouldn't cope with a wife as erratic as his sister.

Some assumed from her name that, when she was younger, Missie had been quick to assert entitlements, a “little madam”. Such was not the case. Her father invariably called “Miss me?”, as he hurried back to his small daughter. At Christmas lunch when she was three, and family gathered for cold ham and hot pudding, an aunt asked “So you are your daddy’s girl, then?” Missie was emphatic. “No, I am his misme!” Following laughter she didn’t understand, she became “Misme” to everyone. At training college friends turned it to Missie.

After a good fish dinner and sleep, Missie no longer had an absurd urge to write to Ralph, or rush to his grave. She woke wondering where to find a replacement at work. Then a pain in her chest took full attention. The diaphragm was pushing to generate too much empty space. You might implode in such emptiness, which strained against the ribs.

Ralph’s body must have dissolved. It hardly made sense that he’d started jumping to mind. He’d been dead nearly three decades and much of that time she’d barely thought of him, except as she sent desultory greeting to his mother at Christmas.

Missie climbed to the attic, intending to look for old photos. She pressed her face against the window instead, to look into flattening grey meeting mossed roof tiles. Dark branches still etched winter across the roof-high horizon, with only one distant corner of brighter light breaking into promise.

The previous night’s impulse to go, which failed to keep its conviction, would take eight months to rebuild sufficient momentum.

One night she was in a thin, uncovered nightdress and opening her front door, exactly as she’d done several times that year and for many years. When it started she did not know. Was it in dream she heard her door bell?

Was it only in half waking that she responded to feeling herself summoned? Someone, or something called her. Occasionally she was adamant the door bell rang. Other nights it was less certain, although she still felt drawn to go and look.

For the most part she lived a busy, apparently solid life but at its fringes Missie opened to some appeal.

Bruce usually slept through her exit and return to bed, but this time her icy feet woke him.

“You opened the door at 4 am? To whom were you prepared to offer hospitality at this hour? Didn’t you even consider the risk?”

“No,” she replied, wriggling into bed warmth.

He didn’t know what to make of this but decided argument could wait till after breakfast: Bruce preferred not to talk until he’d finished perusing the paper and two pieces of toast. It was one of the great satisfactions of a long marriage that you could ignore your wife early in the morning, Bruce thought, as he moved closer to curl around Missie.

Missie only occasionally said she was happily married, it was her friends who trotted out the phrase more often: it proved helpful to fit Missie into that place while they went through turmoil and divorce which required her sympathetic ear and good meals. It was true that Missie’s troubles were not on show. She herself found it hard to catch hold of them. She might look up from cleaning her teeth to wonder whether that flicker of a shadow half seen could be a presence. Other times it seemed certain, though only briefly could she feel sure, that an echo of some call to her lingered in a room.

Those who felt they could rely on Missie said of her that she was settled into herself and didn’t yearn to be other than she was. And she had found more contentment in her adult life than she’d have forecast in her early twenties, when her friends seemed to expect happiness ahead and she could not.

It seemed impossible to account for how the restlessness of that period slipped away, though Missie believed each of her pregnancies wove firm threads across the drop into pointlessness until she no longer feared the hollow in herself and ceased to feel Ralph had bequeathed her threatening doom.

It was as Missie’s children left home that uncertainties began to reclaim her. Their going left room for shadows. “Reach out, reach out,” wasn’t even a murmur, yet Missie heard the call.

“It’s God,” one friend said emphatically, as if that made it not disconcerting.

“All middle aged women get plagued by the need for God or an affair,” her sister-in-law insisted. Bruce’s sister remained an incurable, dissatisfied romantic.

Missie did give consideration to an allotment, God and an affair with the vet, yet felt insufficient urge to follow through with any of these options. Perhaps she was too weary to bother. There was something peculiar in the tiredness which could consume her these days. It was not like that familiar, tight fitting outfit which also bound her head and which passed after good sleep. This was a draining of vitality, as if life had slipped away and only a shell remained to be dragged around. Feeling bleached of what once pumped full blooded, to be rendered a washed out version of herself, made Missie think of Ralph. Once exhausted she felt closer to when she too would be only bone, devoid of flesh.

