

SCOTT RANDALL

## THE SIX

IN ACCORDANCE WITH TRADITION, the six who will bear Tessa Powell (née Anderson) from the back of the Mason Funeral Services hearse to her Woodlawn burial plot are not immediate family, but men who have been selected for their indirect connection to the deceased; for the time being, Tessa Powell's lifelong friends, closest blood relations, and all sundry bereaved will stand aside and remain by the line of parked cars that leads from the south-east entrance to the graveyard. Long ago closed to new business, the Woodlawn cemetery most often now receives the survivors of husbands and wives who have already passed—widows and widowers who purchased twin plots and went on to endure after their spouses did not. Such is the case of Tessa Powell (née Anderson), beloved wife to the late Harold, loving mother to Sarah, dear mother-in-law to Edward, and cherished sister to the late Alice. Standing by the rear of the hearse, the six pallbearers that she named in her final requests wait while an attendant from the Mason Funeral Home unlatches the back gate, grasps a firm hold of a casket handle, and rolls the deceased smoothly outward. The attendant's movements are efficient, choreographed through years of repetition, and as he speaks, his words of instruction are clearly practiced. He addresses the six as *gentlemen* and explains that they are to lift the weight in unison and to follow the pace of the two men at the front. He points to their destination, the gravesite where a pastor already stands in wait and ready to deliver a final blessing, and in a calm, low voice, the attendant assures the six that he will follow them every step of the way. Purchased by Tessa and Harold Powell on credit some fifty years earlier and slowly paid off in installments, the gravesite is a twin plot some distance off. It is located in the much desired southeast corner of the cemetery, where wide maples provide visitors shade for hours of quiet reflection, and so the six will have to navigate carefully, travelling between narrow lines of elaborate graves while watching their steps to ensure that they do not tread on another's hal-

lowed ground. Making the noble journey from hearse to headstone even more precarious is the day's pathetic fallacy. After a night of steady drizzle, the sun rose to a heavy downpour that pounded the roof of the Mason Funeral Home throughout the memorial service, soaking the cemetery grass and creating a hazard that could slip up the funeral procession and spoil later memories of the ceremony. The six should, of course, be paying special attention as they walk, but they do not. In fact, as they move forward, their faces as blanks as Stoics, the men bearing the maple casket polished to a gleam cannot stop their minds from wandering.

At the head of the coffin, Calvin Russell listens to the funeral home attendant's instructions closely, making certain he lifts the weight of the casket uniformly and slowly. Because he is not related to the deceased, Cal was taken aback but pleased to discover his name mentioned in her final requests, and he wants to treat the role assigned to him with all appropriate solemnity. On the day that the estate lawyer contacted him, Tessa's neighbour in the Richmond Gates Apartments was, in fact, unaware of her passing, but he was wondering why they hadn't bumped into one another for over a week. With eighteen floors and 180 apartment units, Richmond Gates is not the kind of building that hosts holiday get-togethers in the lobby and does not have an organized tenant society, but for the past five years he has occupied unit 1107, Cal has grown used to his conversations with his neighbour in unit 1103. These conversations began on the day that Cal moved in, after his childless marriage failed and he found himself not only alone, but isolated. What had happened to the handful of close friends he'd had all through high school and university? What had happened to his network of clients, coworkers, and companions at the office? Where was his family? Divorced at thirty, Cal found himself cut off from all community and connection. Consequently, when he noticed his elderly neighbour Tessa watching him through the eyehole in her door, he did not shake his head to himself and curse the snooping old bag; he did not avert his gaze and avoid eye contact with her in the mailroom, and he did not pretend he didn't see her when they bumped into one another in frozen foods at the IGA down the road. Instead, Cal made a conscious decision to smile genuinely when they walked into the elevator together and to thrust out his arm protectively and block the untrustworthy automatic door whenever they exited the elevator together. If he bumped into Tessa at the IGA—as often in produce as frozen foods, if truth be told—he asked about her day and offered to accompany her, helping her push her bundle-buggie across the intersection and back to

