

The Flowers

Of

Spring

Aaron J Clarke

**Works by the same Author**

*Epiphany of Life*

*The Sinner's Kiss*

*Upon the Rock*

*The Cat*

*The Flowers of Spring*

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Revised and Updated

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Second Edition

For my mother Marian and my mentor Cheryl

Many people considered the small town of Colville to be one of the prettiest in Queensland, but that was before the coal industry polluted it. Its grey houses with their tin roofs wrapped around the slope of the hill – every undulation of the projecting mass of rock was enhanced by a healthy distribution of eucalyptus. Nonetheless, when one stands on the highest pinnacle (where there is no tree to hinder the view) the morning sun's light seems supernatural as it shimmers on the ocean. From her vantage point on the beach, a woman did not pay heed to the dazzling display of light; instead, she was focused on what she would say. Time, however, does not erode the hurt that she tried desperately to hide – no matter what she did, her history pinned her down. At any rate, life is a game from which you cannot escape and no matter how hard she tried; she fell deeper into the trap of life. Nevertheless, when she looked to the sea, a lost emotion resurfaced in her mind – love for her boy. She closed her eyes, hoping to dispel the guilt she felt for not telling him the truth. She remembered that day and how the morning light diffused through the curtains bathing the room in its majestic glow. Yet the tranquil atmosphere of the room hid a great pain.

As her mind remembered that day, sadness enveloped her for she could not dissociate the real from the imagined. Even so, the past infected her dreams, poisoning them with guilt for not preventing the tragedy of so many years ago from occurring. Yet she was afraid of the consequences of telling her story, and as her mind mulled over whether to tell or not, she realised that in order to be redeemed from the prison of her mind she had to confess. Images of the past illuminated her world, but unlike a lighthouse warning ships of the danger ahead, she was attracted to the abyss from which no one escapes. She opened her eyes and gazed at the seagulls darting through the air like projectiles of white and grey. She smiled at the innocent creatures because their carefree natures gave her faith that the world that one inhabits is wholesome and not debased. Instead of blaming others, God in particular, she needed to resolve her past, and the major role she played in the family misfortune. How does one broach something so substantial in one's personal history, through allegory perhaps? She wondered what she would say, and then the seed of experience burst forth, taking hold of her senses that she no longer saw the beach, but the room where pain dwelt. At first, she hesitated but the glimmer of past events drew her in at a point from which she could not escape. On one occasion,

she laughed at a kitten chasing its shadow and then on another, she watched the gradual disintegration of her mother's self-esteem. She craved her mother's love. Yet this missing empathy eventually extinguished the filial love of mother and daughter. Now that she had had a child of her own, she felt morally obligated to confess her secret.

She tapped on my chamber door. I could see that she was anxious, so I offered her a cup of tea. However, she was unaware of what I said so I gently directed her to her favourite chair. She looked at me queerly as if the woman sitting in the chair opposite to me was another person. I thought I understood the profundities of human behaviour, but I could not fathom my mother, and as she rocked in her chair, I was alarmed. I said, "Mama what is wrong?" Still she was silent then I repeated my question. Afterwards, she said, "Do you want to hear a story?" I nodded. This was the only time my mother told me her story. I hear you say, "What happened in that room?" I cannot remember accurately the events that occurred forty years ago. However, I will offer the reader the story my mother told me on that eventful day.

In those days, before the War, Colville lacked the sophistication of a city like Brisbane; nevertheless, it had a certain charm that only seemed to attract miners and cattlemen. The reasons why people came to Colville varied, but the underlying fact was that one could amass a fortune in the cattle and coal industries. However, the truth was a great number of men failed, and only a small number succeeded, and out of those that succeeded none could match the business finesse of John. His money gave him the ability to control the destinies of Colville and its townsfolk. Yet his life was empty because his wealth instead of emancipating him from the drudgery of hard work had, in reality, imprisoned him in the pursuit of acquiring more money, more land.

Yet buried deep in his conscience was the desire for human society not based purely on pecuniary interests, but instead based on love. Even so, the emotion of love was a feeling that both captivated and frightened him because, as we will later learn, his money was a means to compensate for the trauma of his childhood. At any rate, such traumatic events were the impetus behind his quest for money that, in part, led to him travelling to Colville 25 years ago.