Also her children kept on and on leaving. Each departure brought back a little of Ralph’s grand exit. Perhaps all this practice at letting go and being let go might help when she, finally, had to subside out of life. However Missie didn’t really believe so. What she did think true was that, because she was less engrossed in new life and growing children, mortality could move into the vacancy.

When Missie finally returned to the attic to find faded photos of Ralph, she sat before one of Ralph and one of Bruce the same age. A tender wave folded down through her. She stayed softened, malleable enough to feel her heart stretch towards both men.

“These two I have loved,” she said aloud and kissed each picture, until Bruce yelled from downstairs. A hard coldness cut across her: why couldn’t he leave her alone, not shout for pinking shears a neighbour wanted? He might have said his wife was busy and would drop the scissors in soon, even if it was Missie who’d originally insisted on neighbourliness. Bruce seemed not to realise how fiercely protective of privacy Missie was becoming. It was one of few precious compensations for being left by the children.

“No need to be rude,” he said, when she hissed indignantly at his intrusion. Good manners seemed to go all the way through Bruce, while Missie was aware her own had been added on to a core of far less ordered emotionality. And something of that was beginning to break through qualities which had sustained her marriage. This frightened Missie – it wasn’t kind, or joyful.

Bruce was the man in the bed. Shrivelling away from him took her nowhere, except into a refusal to be where she was. Worse, curling away from Bruce to lie in limbo, brought echoes of her shrinking from life after Ralph died.

Back then the options seemed to be to sink entirely out of it with Ralph, or muster sufficient energy for a driven escape.

When tiredness crept up through her, Missie felt less inclination for life. Then the sadness of Ralph threatened to suck her down. He'd waited to re-claim her, biding his time till she was less engaged. He appeared to come up from the ground, through every small sorrow; her son's misery at a broken affair and through her brother's separation. Missie feared her dependability was crumbling.

For his part, Bruce felt ready to square up to being the rock for the marriage if Missie was beginning to dissolve in tears and hormones.

They'd both wanted sturdy foundations for a shared life. Bruce believed he eventually won Missie over to giving her heart again by promising constancy. It was what he longed for, convinced that with the right woman, as straight as himself, marriage would see him through. His own parents had made a mess of family life, then his only sister created a tragedy of that divorce. She saw herself as let down by parents acting out their own drama, and would never be outclassed again.

Bruce had no time for his sister's eagerness to give him a part as fellow victim. He preferred to grit his teeth and build solidity. Having a fixed corner stone for their life together, Bruce and Missie felt freer to go out to others and be attentive to the children. Many of Missie's friends seemed to think only of their own dissatisfactions while Missie put the well being of family before herself, which Bruce admired. They had both settled for the convention of marriage; since they were lucky to have each other, that made an end of it. They wanted it to work, so it did. Others went down paths bound to disturb the ground of their existing lives, and made a virtue of their search. Surely Missie was not about to join these seekers?

Missie made a detour and sat in the park. She rang and left a message that the vet's surgery would open late. Having shed her usual activity, she heard the bird noise. It was the first mild day of

spring, and as she listened to the chatter of birds getting on with nest building and mating, Missie wondered how often she found such contentment. Too often the day remained behind glass; at one remove, now that she was too rarely pulled into it by longing. On first waking and until she got busy her separateness could seem almost unbearable. Yet as she sat alone, she felt a surge of song to sing her connectedness.

When she stood to return to work with a surprising lightness, Missie reached out, extending her arms in laughter. A couple turned from this display but with a smile she called, “isn’t it a perfect day.”

Her happiness did not survive thunder and a heavy afternoon but enough remained. As she lay in the night Missie recalled the songs she and Ralph once sang, and felt sympathy for the younger version of herself: what a lot she had been forced to learn in a big hurry. For years she’d been unable to accept no one had made it easier. And she could not then accept, as a fact of life, that people died young and abruptly even if you loved them.

Her outrage at the unexpectedness of Ralph’s death had come out of assumptions she’d not seen she had, despite the fact they shaped her. She’d absorbed them haphazardly while growing up. Missie tended to look back on her young self as on one who failed a test of comprehension, who couldn’t properly take in what had happened.

