

Floral Arrangements

Jane Turner Goldsmith

Eleanor had just entered the boutique when she felt the first wave. It was like flooding, an internal high tide rising into her throat. White light bled at the edges of her vision. Retinal detachment, she feared, or a stroke, a curtain lowering over her eyes. Everyone in the boutique was staring, or it seemed to her. Foggily she registered that the worst of it was the embarrassment of dying in front of so many people. Silly, because if she really were dying, it would be normal – even permissible – to collapse.

There, again. Another wave, unleashing within and peaking so that she had to grip the edge of the counter to steady herself, with suddenly clammy hands. She lifted them quickly so people wouldn't notice. Her throat was dry. A diabetic coma? Diarrhoea, gastro, rotovirus? She hadn't eaten a thing last night, arriving home late from her shift and falling into bed like a plank.

'Do you have toilets in the shop?' Eleanor blurted. She hadn't collapsed, not yet.

With suddenly sharper, more focal perception, she noticed small details: the name on the florist's badge, Leila, and the fact that the woman was wearing her cardigan inside out. Her cheeks were flushed. The boutique had been closed when Eleanor arrived and she'd witnessed the out-of-breath florist sprinting awkwardly in the wrong kind of heels, landing to the queue of unsmiling customers.

She could hear an annoying woman complaining about the shop not being open at ten despite the notice on the door. That *she* (the woman) was first in line (not exactly true) and in a hurry, wanting flowers for a dear friend whose funeral nobody could attend. A bouquet of flowers was the *least* she could offer.

'Just a moment, please,' the florist said firmly, and turned to Eleanor. She had unflorist-like hair, in that it wasn't orderly and constructed; more a wild tangle of rushes that wouldn't have been out of place in a pond or the banks of the Torrens. 'The public toilets are just out that way behind the supermarket.' She pointed, peering at Eleanor in a too-sympathetic way. 'Not here, sorry.'

Leila hesitated a moment, then came to Eleanor's side of the counter, sweeping back a sheaf of hair. Her hand brushed Eleanor's clenched fists. Eleanor closed her eyes, surrendering to the touch.

‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Come and sit for a bit. Unless, do you want the toilets first?’

‘No, I’m okay to sit.’

Eleanor allowed herself to be led to an armchair in the back of the boutique. She felt hot under the gaze of the other customers. ‘Could I trouble you for a drink of water?’ She wouldn’t normally ask. Usually it was Eleanor bringing the water, the warm flannels, the pills, the gastrolite, the bed pans, towels.

She opened her eyes to take in the customers. An elderly gentleman in moleskins, very important, clicking his RM Williams heels. Wanting an *enormous* bunch of flowers for a wedding that was no longer happening.

‘I’ll be with you all in a just moment,’ Leila addressed the ensemble. ‘Are you sure I shouldn’t call an ambulance, Eleanor?’

Of course, she too had her name badge pinned on her uniform, ready for her shift. It was nice to hear her name spoken out loud.

‘I’m really fine. If I could just sit.’

The dizziness was receding but the sounds in the boutique boomed, as if the volume was up. Perhaps an inner ear infection was coming on. She closed her eyes again and pressed her arms into the sides of the armchair, seeking a firm, predictable boundary.

‘Could I —’

The florist was looking questioningly at her with reddened eyes. Eleanor couldn’t finish her sentence.

‘I’ll get you that glass of water,’ Leila hurried. ‘Then, please excuse me, I must get to the orders. I’ve been so swamped of late.’

‘Of course. Don’t mind me.’

The blood thrummed behind Eleanor’s eyelids. Her arms weren’t tingling; not a stroke. The white light had gone and she could see; her retinas were not detaching. The world before her was green and lush — oriental lilies peeping through long green fronds. She could be in a rainforest.

‘Thank you. I’ll be fine here.’

‘Let me know if you need anything.’

The armchair held Eleanor comfortingly, just the right balance between support and softness. It had a subtle, faded *fleur-de-lis* pattern that transported her to a drawing room in a château on the Loire. That she would never visit again, it seemed.

Her breathing slowed. She could stay here, all day, all night.

The florist was being assaulted: phone buzzing, computer dinging with fresh email orders, dazed customers entering the shop. Eleanor had to fight the instinct to get to her feet and help.