the Richmond Gates. From these initial moments of contact, the two built an improbable friendship of sorts. Whenever Cal was finished with his *Newsweek*, he passed the issue along to Tessa; whenever she baked an almond orange cake for company, she set aside a bit for him. From short visits in her apartment, he observed a few peculiarities—her silver baby spoon collection from cities around the world and the sets of Windsor family dinner plates that lined the wall over the chesterfield—and he noticed a few undesirable traits—the ungenerous tone when she spoke of her daughter Sarah, and the possibly racist remarks when speaking of the Vietnamese family in unit 1109. But most of what Cal knew of Tessa's life and the eight decades she'd lived were no more than biographical scraps picked up in passing conversation. She'd been in her apartment for over twenty years and before that owned a townhouse; she'd once had a husband, but he was gone long before she; the husband was a letter carrier and she worked in a post office behind the counter. Was that how they met? Cal didn't know, and now he never will. As the six begin their slow steps away from the hearse and southeast access road, Calvin Russell thinks he should have taken a spot in the middle of the casket. Unfamiliar with Woodlawn, he isn't entirely comfortable leading the way through the cemetery rows, but now that the six are moving forward, there is little he can do to stop them.

By unfortunate coincidence, the other man at the head of the casket is Vincent Mills, and like Cal, Vincent is entirely ignorant of the cemetery layout. Also like Cal, Vincent was surprised to be named as a pallbearer in Tessa's papers, for while he is the deceased's grandson, he is a relation only in name and by law. Before her death, Vincent had, in fact, met Tessa but twice: first at his father and stepmother's rehearsal dinner and then again at the wedding the following day. At the time of the nuptials, Vincent had recently graduated from university and had accepted an overseas teaching contract for two years in Seoul, which was followed by an eighteen-month position in Beijing and half a year of travel south through Jinan, Nanjing, Shanghai to Hangzhou. Homesickness and lack of money brought him back to Toronto, where he has been staying temporarily on the foldout sofa of an ex-girlfriend, and where he learned of his grandmother's passing. Thus, Vincent's memories of Tessa are few. For the rehearsal dinner, his father had booked a private room in a Keg in Richmond Hill, but the busy waitress attending to their party of twelve also had tables on the floor and the service was poor. One plate came with steak fries instead of garlic mashed, a prime rib was medium instead of medium-rare, and coffee cups weren't refilled.

Tessa's rib eye came covered in a slather of caramelized green peppers and onions, and although this side dish was fully described in the menu, and although Vincent's embarrassed soon-to-be stepmother Sarah tried unsuccessfully to silence his soon-to-be step-grandmother—*just scrape it off your goddamn plate*—the old woman refused to eat more than the baked potato that had come with the meal. At the reception, Vincent and Tessa both sat at the head table, but on separate ends, and so they did not speak; he was, however, certain that he caught her rolling her eyes more than once during the after-dinner toasts. While Vincent's own opinion of his father's fourth marriage to a woman twenty years his junior was one of near-complete indifference, the bride's mother clearly did not approve. During the short memorial service at the Mason Funeral Home, Vincent retraced his two memories of Tessa and thus exhausted his entire knowledge of her life. Had he been paying attention to the pastor leading the memorial, Vincent would have learned more, but his mind was then—as it is now—elsewhere. As he looks up over the headstones and sees the pastor waiting beneath the maples, Vincent thinks not of Tessa but of a cemetery he happened upon in Hangzhou, where the rows and columns of headstones were crowded tightly together. The grave markers were so close to one another, in fact, that at first, he did not understand how so many bodies could fit beneath the earth. Were the dead inserted vertically? Only later did he understand that under the ground were cremated fragments of ash and bone, compact inside their vessels. Strange to bury urns, he thought. Stranger still were the portrait photographs on each headstone. Transferred onto a white tile, black and white pictures were cemented above each deceased name. Some pictures showed healthy young faces and others were withered and gaunt, but what struck Vincent was that the age of those in the portraits seemed to be in no way connected to the lifespan of the deceased, which meant that someone made a conscious and considered decision when choosing just the right photograph. How would one decide the age of the photograph? How could one decide which age to remain for the decades, centuries, or millennia until the cemetery fell into complete ruin? Didn't such hope in a future after death make a joke of the years before death? Such pointless questions couldn't help but sadden Vincent. Suddenly feeling how alone and how far from home he was, he decided there and then to return to Canada, where he was in the process of reacclimating when his father contacted him with the news of Tessa's death. Walking through Woodlawn Cemetery past the many

headstones, Vincent Mills cannot help thinking of the Hangzhou cemetery, and the pointless questions are once again troubling him.

