

Blood Ghosts

by Jennifer Cook

Ariel hiked the baby high on her hip, took a deep breath and began shepherding all four of her children into the funeral home. She'd brushed Liam and Seth's hair, laughing that, of course, tomorrow was the day they were getting their shaggy manes cut. She'd encased their six-year-old bodies in suits and they looked ridiculously grown-up and uncomfortable. They were even wearing shoes but that was only because their dad was. She'd been spared her husband's usual whinge about putting his hippy feet in leather laceups – the brittle edge to her voice all morning had alerted David it wouldn't be wise to taunt.

At least her daughter, Rhiannon, looked beautiful in that way only very young girls can. Shining golden hair, soft cheeks and still chubby limbs not quite lost yet to the big school girl she was becoming. She held her Dad's hand tight, refusing to look at all the old people grabbing at her and telling her how pretty she was. Ariel shuffled them all onto the seat, handing four-month old Angus to his Dad, smiling at the way the sun hit their bald heads. She ruffled the twin boys' hair, for luck – or protection – or both. “I'll just be up the front with grandpa, kids – be good for Dad.” Ariel looked up and saw her father, Martin Finch, front row, red-eyed and weeping already. Skinny in his grey suit his grief clung to his shoulders like a cheap raincoat. Ariel felt her gut tighten.

And there, up the front in a faux-mahogany coffin lay her step-mother, Dot, dressed in a green linen suit, hair perfectly coiffured into an alarming array of waves and peaks, pearl necklace loose on her scraggy neck. Ariel nudged David, “She may be dead but her hair lives on.” “It's bloody immortal,” he whispered back, squeezing her hand. Then Ariel saw him. Dad had told her he was having a celebrant doing the service and as soon as she saw the stoop of him, the round face, she kicked herself for not thinking of it earlier. “Shit – it's Phillip Tasy from EDA Radio,” Ariel hissed, ignoring the glare from the matron sitting in front. Phillip Bloody Tasy - her boss from more than eight years ago. Back when she was an idealistic reporter for

EDA Radio. Ethnic Diversity Australia had 69 different language programs and Ariel worked in the newsroom, “the token Skip” happily dog paddling in a cultural soup. She was dedicated and driven, thriving on the traditional competitiveness of journos. Her scoop on East Timor won a swag of awards. It also spelt the end of her career at EDA. Ariel learnt the hard way that winning often meant losing. Those trophies were like bull’s-eyes emblazoned on her back. The Sydney newsroom was furious with her for not sending them the story straight away. It didn’t take long for a younger, prettier reporter to smell blood and get to work.

Ariel still marveled at her naivety, how she thought she could win her colleague Helena over with a skinny latte and a heart-to-heart chat. What she lacked in reporting skills she made up for with manipulation – Helena had a particular talent for working over men. A flick of her hair here, a Lady Di stare from under her eyelashes there, and the death blow - an intimate hand on the upper arm with just a touch too much pressure to be polite. Ariel later discovered Helena had applied for her job and missed out. She also put in for the same awards and not made the short list. Then there were the “performance reviews” where Ariel had been praised and Helena called in for special sessions to bring her work “up to scratch”.

Before Ariel could say “A grade reporter” Phillip came to her saying he’d heard “the whole story” about her behaviour in the newsroom while he was on leave. He’d heard she was bossy, patronizing, lazy and was always grabbing the best assignments for herself. But worst of all Helena accused Ariel of changing one of her stories to make her look bad. Ariel tried to point out she didn’t know Helena’s computer password but it made no difference. She felt like a sheep bleating in the wind, pathetically crying “it’s not true”. But a part of her had begun to doubt if she was the person she thought she was. Just thinking about it made Ariel’s blood boil. In her mind she was back in the newsroom with its neon lights and glaring grey laminate desktops, giving Phillip her resignation and trying not to cry. She was stepping out of his office and staring at Helena’s back, listening to the sound of her laughing on the phone. She stood there for a moment, wondering how it would feel to smash Helena’s head repeatedly into her keyboard. She imagined the blood spraying from her slightly hooked nose, the crunch of bone on plastic, the lumps of flesh clinging to her hair, staining her designer dress. This from a woman who dry retched during an episode of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”.