In the break between calls, she watched Leila select a frond of strelitzia and measure it, judging the height and look against the other stems in the arrangement, standing back, evaluating, discarding it, choosing another. The repetition of this process felt timeless and soothing.

‘Don’t let me get in the way. I’ll call work directly and arrange a pickup. I’m so sorry, I just had a momentary turn or something.’

‘Should I be taking your pulse?’

‘I can do that myself.’ Eleanor took it, just to check. A little up. But regular. ‘Just tiredness, I think.’

From a distance came the sound of an ambulance siren — *two* ambulances — bearing down, as if heading directly towards them. For a second, she thought Leila had ordered the ambulance for her and felt almost grateful. One siren was pitched at least a tone lower than the other. Strange that they were out of tune. Whoever made ambulance sirens should have perfect pitch, surely!

Leila’s mobile rang. Eleanor caught her frowning at the screen. She tuned in, curious, thinking, *I shouldn’t be listening*.

‘*I’m busy right now,*’ she heard, though Leila had covered her mouth over the phone. She had turned her back to the customer just entering and taken a step aside.

There was a long silence on Leila’s part and muffled-sounding protests coming from the phone. Finally: ‘It’s not a *competition*, Lisa. We are *all*, everyone, *suffering*. I just can’t come over now. Not with the kids. No.’ She snapped off the phone. Brushed at her eyes.

Eleanor considered an appropriate response but failed to come up with anything. Leila pocketed her phone, wiped her hands down her apron and smiled at the new customer.

Eleanor sank back, relieved that she didn’t have to muster up problem-solving, or compassion, or any of the other automatic and exhausting reactions that were commonly triggered in the face of distress. People’s distress. Every day.

She had better let work know though. She reached for her phone and tapped a text message. Then regretted sending it. They were overwhelmed. She was all right, wasn’t she? She could go to work. It was just —

‘Would a coffee help?’ Leila asked, as Eleanor was turning her scrambled brain to figuring out how to get home. ‘I would kill for one, but I can’t leave the shop.’

Eleanor would also kill for one. But maybe not a good idea to jump up quickly and offer to collect them.

‘The barista four shops down might bring us a couple of flat whites; stay put, I’ll give him a try.’

Eleanor would normally order a decaf chai latte with almond milk. ‘Make it a double shot for me,’ she said. ‘Here’s the cash.’ She fumbled for her purse, squashed beside her in the armchair in the rainforest that she simply never wanted to leave.

Leila waved her offer aside. ‘I’ve got an account with them, don’t worry.’ The boutique was finally empty after the morning’s deluge. She tucked back more strands of hair. ‘I’ve had a hell of a start today, myself. But let’s not go there!’

‘I’d much rather hear someone else’s story.’

‘It’s a small one, compared. At least I have a business, for now at least. Maybe not by tomorrow. Would you believe, my sister accuses me of profiteering...’

The phone cut her off mid-sentence. ‘Excuse me, next customer.’

‘A child, you say — or a cat?’ Leila was replying to the caller. ‘A child’s cat?’

It felt like snooping again, but right now, without the caffeine, and with everything else going on, it would take too much energy to *stop* herself from eavesdropping.

Leila fiddled with loose flowers as she spoke. ‘Perhaps a bright, hopeful colour, maybe yellow?’

Eleanor smiled to herself. Yellow, yes. Daisies and sweet-smelling lavender.

A posy might be more appropriate, what did he think? And then: ‘*For fuck’s sake, pull over!*’

Eleanor glanced across but Leila had made the exclamation under her breath. Leila smiled back, mouthing an ‘excuse my French’ expression.

The screaming ambulances were coming closer. Eleanor breathed in. She saw cats and children and roads and death and chaos and had to place her hands over her face.

‘Um, well, sir, a posy is smaller than a bunch or an arrangement,’ Leila was explaining. Yes of course she could do that. ‘And the delivery as well?’

Leila was covering the receiver with her hand and gesticulating now, inviting Eleanor to listen in. She pressed the speaker-phone button. The man’s gravelly voice came through against the background rumble of engine vibration and gear-changes.

‘*Yeah, I don’t have the name, mate, or, um, the exact address, but I can get it, I think.*’

‘I’m sorry, I’m going to have to put you on hold, sir.’

‘No worries, mate.’