Tenderness for that young woman was new, but so was the determination to return. Something still hovered unseen.

Not realising that Missie was steadily accumulating a resolution to return, and return alone to New Zealand, Bruce decided the two of them needed a break. He planned a surprise visit to Missie’s aunts, then on to the sea. Missie grew up on the coast and spoke often of how her brothers taught her to fish. She liked to reminisce about nights of eeling and long days by the sea. It was told as the best of her childhood, where her brothers included their kid sister, yet she never attempted any fishing in Britain.

The pair arrived late at the aunts’ and fell asleep. When Missie opened the curtains to the morning evening mist half wiped out trees on the nearest hill, but it was an opening vista after the city enclosure. As she looked out she wondered how she survived being so shut in the city flat.

At the end of the garden one vast tree in paled grey was rendered barely substantial despite its thick trunk. Hefty pigeons dropped to swing those thinner branches, reduced still to winter twigs, though the ground beneath gleamed with daffodils and beside the window potted flowers declared spring in bright shades.

Over breakfast Missie's aunts, who had withstood strong encouragement to join their family in New Zealand, were concerned about Richard. Missie felt remiss. Had she been insufficiently worried about her brother's separation?

Both Missie's older brothers were hopeless correspondents. The eldest, thanks to his computer, now emailed her a birthday card, while Richard's wife had been the one to keep in touch, until she sped away on a motorbike with a much younger man. After a fortnight, she returned to collect the children, then was gone for good.

Richard once seemed the wildest in the family but his childhood spirit seeped out of him drop by drop. By mid thirty he became sturdily reliable, too solid, taking up the slack for a wispy wife who could be a delight but remained irresponsibly girly. Richard continued to call her his "girl" despite having two daughters.

"I'm planning to spend time with Richard," she told her aunts and meant it. As they left, she told Bruce of her intention to go back.

They drove on to Devon up a climb, folded in by every shade of green, with colouring spots of wild flowers.

Such exuberance of new leaf, new life, Missie thought until they reached the top. There cut flowers were gathered for death in a field of gravestones.

"It is everywhere," Missie thought, "yet once I imagined there could be escape from it." And she told Bruce, "Poor father paid for my inability to recognise no one could make Ralph's death bearable. And I blamed him for not warning me the terrible might strike. As if, had he truly loved me, he'd have given no illusion that he might keep me safe through the dark."

By the time they reached the coast, all seemed as calm between them as it was outside; the sea in the distance was a flattened satin of blue silver, almost bleached of colour in the sun. Only towards the shore did the fabric ripple, folding as if puckered over a tight belly. The final roll, up over pebbles, was not visible from the coast road. This ocean might look undisturbed but surely

there were currents to catch the unwary? Missie still had not got used to sea as tamed as this, having grown up with fierce surf. She and Ralph had liked to lie, toes to toes, along the cliff edge, to feel the impact of thudding waves at full tide below: there was the jolt and there was the sense of the precarious, for the apparently solid rock on which they lay sometimes crumbled and broke.

Ralph remained back in that era of surging potential, while Bruce was moving with her into what felt like an ebbing tide, with rock pools as reminders of the fullness that had been. Sadness over all that was passed could too easily focus on Ralph.

Any fierce pull of desire took her back to him. Missie no longer believed it came from, or belonged to Ralph, as she had done when he first stirred her to such lust; now, she recognised her own longing.

Yearning could still astonish her but it was largely unhinged from the decent man who sat opposite her at breakfast and shared her bed. Desire between them was no longer on free flow: it was reduced to sporadic bursts, usually fuelled by alcohol or a sexy dream.

However, as she and Bruce walked in the wind, Missie felt satisfied enough. The sea beside them, no longer smoothed blue, with churning sand near shore, had a grubby finish.

When love for Bruce, or for the children they shared, pulsed through Missie it drowned out any beat of sorrow.

For decades Ralph's death had been only one strand in the fullness. But now the best of her life was already over. What might sustain her through the rest?