She did have her moment though. At the pub for her farewell drinks Helena had the gall to turn up. She swanned up to them, gin and tonic in hand, cast her eyes over the table and purred, “Where is everyone? I thought there’d be more people.” Ariel smiled but the comment was the catalyst for the steeling of her rage. David had told her once how ironmongers used to plunge newly forged blades into the stomachs of slaves to anneal them. “No oxygen in the gut - makes for a great finish.” She waited until Helena went out for a smoke and bought another round of drinks. She met the waiter at the bar and fumbling in her purse for cash she took out a small brown glass bottle. She took the two glasses of gin and smiled, “I’ll grab these thanks,” she said. It only took an instant, a brief stop at an empty table, a flick of the wrist. Ipecac - a homeopathic remedy taken in small doses to combat nausea - Ariel had been feeling a bit off, she’d later discover it was the twins making their presence felt.

Ipecac came from the same family of plants as strawberries – it was a rhizome - which meant it didn’t put down deep roots. Fitting for that shallow slut, she thought. In larger doses it induced vomiting within half an hour. Ariel had always liked the way that taking too much of a homeopathic remedy induced the symptom you were trying to cure. Helena returned and downed her drink, even raising it to salute Ariel who smiled back. Helena didn’t even make it to the bathroom. Vomit cascaded down her gorgeous Armani dress, clinging to her perfectly foiled hair. Everyone was appalled. They’d heard the whispers Helena was a heavy drinker. Ariel jumped up, passing her napkins. She even helped her to the door. As she guided her onto the street she lent in close to the girl’s stinking hair – the others were standing well back. “Usually this would stop in an hour or so but I’ve got a gut feeling you’ll be up all night. Enjoy.” She walked inside without a backward glance.

Ariel went on to have four babies in seven years. Phillip left soon after she did, saying he “couldn’t be the kind of tough boss they wanted”. He went to work in a funeral home – writing and presenting eulogies in cookie-cutter suburban “chapels” with high ceiling and prints of white, full blown roses on the walls. He’d always had a way with clichés. And now, here she

was, in this suburban notion of dignified death forced to listen to the two men who, she thought with indignation, had let her down most in her life.

Her stomach wouldn't stop churning, stirring a wave of anxiety that made her want to turn and run. David squeezed her arm. "You'll be right love, don't let the bastard get to you." Ariel smiled weakly and walked down to the front row, sliding into her allotted seat of honour. She looked up at her dad who was standing next to the coffin. Her head was still spinning and she tried to push down the panic. "This is stupid. What do I have to worry about? He's the one who should be worried, not me. I didn't do anything wrong." So why did she feel like this? Adrift on a rising tide of shame and sadness mixed with helpless anger. She could see it – a swirl of grey-green shot through with viscous scarlet. She could taste it – the iron tang of filthy gravel. Suddenly she longed for her laptop. If she could just get to her keyboard and pour out the emotions, let them spill onto the blue screen. That would drain the well of emotion threatening to sink her carefully constructed skin of down-to-earth, easy-going-yet-sharp-as-a-whip façade. Caring mother, loving wife, dutiful daughter.

But she had more pressing matters. Angus was crying. She could tell from the pitch that he needed a feed. Next thing she knew David was beside her, handing the bundle of boy over. Perfect, she thought. Of course that was exactly what she wanted to do, get her boobs out in front of everyone at a funeral. But there was nothing for it. Her world was ruled by fluids these days. Breast milk, urine, sperm, even her cervix had given up on her and collapsed, causing mucus to flow in impressive amounts. She expertly unclipped her black maternity bra (no-one could accuse her of being inappropriate, even her tits were in mourning) and scooped her breast into Angus' perfect, pink mouth. She silently begged him to be polite. He wasn't. He gulped noisily while Ariel ignored the stares. For a few blissful moments she let herself be saturated with blessed oxytocin, feeling her edges blur and her love for this little scrap of man flow into him. But Angus had far too much to see to feed quietly. He lifted his head, still attached so that he stretched the nipple at an alarming angle.