‘For real!’ Leila mouthed at Eleanor. ‘He wants me to deliver to an unknown address, for a dead cat, belonging to a child he doesn’t know! Gotta love him!’

‘I’m relieved it’s a cat, not... well, poor cat of course.’

‘That’s two of us.’ Leila took back the call.

The truckie was going to be driving by the spot soon and could let the florist know the exact address, he just wanted to have the order all ready to go. Eleanor listened as Leila suggested a gift card.

‘Shit, what would I say on it?’

‘So, let me get this,’ Leila was saying. ‘It’s for a child, right, who you don’t actually know...’

‘I ran over the cat, right?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Mate, I could have, like, just driven on.’

‘But you didn’t?’

‘I did at first.’

‘But you didn’t,’ Leila repeated. ‘You stopped.’

‘I...went back, mate,’ the truckie said.

The barista was there with the coffees. Great, except that once she’d drunk it, there’d be no more excuse to remain in the armchair gazing at the purple lisianthus.

‘I brought you a bag of beans too,’ he said. ‘The country’s about to lock down.’

The truckie was back on the line, on speakerphone.

‘About the flower bunch thingy, yeah, and the address, I got it.’

‘Oh, thank you, sir. Go ahead.’ Leila, not missing a beat. Her world about to freefall.

‘So, yeah, it’s corner of Colac Street and Hampstead Road. Broadview. I couldn’t see a number.’

‘I’m not sure the delivery person will be able—’

‘Come on, mate, you know your guy, don’t you?’

‘Right. Yes. Of course, sir.’

‘Bloke’ll work it out. Right on the corner, mate, only house on the north side. Orange door. Can’t miss it.’

‘That will be fine. Sir, I don’t want your credit card. No, please. I won’t take it. Please. Drive carefully. The flowers are on me.’

Leila. Such a lovely name.

For a moment Leila looked as if she didn’t want Eleanor to leave when she said she really must get going. It was an inexplicable current that passed between them.

‘But you came... to order flowers, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, but, oh, it’s a long story.’ Without even meaning to, Eleanor reached for Leila’s forearm. ‘It’s how they die,’ she blurted. ‘No one should –’

‘Yes,’ said Leila. ‘I mean, no.’

Eleanor withdrew her hand quickly. ‘Sorry. I was going to order some flowers for a resident... who died. I don’t even know if there’s any family. Silly, really. But I don’t know what else to do.’

‘My mum’s in aged care, in Melbourne,’ Leila said. ‘I might never see her again. Take this bouquet, really, please take it. Take it for yourself.’ She moved to the front window of the boutique and lifted the gorgeous arrangement of lilies and chrysanthemums. ‘There! Please don’t say no. Don’t do that to me.’

Eleanor accepted the bouquet with shaky hands and drew it to her chest. ‘I’ve been meaning to tell you all morning. Your cardigan is inside out. You might have half a sec now to go out the back and turn it around. Thank you. I must fly.’

Eleanor walked out of the boutique, out of the shopping centre and across the park with the little rotunda, towards the nursing home. She stopped. They wouldn’t be expecting her now. She would sit a while on a bench in the rotunda where staff escaped for a moment’s calm. Try to work out what should happen next.

One of the orderlies from the Home was already there. Eleanor hesitated; she hadn’t meant to stumble into his space. He was in his white tunic, face sunk into his hands. His whole body was still, yet at the same time heaving with some untold grief. She had a flash of the Italian health worker she’d seen on the news – doctor, nurse, orderly, who knew – slumped on the floor in the corridor of the chaotic ward, bathed in unnatural blue light. Holding his head in his hands, all the other masked and gowned orderlies, doctors, nurses, blurring past.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, not meaning to say anything at all.

The man looked up, startled, and made a clumsy attempt to brush away emotion from his tunic. As if trying to dispel the collective helplessness of the entire world. ‘I must be getting back.’

Eleanor watched a leaf twirl down. Autumn soon. Above, a curl of cloud processed across the sky like the robes of a benevolent god.

She took a step towards the man.

‘Take these,’ she said, offering the flowers. ‘They’re for you.’

Jane Turner Goldsmith has published a novel, *Poinciana*, and short stories in various literary magazines. She is currently undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. ‘Floral Arrangements’ is one of the linked stories in her composite novel *The Essential Worker*.