Directly behind Vincent is the oldest of the six, and though he's positioned in the middle, Wilson Thatch does know where he is going. At one time, Wilson counted the deceased and the deceased's husband Harold as close friends, and as such, Wilson was here in the Woodlawn Cemetery on the day of Harold's funeral and on many other days over the twenty years since. Sitting beside his dead friend's gravestone, the aging Wilson talked to Harold at length, apologizing for his betrayal of his friend and for his affection toward Tessa. Once upon a time, Wilson would have said confidently that he knew the deceased better than anyone else at her funeral—certainly better than any other of the six. Until the open-casket viewing a few hours before, however, he had not seen Tessa in over two decades, not since Harold's death, funeral, and burial. He'd had the pleasure and honour of carrying the casket on that day too, but at middle age the task was easier than it is now. With Harold's funeral over, Wilson and Tessa stood at the foot of the southeast entrance road, and holding her shoulders in his hands, he leaned forward to embrace her. What she told him then was that she didn't want to see him ever again. That was it. She banished him and he would never see her alive again. Wilson didn't argue at the time, for though he hoped such a punishment would not be coming, he had half expected it would, a comeuppance for his earlier misjudgment. How this resentment of some two decades began was a story that reached back even further in Wilson's memory, back to when he moved to Toronto and started on at Canada Post. When he was first hired on and assigned to shadow Harold Powell, the older man had been working out of the Steeles and Yonge office for over a decade, walking a route that was no more than ten minutes from the front door of the townhouse where he and his wife Tessa were beginning their family. The delivery area meant lunches at home and, as Harold put it, it would have been downright inhospitable not to invite the new trainee along for soup and sandwiches. Their daughter Sarah was sitting in her highchair finishing up a purée that might have been prunes when the two men walked in wearing their uniforms, but the infant took an instant liking to Wilson, reaching her arms out and pleading to be held. He bounced the girl on his knee throughout lunch while her parents asked how he was finding the city, why he'd moved all the way down from Sault Ste Marie, and—*seeing as Sarah had taken such a shine to him*—if he'd like to come to Sunday dinner that weekend. They must have seen how alone he was, that's what Wilson figured. Though he liked riding

the streetcar and seeing a new picture nearly every week, it wasn't easy living alone in a new city. The Powells became his first Toronto friends. Later, they invited him to come along to Ontario Place, which was just opening up that summer, and, because they hated to see him spend the holiday alone, they asked him over for Thanksgiving. By the time Wilson was assigned his own route he was something of a fixture at Sunday dinners, and by the time young Sarah started into grammar school, he was something of an uncle to her. It wasn't until after the girl began secondary school that Tessa started at Canada Post and Wilson's brotherly feelings for her took on a different nature. More and more, women were leaving the house to work, so it only made sense that Tessa considered a job as her daughter needed her less, and when a counter position opened up at the Steeles and Yonge office, it again only made sense for Tessa to put her name in. The job meant Wilson saw even more of her, and often without Harold. Though Wilson hoped he would know better than to make a pass at her, he wasn't at all surprised when he did. They were in the back loading dock at the time, sorting parcels, when he grabbed her shoulders and pressed himself against her. In his defense, she pressed herself against him as well, but that didn't make his actions any less wrong. There may have been some groping, and he may have opened a button on her Canada Post uniform as well, but they'd gotten so carried away that afterwards he wasn't certain what all had happened. Neither of them mentioned the incident when they saw each other for the following Sunday dinner or during any of the Sunday dinners in the years that followed, and the silence was a kind of punishment of its own, a decades-long penance for his misjudgment. At Harold's funeral, when she said she no longer wanted to see him, Wilson accepted the new punishment and hoped it would be the last, but it was not. She put his name in her final requests for a reason, Wilson knew. After another two decades, his comeuppance came again, and so while the physicality of a pallbearer's task should really have excused the 73-year-old man, Wilson Thatch trudges along over the wet cemetery grass with the rest of the six, glad that the formal pace is slow enough for him to keep up.