Missie believed Bruce was probably a good man. She often said it. Yet he hadn't kept his dignity. Something in him was dreary and as he slept beside her Missie was afraid it might prove contagious. When the seagull call and morning sun came into the room to wake her, she threw on clothes and ran to feel grit underfoot, with the bite of cold as she paddled. She stepped into good cheer that escapes were possible, then returned to breakfast.

After Ralph's death Missie had gone back only once to those spectacular, uneven cliffs, with jagged drops to sharp rocks, covered by crashing surf at full tide. Although she'd been again and again to where she'd expected to live, to where they'd decided to build their own home, Missie avoided

the remote edge of the farm. Until one day she woke determined to return. Her mother agitated that she was in no state to be by herself. Her father's view, only given retrospectively, was that Missie was all steamed up, with no clear intention as she set off urgently. Anger gave Missie an outline, as if she'd finally firmed up after a prolonged shapeless interlude. She felt ready to fight Ralph's having simply vanished, reducing her to helpless. She'd show them! To whom it would be shown, or what it was she could show, Missie gave no thought. She simply drove and kept going. The car might be fifth-hand and increasingly untrustworthy, but bumped over unsealed roads and fields.

Missie found herself driving all out towards the cliff edge. She failed to take in the new fence till the final moment, and braked suddenly. She leapt out and smashed herself against the nearest pole, pulling her hands and arms again and again across taut barbed wire. Although blood flowed, she continued to throw herself against the post. The new fence must have been impressively embedded, despite being only feet from the unstable edge.

Eventually Missie's fight died off. A raging to smash everything, including herself, dropped away. She fell to her knees, forced into submission. However much Ralph mattered, she could not keep him alive. She could not alter any of it. It had not occurred to her before, that she would be utterly powerless in what she most valued. She lay face down.

It was not till darkness fell, as it did abruptly, that she attempted to move her aching body, step by slow step, towards the farmhouse several miles away.

Perhaps he divined she was out there, for Ralph's father walked out in the dark in Missie's direction instead of drinking whisky. When they met he asked no questions. He could not see the state of her and felt no alarm. He just turned and walked by her side, at her funereal pace, towards the lighted house.

Ralph's mother put down her knitting and let out a cry. She rang Missie's parents to say their daughter was staying at the farm. Mrs Grummet ran a bath and found disinfectant for the injured hands, but Missie was already asleep. Ralph's father had placed a blanket over the young woman and drawn up a chair for himself to keep vigil. He would be there when Missie woke. She had brought her damage to them and he felt grateful. Something of their own grief was made visible in that torn and bloodied younger flesh.

But Missie could redeem too little for Ralph's parents. Intensity flattened. Missie found herself wishing she and the Grummets could dig and dig for weeks, to make a hole big enough for all the expectancy Ralph had generated. Those bright hopes had to be lined in one by one, to be caught and exterminated. For his parents he was the miracle turn around after many miscarriages, from the adventurous boy who took off camping at a young age and seemed unlikely to ever settle in the country, to the surprise distinction at Agricultural College. He drank too much and risked too much but understood farming and was heading nowhere else but home. Ralph was passionate about Missie but made clear from the start that he intended to farm. He had big plans. He and Missie shared a future.

When he was shot, she was crushed in an undifferentiated mush, and had to return to a singular shape with no plans.

Her brother, Richard, suffered too, Missie saw that, but did not like being near him. Ralph's death did not draw the siblings together; each of them was gripped by a tailor made vice. She shrank from Richard's pale and grim attempts at kindness and had no spare capacity to consider her brother's grief for a best friend; she was struggling to get through each day and sleeping badly. Richard was part of what drove Missie away from home to the farm, to be alone on the land Ralph had shown her.

When she decided to travel Missie felt her mother to be on her side; she could not sit by and absorb the turmoil of her daughter, as well as the misery seeping through Richard. Richard had turned to wood, while Missie, who'd lost her footing, became liable to constant falls. She tripped over, she slipped on the front steps and appeared to bang her head and elbows almost daily. Missie dashed about as if she still could not quite register what it was that had hit her.

