



Source: Chris Hastings, 'British sailors given go-ahead to sell stories', *Telegraph*, London; Press Association in *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 09/04/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [death](#), [corporeality](#), [religion](#)

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In the beautiful old church in the city, filled with light and air, people stand together to say goodbye to someone they knew. And in the front pew, two girls sit, waiting for the coffin to come in, come in past them. A box, a rectangle made of wood, with precious cargo, no longer theirs.

The girls stand to watch the box carried past them. These girls are long-limbed and shiny, still newer to the world than the rest of us. They look like angels, even with their slightly awkward adolescent attempt at behaving like grown-ups. They pray to God with the rest of us, and I don't know if they believe, but they read the words in the prayer book, and their eyes stay on the words. They do not look at that box. They sit with the rest of us, stand and sing with the rest of us, but I cannot hear their voices and I do not know if they struggle for air to push the sound from their lungs.

The priest says: The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

What does her spiritual body look like I wonder, as I sit in my pew, overwhelmed by the presence of incense and death. I imagine it light, free and beautiful. It was so damaged by her illness, so torn to shreds and diminished. I think of the freedom that body has now, without all the drips and the morphine and the drugs that made her hair come away. It is once again, a beautiful thing, an easy thing.

Does her body look like her daughters' bodies do now, as it once did many years ago? Long hair and skinny legs and big eyes taking in the world? When this woman, gone from us, goes to where she goes, will she be this beautiful, this delightful?

These girls, they are sixteen, and twelve. It is too young to be motherless, and too old to let her go simply. There is history there, fights, anger and rejection. There are teenage tantrums and real, actual hatred, and it is too much to say goodbye to with any ease. It is the time that you let your mother go, you define yourself against her, tell her 'I am not you.' You are the one leaving and going forward, as she tries to keep you. But their mother left them. It is a topsy-turvy way to do it—a break with the rules.

Do these girls, these beautiful and delightful girls, do they

imagine their mother rising up, up, up, light as air and beautiful like the sun? Do they let her go, or do they hang on, try to pull her back, angry with her for leaving them? I can't read their faces, can not know what they think.

And yet, their mother is raised, or she is fallen, or she is simply gone back to the earth, depending on what you believe. And her body is changed forever.

A friend gives the eulogy. She says, crying, that the girls' mother prayed for them, prayed that her girls would be all right without her. She went to this church, where she lies today in her coffin, and lit two candles for her little girls.

'Please, Lord, or whoever it is, please let them be okay. Please let them be okay without me.' Desperate whisperings and bargainings to whoever is out there. Desperate, running against time. 'Let my girls live well without me. Let them. Let them.' For she did not leave them, because leaving is an act of the will. She was torn away from them and it must have felt like she was in a raging sea, holding her babies up over the water, getting them to dry land.

The mothers in the church, here to say goodbye, let out a common wail at the knowledge of these desperate prayers, for we know and understand what this means, this ripping away from the very best of ourselves, from the very best things that we have made and grown and cultivated. We mothers, in the church today, clench our fists, steel ourselves because we too feel that terrible desperation for our children. We want to promise them that we will never, not ever, be taken away from them, even though we cannot make such a promise.

The service ends, and we walk slowly out to the harsh sun beating down on us. We're hot, and we sweat, and our faces hurt from shedding tears.

And there are two girls on the footpath, and each one of us wants to say to them how beautiful they are and how much their mother loved them, and do they understand what her prayers meant, do they understand how painful it was for her to be taken away?

But we don't, because it's not the time, and they are embarrassed and fragile and they need to go home.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sophie Townsend.*