Like Wilson, middle-aged Henry Anderson also suffers from a debilitating guilt as he carries his Aunt Tessa forward through the wet cemetery and thinks of time spent with her years ago. As he was an older brother with a single mother, responsibilities fell to Henry early on: at seven years of age he had to ensure his younger brother Elias wore a toque, mittens, or scarf before dropping him off at the babysitter's; at eight he had to teach Elias the proper way to make his bed, rinse his cereal bowl, and lock the apartment door

before setting out for daycare every morning; and at nine he had to accompany young Elias on the TTC along Steeles to Willowdale Elementary before seeing him in at the junior kindergarten door. The many duties that their waitress mother had entrusted in him, of course, caused him more anxiety than was normal for someone so young, and the after-school hours he spent at Aunt Tessa and Uncle Harold's townhouse were a welcome relief. Two evenings a week, instead of returning to the depressing high-rise on Bathurst where they rented a small one-bedroom, Henry could forget about his brother and escape to the black-and-white television set in the townhouse basement for an hour of *That's Incredible* or *The Incredible Hulk*, though it was a drag that the Hulk always transformed into a sickly pale grey instead of the radioactive green he was supposed to be. Back upstairs for his favourite mushroom soup-tuna fish casserole, Aunt Tessa always made a fuss over Henry, astonished that he never needed extra hours of homework to get straight As on his report cards—*if only his cousin Sarah were so bright*—and she always sliced him an extra generous portion of almond orange cake, complimenting him for tending to Elias in a way that their careless mother, her own little sister Alice, never did. In his aunt's words, young Henry was *a person of substance*. She said he would go so far that he could become a surgeon if that was what he so chose, and when she was old and grey, he could come by with his beautiful model wife in his limousine and give his Aunt Tessa rides all over the city. And although both Henry and Elias were grown into adults when their mother died from the breast cancer that takes many middle-aged women, Tessa held Henry tightly as he cried at the funeral, patting his back again and again as one would a colicky child and repeating that he was *a person of substance*. In truth, she probably did not believe he would meet her limousine expectations and, as an adult, Henry can see that her words were intended only as kind encouragement for a fatherless boy. Still, between the person he once saw reflected in his aunt's eyes and the person he has grown into, there is such a disparity that Henry cannot help but feel disillusioned on the day of Tessa's funeral. A sales representative for the past twenty years, he has moved from office equipment to the printing industry and back to office equipment and, though he has won a few in-house sales contests and has single-handedly paid off nearly half the mortgage of his three-bedroom detached in Richmond Hill, he has never really distinguished himself in any way. Instead of a beautiful model wife, Henry went through a series of unwise girlfriends before settling into the on-again-off-again affair he's been having with a married accountant from payroll for eight years and counting. The

relationship is, he of course knows, fundamentally wrong, but it does help to lessen his isolation. When his Uncle Harold died, Henry did try to absorb some of his aunt's sorrow, helping her to move her belongings from the townhouse to the apartment, and later visiting to hang her entire collection of royal family dinner plates according to her wishes, but the truth was that the Richmond Gates Apartments reminded him too much of the Bathurst rental where he'd spent his childhood, and so over the years, he stopped in less and less. At forty-five years of age, he sees that he is not at all a person of substance and that he was not a very good nephew, and the guilt he feels is twofold. Thus distracted, Henry Anderson has allowed his attention to drift, and on a hazardous patch of exposed mud underfoot, he loses his traction, momentarily altering the distribution of weight between the six pallbearers.