She caught her father's horrified glance and pulled her dress tighter across her chest, forcing herself to listen to the service – she hadn't heard a word. One of "the girls" from Dot's secretary days was talking. "Dot was the heart and soul of Boscombe and Son's Solicitors.

Without her, Mr Boscombe wouldn't have known where his glasses were – let alone his clients. One time I mixed up some files and Dot told everyone I had delivered her briefs to the wrong barrister,'’ laughter danced up and down the pews, hands dabbed hankies at eyes. Ariel tried to imagine Dot young. All she could see in her mind's eye was the woman's dessicated body, encased in lime green, lips painted a ghastly brown. Had she ever been like Ariel? Gushing with milk, seeping mucous and blood? For a moment Ariel gloried in her liquids, seeing them as the precious dam between her and death. She put her finger in her son's hand, letting him encase it like a Venus Flytrap.

Then Phillip announced it was her dad's turn. That was her signal to go and stand beside him for moral support. A buttress between her father and his rising tide of grief. She looked down at Angus and hooked her little finger between his mouth and her nipple, breaking the seal. Before the outraged look on his face could transform into a howl she popped a dummy in and smiled to David who strode down the aisle to take him. So up she went. Her dad looked frail, as if he would snap. She imagined the sound, like the crack of a whip. He grabbed her hand and she instinctively held it in hers, marveling at how little she needed from this creature who helped create her. How effortlessly he could make her love him again. Like her own children he had somehow got into her blood. He started to read, his voice shaky but gaining strength. Ariel realized that he was enjoying himself, his moment in the spotlight. The grieving widower. She glanced at him and smiled. A show-pony to the end. All about him, as usual.

“Dot and I led a simple life, filled with dancing, good friends and much love. Dot loved my daughter Ariel as if she was her own and was devoted to her four grandchildren. As am I’’. Ariel felt the bile rise in her throat. Devoted. Now that it suited him. An image of him whacking her hard across the head, another of her mother, cowering, knocked to the floor but still managing to smile at her and say she was okay. But for the first time she wondered how much all that history mattered. When she died it would die with her. A house of mirrors smashed.

She looked over at Phillip and realized he'd recognized her. He was smiling at her and for the love of God; did he have the decency to be embarrassed? Yes, he looked almost sheepish. She

gave him what she hoped was a look of pure disinterest – but she felt herself puff out a little with pleasure. “So Ariel, here you are girl, with these two men you’ve painted so convincingly as demons in your life’s script looking as vulnerable as children.” She felt herself flood with fury. But it was a different kind of anger. This was indignation that they’d robbed her of a good rant. A really good, “Clear the cobwebs - woe is me - can you believe this crap?” tirade. She had no doubt she would’ve been magnificent, incandescent. A sight to see.

She’d been imagining throwing a glass of whatever god-awful wine they served at these places over Phillip, of suggesting the donations Dot had requested be made to the local hospital, in lieu of flowers, be sent to a women’s shelter instead. But now? Dammit. Her sense of humour had landed. “Of course my step-mother’s funeral is all about me. Who else could it possibly be about? Certainly not the dried trout lying in state with hair as high as heaven? No, that can’t be right. How about my Dad, married for 16 years and now alone? No, never. And I think the old man is narcissistic?” Ariel smiled out at the congregation, who smiled benignly back at her. She let her Dad’s words wash over her.

“Anyone who knew Dot would tell you what an intelligent, caring, wonderful woman she was. She always thought the best of everyone.” Ariel remembered a woman who hated fat people, couldn’t understand what the Aborigines were on about wanting land rights when they couldn’t stop sniffing petrol and wondered why “those Arabs don’t go back to their own country if they don’t like it here.” But Dot did make her Dad seafood soufflés. And they danced three times a week, him in a tux, her trussed up like a canary on crack in a criminally expensive explosion of tulle and feathers. Ariel wondered if she’d got it wrong, that happiness was to be found in between bites of creamy mollusks and in the swish and spin of a perfect Viennese waltz. Not for the first time she found herself wishing she was more easily pleased.