When he arrived, he was a dashing, carefree young man. However, the town, over the course of 25 years, had moulded him into a man who appeared disingenuous, and some would go as far as to say cold-hearted. Even with the self-deprecation of being born into a poor family, John's nature was diametric and this was evident, decades later, when he shouted at Mr. Thompson, "Sit down and shut up! I want your property, but I'm not prepared to pay a penny more." He tossed the document at him and bellowed, "Sign! If you don't, then I won't be held accountable for my actions." The other man, who this time was flushed with rage, shouted: "Everyone knows that you're an overbearing bastard, who usually gets what he wants. This time I shall not be bullied by the likes of you. I remembered when you came to Colville, and I said to myself, 'He won't last'. Look how you've proven me wrong." John smiled and said, "All right, I'll pay you more." The other man smiled. Then John continued, "But in return, I expect loyalty."

Needless to say, John knew that to pay for Mr. Thompson's loyalty would lead invariably to more resentment, particularly among his workers in the Colville coal mines; however, he disregarded such negative sentiments by indulging in his passion for growing flowers. In his garden were a multitude of orchids, roses and other imported flowers that he religiously pruned and watered; besides, his efforts were rewarded by his resplendent children perfuming the air with their heavenly scent, yet such horticultural endeavours temporarily filled the void in his life. As I said before he desired companionship, he desired to be kissed and caressed; however, his actions, namely his reprehensible treatment of his workers, precluded him from such contact. Then one day, he saw a young woman standing near his yellow rose bush fingering the bloom, and then she audaciously picked the flower. Such an act would usually cause John to act harshly at those who had the effrontery to violate his prized rose. Instead, his desires were inflamed by this captivating woman, who was in the process of plucking another bloom, when she realised that John was watching her, so she apologised, "I am so terribly sorry but this flower is so beautiful I couldn't help myself." He reassured her by saying, "Please take another." She smiled, and he knew that she was as perfect as the flower that she held in her hand. Sensing his awkwardness, she replied, "You have a beautiful garden, perhaps the best in Queensland." He laughed and said in a self-deprecating manner, "There are much better gardens." She enquired, "By the way. What is your name?" Surprised that she did not know who he was he said, "I am called John and you?" She said, "Sonia. I've just arrived in Colville, and I don't know anyone. Perhaps you could introduce me to your friends?" The only people

that he knew were his workers, so he was naturally inclined not to introduce this young, elegant, beautiful creature to such corrupt individuals, who would pollute her innocence with their rough, dirty hands. As he guided her along an underpass of overhanging golden wattle, he observed how she held that precious bloom in her hand, and the way in which she probed it with her finger, oh how he wished that he was that flower.

He was a man possessed with love. Yet such feelings remained hidden from the unsuspecting girl. She enquired, “What’s this flower called?” He told her its name, and she continued her gentle, coquettish interrogation that he ‘happily’ submitted to, and as he answered her numerous questions, his eyes lingered on her fair features. Yet his mind was a maelstrom of emotions that, up until now, had remained suppressed. However, the danger that this sensual siren presented to him was hedonistic pleasures that if he were to indulge in he would surely drown in the sea of longing... Nevertheless, as they walked along the garden path, Sonia noticed the way in which he glanced at her. It was as if he were pleading for absolution. Then she said, “Are you all right?” He demanded, “What makes you say that?” The love he felt for her was temporarily transformed into its opposite. Moreover, his metamorphosis into a wanton animal compounded his shame, for she had glimpsed his fractured nature: a personality more suited to giving orders than admitting weakness... Oh, how he wished he could take back what he had said, however, the hurt engendered by his outburst on the startled girl seared his soul with self-deprecation. Even so, he knew what he did was wrong, and when he sensed that the tension between them had subsided, he said, “I apologise. I am not used to women.” Why did it matter to him what she thought of him? Because her love was the means to remove the myopia of his past, a past tainted with pain. Although, Sonia was poor, compared to his millions, she offered him an alternative to his sterile existence, namely the chance to bring forth new life.

It did not occur to him that she had a different plan that did not entail having children; however, he would entice her with pearls and feathers, anything that his money could buy. What is more, as he guided her toward an ornamental fountain carved from pinkish sandstone, he blurted, “I adore you.” Then she hesitated for a moment before she snickered, “How can

you love me? We've only just met." Yet he was powerless for she had a stupefying effect on him, which was apparent with her rebuke thereby causing him to beg, "Don't you believe that fate has brought us together? Don't you believe I adore you, and that I would give you the world?" She laughed, "Poppycock." Angered he snatched the flower from her hand, and destroyed it with the sole of his shoe. "Don't be so childish. If you were to behave, I shall see you later this week. Do you accept my proposal?" He nodded his head. With that act of submission, she kissed his cheek and left...