Fortunately, at forty-two, Elias Anderson is in better shape than his older brother. He's broad shouldered and physically powerful in a way that Henry has been jealous of for years, and even without thinking, Elias uses his strength to correct his brother's misstep, steadying the casket immediately so that Henry can find his balance, and the procession can continue as if never disrupted. Like his brother's, Elias's own memories of his Aunt Tessa are also set in the deceased's townhouse on the two days a week they stayed after school, and while Elias did not descend to the basement for a relaxing hour of television, he also remembers that time fondly, but for entirely different reasons. Too young to be assigned homework of his own, Elias sat at the dining room with crayons while his older cousin Sarah completed her ninth-grade assignments and the extra practice exercises her strict mother gave her. While Sarah cross-multiplied fractions and memorized provincial capitals, Elias worked through his stack of *Reading Rainbow*, *Great Space Coaster*, and *101 Dalmatians* colouring books. The last one was somewhat unsatisfying, he remembers, because for the most part, it featured black-and-white dogs that required very little colour, but that was all right because he actually spent much of his time at the dining-room table sneaking glances of his older cousin. Sometimes Sarah chewed on her bottom lip when puzzled by a long-division problem. Sometimes she stuck out her tongue while cross-hatching the shading for an art class pen-and-ink sketch. And sometimes she sucked on the ends of her long hair if bored with conjugating irregular French verbs. On days when he was lucky, Sarah would ask Elias for help; his tasks were limited to reading out from her French text so she could dictate new vocabulary words, or following along in *The Merchant of Venice* while she recited a memorized passage. Even though he sometimes had to sound



out words and he mispronounced lots of them, Elias could tell that Sarah liked his assistance. Her manner lightened when they worked together, and occasionally, she would even forget her mother's stern presence in the house and let out a loud laugh. At such times their voices did draw Aunt Tessa to the dining room and she did silence them with a glare, but to Elias's way of thinking, his aunt's disapproval was worth the trouble. Back to his colouring, he would return to sneaking glances, and if Sarah caught him at it he had a readied excuse and asked some question about the living room over her shoulder. How many silver baby spoons did Aunt Tessa have in her collection? Did Aunt Tessa let her watch the colour RCA in the living room or did she have to settle for the black-and-white downstairs? What did Aunt Tessa mean when she said that Sarah wasn't a person of substance? In later years, Elias grew not only to understand that Sarah had been aware of his crush all along, but also that Aunt Tessa had known of it as well, and instead of viewing his affection as the harmless phase that it turned out to be, she openly scowled at Elias. In his memory, his aunt scowled at much: at Sarah and him laughing in the living room, at having to cook extra portions of tuna fish casserole two days a week, and at her own younger sister, Elias's mother. While Tessa's world view may have changed with the times enough to allow for a job out of the house, an unwed mother was still an unwed mother in her eyes, and an unwed mother with two sons from two fathers was a problem about which to hold her tongue only sometimes. While she was not one to utter a profanity in the darkest of moods, her less charitable descriptions for the boys' mother were *loose woman* and *harlot* and *waitress*. She seemed never to say such things around Henry, but for whatever reason, she let them slip in front of Elias and, even as a young boy, he understood that the words were a measure of how little she thought of him. This is what he remembered while the pastor delivered the memorial service in the Mason Funeral Home, and from where Elias was sitting, he sneaked glances of Sarah in the front pew. His hope was to catch her chewing on her bottom lip or sucking on the ends of her hair, but, of course, she wasn't. She was sitting uncomfortably next to her elderly husband and staring at the open casket, experiencing the confusing and conflicting sentiments everyone suffers through when a parent dies. Aunt Tessa was not a big-hearted and gentle mother, Elias knew that much, but she had always been present, which was more than his mother. On the other hand, Aunt Tessa was never able to display the tenderness or generosity of spirit that came easily to his own. While he and Henry grew up in a rental apartment that could only kindly be called economical, Elias retains

fond memories of that one-bedroom on Bathurst and, still today, he drives out of his way to pass by it. Sometimes, when they were young and Henry fell asleep first, Elias sneaked out to the small living room to wait for his mother to return from a late shift, and she always let him curl up beside her in the foldout sofa bed. Although he may not be a person of substance, Elias thinks with only slight bitterness, such beginnings were enough to propel him into a contented and well-adjusted adulthood: a stable carpentry job of twenty years, a steady wife of eighteen years, and a beautiful son, Elias has never suffered from the isolation that visits many, and he probably has his late mother to thank for that. Can Aunt Tessa say the same? Can her parenting skills be blamed for the alcohol troubles that Sarah had in her twenties, the string of men she had in her thirties, and her compromise of a marriage to a man some twenty years her senior? And, if this is the case, will Sarah eventually forgive any of her mother's trespasses? Elias Anderson didn't know, but stopping at the open burial plot to set down the casket, he hopes so.

