# Ashes

On the sunny Horseshoe Bay foreshore, four people sat at a park bench table.

“Let’s get started,” Sally said.

Everyone looked at Tyler.

Tyler bit his lips. Thirty-two and tall, he had inherited his father’s lean body. Tyler’s unlined face contrasted with the creases and wrinkles in those around him.

“Dad wanted his ashes spread from Mount Arua,” he began. “That’s the big bluff you can see in Nelly Bay, at the end of Mandalay Avenue. We loved climbing up there but–.” His eyes teared up. Then he took a deep breath and continued, “– it’s a big climb, not for the faint hearted.”

“Or people with bad knees and dodgy tickers,” Sally interrupted. She wore new runners on her swollen feet but was breathless after walking a hundred metres.

“Exactly,” said Tyler. “You’re his closest friends. I want your thoughts on where his ashes ceremony will be.”

“Good on you, Tylery,” Deb gave him two skinny thumbs up. Deb’s short bob emphasised the narrowness of her face and spindly body, like a cropped silver-haired mop held upside down.

“Somewhere meaningful to Doug,” Sally asserted.

“Geoffrey Bay,” said Deb, “Doug loved it down there.”

“Here at Horseshoe Bay is the obvious choice,” said Fred, who lived one street back from where they sat and didn’t own a car. Tall and skeletal, he wrapped his weary flesh within drooping clothes.

“Not obvious to me,” said Sally.

“Geoffrey Bay,” Deb insisted, “Geoffrey was special to Doug." She looked far-away, “We used to sit in the sun, near the wallabies’ road, down near the rocks and mangroves. We’d watch the sky change colour as the sun set over the ridge. Beautiful times. Doug loved it.”

“What about Alma?” suggested Sally, “it’s kind of traditional.”

Deb lifted an eyebrow, “Alma’s a bit cliché, isn’t it?”

“Cliché?” Sally straightened her skirt and flicked something invisible off her knee. “I don’t think so.”

“Doug never hung out at Alma,” Deb retorted. “And there’ll be a wedding, or a surf carnival, or some other,” she waved her hand in the air, “*thing* going on. Somewhere quiet would be better.”

No one spoke while a bus accelerated past them.

“What about Picnic?” Deb spoke up.

“No.” Sally was absolute, “too clichéd.”

Fred growled at her.

Undaunted, Deb continued, “Picnic Bay. Down the Hawkings Point end.”

“We’re not climbing up Hawkings Point, Deb,” Sally huffed and shook her head.

“*Not* what I meant,” Deb sliced her hand sideways and emphasised the ‘not’. “We’d stay on the foreshore, past the last of the fig trees.”

“Not a good idea at all,” snapped Sally, squirming on the metal bench.

“Some bay special to Doug,” Sally said, “We’ve got to choose one.”

“Do we though?” asked Deb, her eyes bright with inspiration.

“Do we … what?” Fred’s eyebrows came together.

“It’s only an idea, right?” Deb’s left knee started to jiggle. She smoothed out her skirt and steadied her knee. “Couldn’t we divide the ashes and place a bit of Doug in each bay?”

“There’s bugger all left when you incinerate a body, Deb,” Fred shook his head. “We’d be dropping a tablespoon of ash in each bay.”

“It’s more than that,” Tyler corrected. “It’s about a cup and a half. Which is about …,” his head wobbled while he calculated, “nineteen tablespoons.”

“We could have nineteen places,” Deb was upbeat.

Fred blew a puff of air out the side of his mouth and crossed his arms.

Sally sat up straight, “If we had enough people, we could hire Tim’s bus.”

Confused, Deb asked, “Whatever for?”

“He has a big esky on the bus,” said Sally.

Everyone looked the same question at her.

“We could do an ‘ash-crawl’,” Sally bounced in her seat, “We could raise a glass of champers at every bay. Someone could say something meaningful. Or pretty. Then we could ladle out the spoonful of ash and move on.”

Tyler and Deb joked together about inebriated mourners losing the ashes, or the spoon, or each other.

“We’ve got to be practical,” Fred interrupted, “We want one bay. Easy to get to. Room for lots of people. And a bay where the wind is blowing offshore.”

“Oh, my goodness yes, so true,” agreed Deb, “You don’t want the ashes blowing into your face. I was at a funeral once, in Nelly Bay. The daughter emptied out the ashes into the waves and they all blew back into her face. It reminds me of another time–”

“We can’t have that.” Sally cut her off. She looked at Tyler, “Be careful which way the wind is blowing.”