"Mama I don't understand this John." Her eyebrow arched in surprised disparagement. Before she could speak, I continued, "He wants love, and now he's got it." She replied, "He was a very strange man." I asked in what way, but she remained silent. Then she continued, "I would now like that cup of tea." She closed her eyes and imagined that garden of a bygone time...

Dejected John sat in the cane chair that faced his spacious garden. The flowers that he nurtured exuded a fragrance that he now found nauseating, for it was the perfume of penitence. Perhaps his relations with women, generally speaking, were destined to fail. Why? The answer to this question was buried in his childhood, a childhood marked with pain that, until now, he had tried to suppress, alas, he could not and this was evident with tears streaming down his cheeks. Then there was a knock at the front door, and he told them to 'wait' before drying his eyes with a handkerchief. John didn't want anyone seeing his pain because, according to him, it was a sign of weakness. He was ashamed of his emotional outburst because the dam that was his emotions would burst if anyone guessed his secret: that his adoration of Sonia had turned him into a lovesick puppy. However, it did not occur to John that everyone, including Mr. Thompson, who entered the veranda that faced the garden, would talk about the lives of the rich and powerful in a small town like Colville. After regaining his composure, John bellowed for him to "come in" and once the pleasantries, which were rarely enacted between employer and employee, were over, he continued:

"How long have you known me Frank?"

Puzzled by his small talk, he replied cautiously, “Since you arrived in Colville more than twenty years ago.”

“And in that time would you say that I’ve changed?”

In hindsight, Mr. Thompson didn’t fully fathom what John meant by ‘changed’; however, as he gazed at the seated man, he noticed, perhaps for the first time, a wilful pride that had increased into something that was both captivating and terrifying. He looked away, and was silent for what seemed an eternity, and then he said:

“We all have.” He noticed how his reply had a strange effect on him, an effect that was beginning to work on him too. Frank feared his strangeness that if he were to indulge in such crazed imaginings he as well would be sent away, so in desperation he snapped, “Are you backing out of our deal? Tell me!” John was unmoved, so he lowered his voice, “I need to know.”

“On the contrary, I will pay you extra if and only if you do ‘something’ for me.”

Money had a mollifying effect on Mr. Thompson, for it was the morphine to his mercantile ambitions that he was in danger of becoming addicted to; even so, he imagined what John’s pieces of silver would enable him to buy, namely the Colville Hotel. Overjoyed, he snickered and rubbed his hand with glee and was about to speak, but John cut him off with:

“Your childish demonstration means that you accept my proposal.” He pulled from his pocket a fifty-pound note, and handed it to his docile automaton. “Ah but if you expect more you must do exactly as I say.”

He nodded. Then John told him what he desired of him...

After the kettle boiled, I made her a cup of ‘Earl Grey’, and she said, “Thanks.” She blew on the hot concoction, and as she sipped it, her lipstick left its bloody mark on the cup. For a moment, she cradled the empty cup in her hand, and then she whimpered:

“Do you believe in God?”

I nodded. The madness that dwelt in her heart had now resurfaced then she continued:



“In order to believe in God one must also believe in the devil. You believe in the devil, don't you my son?”

Puzzled I replied, “Why yes. However, one mustn't be tempted by evil...”

“John was tempted and so too Mr. Thompson. They were tricked into believing that their desires could be sated. Ah how wrong they were.”

“Mama I don't understand. Please tell me.”

She stayed silent then her memories flash before her, and she remembered that heavenly garden where evil grew in the souls of every precious bloom. ...Desire had caressed the flowers of his garden, and this was evident in the way in which they discarded their petals and their modesty to the probing tongues of the birds. And as he wandered through his Elysian grounds, he noticed an imperfection in the yellow rosebush, and as he drew closer, he saw a rat munching on a fallen bloom. Slowly, he retreated, and a moment later; he came back with a shovel. Whack! He hit the rat on the head and said coldly:

“That'll teach you.”

Cruelty and love were elements that fused in his soul. His wanton desires for Sonia were corrupting him, destroying his conscience and some, myself included, would go further by saying that he had become a crazed creature. All his life, he had suppressed such visceral instincts to the point that his actions were contrived, and this was evident in his dealings with women, especially attractive girls like Sonia. Whenever, he saw a charming creature, his eyes stripped them bare, and his hands touched them here and there.