Missie, at least, was fighting; it was easier to have faith she would eventually collect herself and face the loss.

Missie's father took her for a walk and mentioned that he hadn't realised what it might mean to live so far from the two sisters in Devon she was about to visit.

"I'm afraid that if you go now you'll not come back."

Missie did not want to have possible consequences put down before her. She simply wanted to get out. She found blackberries to pick and put an end to her father's attempt at conversation. "A clean slate," she said as she turned away from the scene of her defeat.

Her mother seemed not to register, as she sewed busily for Missie's suitcase, that she might also be stitching up her own severance from her daughter. Her eye was on Missie disentangling from the Grummet family. Missie could fly away and love again, while Ralph's parents could not replace an only son.

Missie knew better than to suggest Ralph's sudden death was a humiliating affront to her not very tested belief in predictability. She had grown up with consistency and that formed her. Even a thrill in the precarious at the cliff edge was in relation to the solidity of the rest. Deadly bullets had always found someone else. Missie could hardly cry in shock that this one was too near herself, when it was Ralph who died. But it was Ralph who introduced her to the possibility of being swept beyond herself, and who made those sheer cliffs seem an extension of her body.

Everyone spoke so well of Ralph, he grew better by the minute, yet for Missie he had also done the unforgivable. Her words of fury she kept for herself; that she had been a fool not to recognise the danger, that she'd taken for granted she could rely on Ralph not to vanish.

It was a long and convoluted dream. She was walking through bush when Ralph's cousin appeared, perched on the steps of a hut where Missie was to sleep.

"Ralph must be pleased you look as lovely as you ever did," the cousin said.

Missie felt relief that Ralph would not be shocked at how she'd aged; there was no drama over his being alive, that was simply fact. Of course, some man wearing the same brown corduroy as Ralph had gone into the bush to kill himself, and it was his body with a blown away face. The lads assumed it to be their friend and hurried out with the corpse. They left Ralph stranded and it took him ages to make his way home. By then she'd gone.

She woke to a familiar confusion over how she could have assumed him dead when obviously he was not.

In some dreams it proved to have been only a test of her fidelity. A test which she failed.

Waking sorrow tended to concentrate on not having given Ralph an adequate goodbye; as if all he'd meant should have been gathered at his burial. But since she and Ralph were also merged, she could not just run her hand around his outline and separate his cold flesh from her still warm breath. It took long months to recognise he truly could be sucked out of all he was immersed in. At the time of his funeral she was barely present.

Missie was waiting for a friend, mulling over her dream of the previous night. Her friend was always late, claiming she couldn't stand to be kicking her heels alone in public, whereas Missie couldn't figure out how others dared people waiting. Besides Missie liked the luxury of just sitting. In this busy café she felt freer of clamouring tasks and decisive: she would book next morning and take a sabbatical from marriage.

When Missie arrived home after that dinner, there was a letter from New Zealand. It was brief and forthright, but its very existence astonished. Had Richard ever sent a proper letter before?

She'd written to ask how he was coping and he replied how glad he was that she thought of visiting. He wanted her to come and stay.

Bruce's sister rang immediately she heard of Missie's plans. "So don't you love my poor Bruce anymore?" Missie shook her off and felt lonely.

After nearly thirty years, what had gone from her was not her capacity to feel any love for Bruce. It was the casing of romance, that once shaped a vehicle for two. It had been a reasonable fit for them to ride in, and in it he became the right man to make her life beside.

Such casing chipped, then seemed to drop off her sense of herself.

Perhaps it was a younger, more opened version of herself she wanted back. Did she want a return to longing and being caught up in the meaningful?

These days, she was more likely to be taken over by indigestion or tiredness.

She did not want Richard to meet her plane and take her to the grave. She'd hire a car and put off seeing her brother for a couple of days.

As a child she'd belonged beside Richard but Ralph's death had come between them and then Missie went away.

The grave was perfectly kept but was stone and did not speak. The written words she knew by heart and they said nothing further. It barely stirred her to stand in that graveyard.

Missie visited Mrs Grummet who hadn't a clue who she was. "Ralph? No, no my brother is called Christopher. Soon he's coming to play."

