



Source: Stephen Farrell, 'Holy Land's 'oldest' Christian church found in jail', *The Times in The Australian online*, 08/11/05.

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The order was wrong. By the time she saw him again, she was an old woman and he was still young.

In his early 20s he looked like Hugh Grant—so much so that someone once asked for his autograph. His incredulity came from his modesty. That he also utterly expected it came from his understanding that the world was partially populated by dimwits. By his later 20s, after a drastic haircut, he looked more like George Clooney, but maybe that was just a general Irishness he got from both sides of his family. After he died, she would always see a George Clooney film, or watch him on chat shows, just to see how he would have looked at that age. She didn't even particularly like George Clooney. But she needed a reference point to replace the North on her compass. One day on another continent, her compass had been smashed by a spoiled brat whose license should have been suspended long before. As if she needed another reason to hate landed gentry. But he was gone, and the spoiled brat was still driving around, with a metal plate in her head.

He had gone to the other country for his godson's christening. Like his father, he was an enthusiastic atheist, but also like his father, he was careful to keep it to himself around those for whom God was the only comfort available. Those for whom God was an actual explanation both men held in low regard. So the child lived, and the godfather was killed in a crash, and when his effects came back they were still wet from the spoiled brat's low speed plunge over a bridge. Had she been leaning over to fish a cigarette out of her bag? Had she been flirting too hard? No one would ever know.

People tried to make it make sense, attempting to replace Stupid Accident with Grand Tragedy. When those speeches started, the woman would cover her ears with invisible hands she developed just for the occasion, and pretend she was a dog who could not understand the wagging of strange tongues.

His death had had a moment, one attenuated by long distances and many ceremonies. But somehow his life kept living without him. He had passed the New York Bar Exam and never known it. The results came in the autumn after the summer he died, and his mother called the woman to share the news. Happiness rang hollow, and the two women walked around in the triumph like people walking through a house they had lived in years ago which was now, decades later, completely devoid of furniture.

She could still smell him, though more abstractly ten years on than she first had. The mistaken sightings had stopped, at least. Those were the worst—thinking she could see him down the street just because someone else had his gait, his lope, his floppy stride. But as long as she could smell him, she knew she was still looking for him.

She didn't believe in an afterlife, but she also didn't believe that he could be gone. He wasn't finished. Dead is dead, she knew, but what about all the things a person has left to do? At first she tried to do some of those leftover things for him. But she had enough trouble with her own cosmic 'to do' list to be examined by experts and be told her execution of his list was wanting. They weren't the same person. Forged in the same small town, fluent in the same philosophical languages, and yet they arrived at the cusp of adulthood two completely different social agents. There was plenty else to explain why, but after he died, she decided it was part of what she would let go so she could carry what she did not let go.

She lied about one thing to one person. It was an object lesson in the healing power of a lie. When young, and smart enough to be stupid in ways that wouldn't kill him, he had done one unforgivable thing to her, and, one night while going through his documents, she quietly removed the journals of his life from that period that charted the events from meandering to temptation to resistance to weakness to guilt to sorrow to everything that came after that expelled them from their little Eden. Then she returned the remainder to his mother. For a day or two she argued with herself about it. But she reasoned that if she'd argued about it with herself before the extraction, the act and the argument would have meant something.

Sometimes she thought that to see him again would be a pretty good sign she was on her way out. Given a choice, she would like that sort of hallucination.

Time passed, because that's what time does. If what does not kill us makes us strong, she grew strong. One day she fell in love again and this time she was grown, weathered by loss, and, in the paradoxical calculus of it all, better for it. There was no point in comparison. This time, instead of being expelled from Eden, she and the man she loved built their own.

The hallucination came many years later. Eden was in full flower, well populated. She was gardening, ignoring the arthritis that came on only in her eighties. She could hear her husband preparing dinner in the kitchen. She had always been clear with him that she could not grieve like that again, and, as this time would be much worse, she intended to go first. Sometimes when they lay in bed holding hands, she cried quietly because there was no afterlife, and with him she wanted to live forever.

In the middle of digging a hole for a tulip bulb, she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, a young man's hand. She looked up, and she was an old woman and he was still young.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Alexandra Keller.*