...Yet Sonia was unaware of the effect she had on him, and when she arrived at his house, the next day, she noticed the violated rose bush and the bloodstained shovel that rested beside it. Besides, as the wind blew through the garden, she could hear the sinister sound of secateurs cutting the stems of a pink bottlebrush that grew near a path. Curious as to where the path went, she decided to investigate: thus, she solemnly marched along the meandering path that was flanked with native Australian trees that were foreign to her European eyes. Then the path gently sloped towards a long stretch of beach and in the distance; she saw, what looked like, a man swimming in the swirling sea of green. She secretly observed him, and as he emerged

from the seas embrace, her gaze drifted down his naked body. Excited she blushed and quickly retreated for fear of being discovered. As she dashed up the path, she bumped into John, who was carrying dead branches thereby causing him to drop his load.

She shrieked then said, “Arrgh you frightened me.”

His eyes were inflamed with passion, and he demanded, “What were you doing? Why did you go down this path?”

Surprised by his anger, she snickered, “I’m an avid explorer. I – I want to discover a new continent.”

He felt ashamed of his acrimonious outburst, and so he tried to remedy the situation through laughter. “Isn’t Australia big enough for you?”

As he held her, she was aroused by his virility but when he lifted her lips to his, she turned away and said, “Don’t spoil it.”

*How strange, how melodramatic this tableau was, perhaps you should start again. Yet the past had a peculiar effect on my ability to recall what mama had told me of that eventful day. History is never what we expected it to be, and when one tries to recall ‘who said what’ or ‘who did what’, we are disappointed because history is in the process of perpetual change. Moreover, the past is a matter of perspective to the artist constructing a tale, and yet I am grateful to mama for telling me her story. As she drifted off into a restful sleep, it is I who had become the narrator. I closed my eyes, and my imagination guided me to the tragic theatre whose actors were locked in a struggle to subjugate the other.*

He forcefully kissed her and said, “I can’t control my emotions because my love for you is overwhelming. I must have some token of your appreciation.”

“If you truly love me, then prove it.”

“To sacrifice oneself, you know I would do that.”

She chuckled, “There’s no need to be so melodramatic.”

Hurt he whimpered, “You’re a gem I must have and for that reason I will polish, I will cut you into perfection through the act of marriage. Marry me.”

“Are you serious?”

She looked into his eyes and guessed the answer to her question. However, she remained reticent that only compounded his shortcomings as a prospective partner, so he reaffirmed his position: “I’ve never been more certain in my life than now.”

“I need time to consider your proposal it’s something that we both shouldn’t jump into.”

...As Sonia walked back to her lodgings, she couldn’t stop herself from thinking about the naked man she saw swimming in the sea. “What’s his name? If only I knew.” A tear wetted her lashes because the longing she felt for this stranger was forcing her to feel shame and guilt towards John. “Perhaps if I married John, then my feelings for this stranger will go away.” And when Sonia confessed her secret to Edith (a childhood friend who had just arrived the other day in Colville by ship) she gave her a dressing down: “You little fool don’t waste an opportunity such as this. I’ve heard people talking about John, they say he is overbearing...” Sonia cast her eyes downward but Edith gently continued, “One can overlook such failings because money can transform a frog into a prince. Do you understand what I’m saying?” She nodded her head and said, “You’re right I shall accept his marriage proposal. But I don’t -”

“You ninny one can grow to love one’s husband.” As she stroked Sonia’s hair, she smiled and said, “If you don’t take up this opportunity, then I shall be forced to pursue this magnificent millionaire.”

Sonia let out a faint laugh by what her friend said, although, deep down, she knew that her friend was wrong. Even so, she continued chatting about the latest fashions from Sydney, and the way women wore their hair in the Joan Crawford style. Her chitchat was a distraction from her dire predicament, namely to be the wife to a man who she was not sure she could love. And as the day transformed into night, Sonia went to bed early, hoping that her dreams would be of some comfort, alas, they weren’t...

The shimmering sea of green and gold filled her with ecstasy because every time she gazed at it; she would always remember the naked Adonis. It didn't occur to her that her feelings; her passions for this stranger were mirrored in John's treatment of her. If only she could return what she felt for the stranger to her future husband. In the beginning, Sonia liked John, but as she got to know him, she wasn't so sure and her apathy was becoming apparent to Edith. Why did it matter so much to Edith? The answer was obvious to all who truly knew Edith namely a well to do friend could introduce her to rich bachelors. Moreover, Edith's desires for wealth grew from the insecurities of being brought up in an orphanage. Edith equated money with happiness so too Sonia. However, she wasn't sure whether diamonds and pearls could truly bring joy into one's life like seeing the naked youth, whom she couldn't remove from her mind. Arr what a pickle she was in. Yet the easiest way out of a bad situation was to tell the truth, so the next day Sonia would extinguish her betrothed union.