Following the instructions of the funeral home attendant and the example of his father, Daniel Anderson bends at the knees as he places the casket over the grave. Thick canvas straps attached to a metal frame of pulleys are stretched over the open hole and, though he tries not to, Daniel stares at the contraption. At fifteen, Daniel is experiencing his first death, so the proceedings contain a completely new brand of novelty. The charcoal grey suit he wears fits well enough, but is loose in the shoulders because it is his father's, borrowed after they discovered that the navy blue sports coat Daniel wore to sophomore prom not three months ago was already too small. Shaking her head but with a smile, his mother swore that if he didn't stop growing, he'd be as massive as his father—*another great big brick shithouse*, she laughed. This sounded all right to Daniel, whose strongest connection in life is with his father. Unlike any of the other pallbearers, Daniel listened closely to the memorial service this morning, and though he could tell that—like himself—the pastor had never actually met his great Aunt Tessa, the sheer triviality of the biography was fascinating.

Before Tessa and her sister Alice were born, there was a brother who died from TB when he was only five. Her parents emigrated from Wales in the late thirties when she and her sister were just young girls, and before settling in Toronto, the family lived first in Halifax. Tessa excelled in school and graduated from junior college as a registered nurse's assistant, though she chose to raise a family and never worked in medicine. For her entire adult life, Tessa volunteered for the CNIB, first reading aloud to the blind

and later stuffing envelopes for fundraisers. In her retirement, Tessa took up aqua fitness and swam five days a week.

Was this all that there was? At the end of his prepared notes, the pastor read a generic poem entitled “Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep,” and Daniel’s attention drifted. At the graveside now, however, he is again intrigued; because they purchased a twin plot and a shared headstone, both Tessa Anderson’s name and Harold Anderson’s name are etched into the polished rock, but only his lifespan is recorded. Tessa’s will be carved in shortly, Daniel assumes. Crouching down, the funeral home attendant releases the winches that hold the casket above ground and the canvas straps slowly lower. At this moment, Daniel thinks of the finality of the event, of how Tessa Powell will be no more, and of the family members she has left behind, and like many at their first funeral, he imagines the death of his own loved ones. Someday he will attend his father’s funeral, Daniel Anderson thinks sadly, and he will have to dress up in his own dark suit, and he will have to explain death to his own daughter or son.

With the canvas straps slack and the deceased beneath the ground, all of the six are relieved to have carried out their obligations without incident. No one slipped on the wet grass and no one fell, thank goodness. Standing under the wide maples, the pastor will deliver a final blessing, and there may well be tears before the casket is covered in dirt, but the task assigned to them by the deceased’s final requests is finished. Such is the end for Tessa Powell (née Anderson), neighbour to Calvin, grandmother to Vincent, friend to Wilson, aunt to Henry and Elias, and great-aunt to Daniel. The casket is not, however, at rest. The rain that came down last night and through the morning has accumulated in Tessa’s final resting place, leaving an oversized bath of muddy water in the hole, which each of the six leans forward to consider. The casket, a maple box polished to a gleam, floats, of course, and as the six watch, it is moving slowly across the surface of the brown water, knocking into the grave’s interior walls and then changing direction until after a moment it stops, adrift but motionless. Fortunately, none of the deceased’s lifelong friends, closest blood relations, and sundry loved ones are present at the graveside to witness Tessa’s final movements, and their future memories of the ceremony will not be spoiled by the sight that all of the six view with a sense of shame, their noble task suddenly and decidedly ignoble. For the Mason Funeral Home attendant, water in a grave is not uncommon, and he solves the problem as he has many times before, dragging over a heavy green tarp and drawing it atop of the hole.