Tyler nodded, a tight smile on his face.

“Good argument for Horseshoe,” said Tyler. “There’s usually a gentle southeaster blowing out to sea. As there is now. Not like Picnic.”

“But some of Doug’s friends are at Picnic,” Deb whined, “spread under the big fig tree near the end of the path. You know? Chris and Terry and Rhonda.”

“Sounds a bit,” Sally paused, “overdone, I would say.”

“Doug’s not craving company, is he?” Fred observed.

“Picnic won’t do at all,” Sally declared, “And it’s always blowing in Picnic.”

“I feel Doug would have loved us,” Deb scratched finger quotes in the air, “’Returning him to the earth’.”

“He would have dug it!” Tyler quipped. No one laughed.

“It doesn’t matter to Doug,” Fred interjected, “he’s past complaining.”

Sally and Deb rolled their eyes at each other.

“Honestly,” Fred continued, “let’s remember, he was the dopiest hippy.”

“That’s not true,” Sally said.

Fred raised his eyebrows and looked away.

“He did love giving those long, rambling explanations for things,” Deb said. “I mean they sounded amazing, but I could never follow them.”

“That’s because Doug thought he was left-field and out-there,” Fred said. “In fact, he was middle of the road and bottom of the rut.”

“Bloody hell, tell us how you really feel,” Sally protested.

Deb joined in, “Like any judgement it reveals more about you than Doug.” Deb reached out and squeezed Tyler’s arm.

Fred sat up, palms out, pushing the air down with his hands. “Alright! Alright!” he said, “First of all, Tyler, no offence. I loved your dad; he was my best mate.”

Fred stopped. Sally and Tyler had turned their attention to Deb, who had her face in her hands.

Fred changed his tone, “Sorry Deborah. I didn’t mean to upset you. I knew it was a bit … … edgy.”

“Edgy?” Sally snapped, “Rude, I’d say.”

Deb pulled her face out of her hands, eyes moist, and said, “Rude and unfeeling, Fred.”

“Now we’ve found the edge,” Tyler broke in, “Let’s not leap right over.”

Fred crossed his arms and his legs.

“Why does nobody support my ideas?” Sally pulled the corners of her mouth down.

“Well, they weren’t, you know,” Deb bobbed her head like a pigeon, “great ideas.”

Sally puffed up and took a deep breath.

“No, no,” said Deb, back-pedalling in her seat, “I don’t mean they were bad. But, you know, there’ll be more than a bus load of people who want to come along, and Alma can be as busy as an anthill.”

Sally deflated a little, and Deb relaxed.

“Nobody particularly cares for my ideas either,” said Deb, looking at Sally. “We need to work out what would make Doug happy.”

“Honestly?” said Fred, exasperated.

“No need to yell, Fred,” huffed Sally.

“I’m not yelling," Fred rejoined. "Listen, this idea of ‘what Doug wants’, is beside the point. Doug doesn’t care what we do, he’s dead. We could dump his ashes in the bin at Lion’s Park, it doesn’t matter.”

“Incorrigible,” Sally dismissed Fred’s words with a flick of her hand.

“You don’t give up, do you?” Deb said. “The ashes, the spreading of the ashes, it’s important.”

Sally used her schoolteacher voice. “The emotional and psychological healing for the mourners, for family. Closure, Fred, have you ever heard of that?”

“Of course,” said Fred, rolling his eyes out to sea.

“What exactly *would* Doug want?” Deb asked.

“He was clear as crystal,” Tyler looked at them in turn, “Walk up to Mount Arua.”

“Which is where we started,” said Sally, “It won’t work. We’ve gone full circle.”

“I don’t want to go around again,” said Tyler, shaking his head.

Deb turned to him, “If we give up, you can pick somewhere, Tyler.”

Tyler jumped straight in, “I’d do it right where we are.”

“Opposite the pub?” Sally looked like she’d bitten a lemon.

“I mean Horseshoe Bay, because there *is* the pub and the shops and the buses,” Tyler said. “But we’ll go down the other end of the road, for sunset. I’ll hold some ashes back for Arua, but half of what’s left we’ll spread on the water, the other half under a fig tree. With a barbie and party to follow.”

Fred smirked at the two women, who said nothing and looked away.

Tyler spoke into the brief silence, “I *really* miss him.”