But then her bitch of a mind flung up an image of her mother, sitting on her double bed, head in hands, saying over and over again, “I would’ve gone dancing if he’d asked. Why didn’t the bastard ask?” Ariel looked over at her Dad and sternly told the mother in her mind’s eye that she’d had a lucky escape. Her mum barely turned on the oven, let alone whisked eggs to peaked perfection for a man. Ariel was shaken out of her reverie by the silence. Everyone was

looking at her. Oh crap, he's lost it. She took the papers from her dad's shaking hands and tried to take up where she guessed he left off. Blahblah. Dot-as-a-saint-and-we-will-miss-her-blahblahblah...ah, here we are. Ariel took a deep breath and began. "I learnt from Dot my greatest lesson, that, as a man, I was not automatically right," Ariel tried not to spit out the words. Might have been nice if he'd come to that conclusion thirty years ago after beating the crap out of mum and me. The thought clanged between her ears. She realized she had paused a fraction too long. And that she had muttered under her breath. At least she hoped it was under her breath. She looked down and saw the microphone, sitting up like a black cobra with a silver head.

"Shitshitshitshit". Okay - that they definitely heard. She felt herself blush. Come on Ariel, you can do this. You're a professional, just suck it up. Just find the next words. Blame the stumbling on grief. Overcome with emotion. Well that's true. We just won't tell them what kind of emotion will we? She found her spot, but it wasn't a paragraph that she'd read before. She had helped her dad "put down a few words" – which translated to typing up and deciphering and rewriting his jumbled prose into something readable. He had mentioned he'd changed the eulogy a bit and she'd shrugged it off. She'd resigned herself to listening to her father's sentimental twaddle and getting it all over with as soon as possible.

What she didn't plan on was these tentacles of connection, of a shared past and blood snaking into her heart. She looked at the unfamiliar curves and angles of the letters – for a moment seeing them as nothing more than indecipherable scratchings. It reminded her of when she was a kid and used to say a word over and over until it lost all meaning. Ariel forced her mind calm just long enough for it to slip back into the harness. She took a breath and continued in her deep, pitch-perfect radio tones.

"It was a lesson I wished I had learned years earlier. But there is still time to make amends, especially to my daughter, Ariel, who always deserved so much more than I gave her"

"That sentimental sod." Her dad had regained his composure and was standing next to her, back straight, arm around her waist, glowing with pride. She looked into his watery aquamarine eyes and then kept reading. A moment of schmaltz wasn't going to throw her. But

it had. She knew it and with a sigh she realized her anger had left the building. She missed it already. Ariel reached the end. Her father smiled at her, nodding, tears in his eyes. Phillip came and put out his hand to shake hers. She let him take it, keeping her grip firm. She looked up at him, trying not to stare at the broken capillaries spreading like spider webs across his cheeks. “Well done,” he whispered, “Smooth as silk – just like the bad old days.” Despite herself she grinned at the old phrase they used to bandy about.

“Thanks. Yep, they were totally crap days in the end weren’t they Phil? Thank God we escaped.” She wondered if his trained ear picked up the delicate lacing of ice clinging to her words. Dammit she wasn’t even sure if she could. She pulled her hand out of his grasp, stepping back and giving him a tight smile. When she sat down David put his arm around her. “That was nice of your dad to put that extra bit in,” he said. “Too little too late,” Ariel said, knowing she sounded tired. “God I’d sell all four kids and you, darling husband, for a vodka with lime and soda. And I’d throw Dot in, casket and all, for a gin chaser.”

“That’s the way Ariel-my-belle; drown those sorrows,” David was cradling a sound asleep Angus. Ariel stared straight ahead at Phillip. He was picking his papers up from the podium and tapping them as she remembered he always did after a bulletin. She sighed. “I think my sorrows learnt to swim a long time ago.”

“What, love?” But the service was over. People were making their way to the back of the chapel where sandwiches waited on trays. Ariel scooped up their daughter. Burying her face in the girl’s neck she breathed deeply and stood up, using her spare arm to pull her boys in close. “Nothing Dave, I could murder a cup of tea.”

THE END