Mrs Grummet had first unravelled at the edges as she sat and knitted blankets square by square. The crumbling now occupied the centre of her. Life before she was ten seemed all that was left.

The evening Richard arrived at the motel with fishing gear for them both, he suggested a walk along the cliff after dinner. "But it will be totally dark," Missie thought. Her next thought came as a shock, "perhaps Richard has been waiting to push me over."

Surely, she couldn't be fearful of this constrained man? As they stood together at the point, she could not see his face. Richard began to talk.

"It was me. I assume you worked that out. Well, it was me."

Missie listened in silence to these hard words. The hunting expedition had been arranged by Ralph and Richard. They'd gone hunting with more experienced men before.

It was an accident and no thorough investigation called for. It happened deep in the bush and it never occurred to the young men to leave markers at the scene. The guns they'd used were collected together in one bag, there was no attempt to work out which gun fired the killer shot. Ralph's parents didn't expect a police enquiry.

Missie woke alert the next morning. Breakfast, a shower and her brother could wait, she felt surprisingly cleaned up and ready for the beach and to think over the night's conversation.

How had Richard lived with this and not spoken? His silence and guilt had obviously cost him.

She wondered if he now regretted speaking but felt sure he'd made his decision to do so long before her arrival. Certainly it wasn't blurted out in a drunken moment of release, he'd not even had one beer before their walk.

Since the tide was still coming in she'd have to time her return carefully but Missie strode on energetically. When it was time to turn and face her brother, she stood still, aware she was also turning towards what now seemed obvious. How had she avoided seeing? Her father and Mr Grummet had been able to look where she had not.

Even if she hadn't realised Richard felt certain it was his gun, it was clear his friend's death left him closed down. Why had she not asked him about guilt?

She had run away from this familiar, wild coast in a panic that her own load might be sufficient to sink her.

On her few visits home before, Missie had noticed Richard bent with effort and felt an impatience to straighten him back to his younger shape. Everyone called him a "decent" man yet it was his less than good wife who was more obviously alive. Why had she not wondered whether her brother was the one who killed his best friend?

Standing on the cliff edge, Richard told Missie of finding an old man hunched over the grave, which he tended regularly. Richard hovered, waiting for the figure he didn't recognise to leave.

After some minutes the man turned, and Richard realised with shock that the shrunken man was his own father.

The two sat side by side on Ralph's stone in silence. Finally, looking into the distance, not at his son, he said, "it was terrible Missie losing her first love and you your friend, but she loved again and you have friends. What vanished for me was barely visible. When Missie fell for the best of men, who would also keep her near, I couldn't believe my fortune. Selfish I know, but it seemed a miracle that Missie would stay only twenty minutes away, to lighten my days as she'd done since birth."

He misread Richard's stricken face and quickly moved to reassure how much he'd loved his sons as well. But Richard had long ago taken on himself responsibility for driving Missie away, or, at

least, for making it too painful for her to stay, yet felt he'd barely considered what it meant for their father to lose his "Misme".

Years before, Mr Grummet had asked Richard bluntly if he believed it was his own bullet that killed Ralph. "Christ what a burden!" was all he said when Richard told his version.

"You've lived with a lot, we all have." He was selling the farm to pay for his wife's care – he couldn't nurse her any longer – he had a rotten prognosis – there were nieces as beneficiaries but he was asking Richard to be executor of his will and check from time to time that his wife was well looked after. "And do me a favour. Try harder to keep your eye on the living."

Richard had one other thing to say. He took it as his fault that his sister had been driven to marry a staid and essentially boring man. Having loved Ralph and never having felt drawn to the formal Englishman he barely knew, Richard spoke as if Bruce was no more than a poor substitute. Since he felt no love for Bruce it hadn't occurred to him that his sister might have discovered joy in loving her husband. Missie found herself feeling more cross than amused that her brother failed to believe she'd found riches in being with that sometimes infuriating man she already missed and knew would await her return.

But first, Missie was hungry and wanted the surprisingly good coffee. She no longer expected to catch whatever she had sought, but looked forward to fishing with Richard.

