

In Memoriam

Natalie Conyer

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Mr. Tilley died doing the crossword. No surprise there: he did the crossword every morning. You could set your watch by him. Every day at ten sharp the library doors opened and Mr. Tilley shuffled in, thermos and Tupperware in hand, the same greeting every time, a single dip of the head.

‘Morning, Mr. Tilley!’ I’d reply, overdoing the cheer because I knew the story, how nearly fifty years ago his young wife had been swept out to sea, lost forever, and how he’d channeled his grief into this library, commissioning, funding and overseeing its construction, insisting it be named the Susan J Tilley Memorial Library, to honour her love of words.

For nearly fifty years, too, from when the library opened, Mr. Tilley spent his mornings here. He chose the same chair each time, set out his provisions in exactly the same order and fetched the previous day’s Herald. Users weren’t supposed to write in it but I made an exception for Mr. Tilley.

He would read the newspaper first, thoroughly, then fold it very neatly so the crossword was uppermost and begin, working out anagrams in pencil in a small spiral-bound notebook. When he got stuck he'd ask me for help, and if I had time we'd complete the crossword together. Then he'd pour himself a cup of tea (also a strict no-no for anyone else), offer me a biscuit from his Tupperware, and spend what was left of the morning staring at his hands, or into space.

One Tuesday Mr. Tilley gave a small cry. I looked up to see him clutch his side, eyes tight closed. He let out a sharp breath and fell forward, his forehead striking the table.

I knew what had happened but felt for a pulse anyway. Then I phoned the doctor and closed the library.



Nearly everyone in Silver Bay came to the funeral, though it was hard to tell whether they were there for Mr. Tilley or just to get out of the house. Silver Bay sparkles from December to March, when holiday people come. The rest of the time the place is boarded shut, teenagers clump in front of Maccas and plastic bags blow against seafront benches.

In his eulogy, Reverend Blackman told us not to be too sad. Mr. Tilley was in his eighties, after all, and

his time had come. The Reverend said a few words about Mr. Tilley's tragic life then segued into how grateful we were for the library, because it did more than honour Mrs. Tilley. It brought the community together, he argued, and he was right. We're too small for a town hall so if it isn't in the RSL it's in the library. People come to read and meet and gossip, and yes, we're grateful. And I'm more grateful than most because if it weren't for dead Mrs. Tilley I wouldn't have a job.

After the service the Mayor collared me. 'Louise,' he said, 'I think we should put on a special event for Tilley, as a memorial. In the library, of course. Afternoon tea? I'll make a speech and you'll prepare a presentation on his life. A words and pictures thing.'

I wasn't averse, for two reasons. First, I was aware the Mayor was shooting me a helping hand. He was kind enough not to mention it, but I could use the PR. I was born here, in Silver Bay, went to school here, became the town bad girl, no excuses. Driving home from the year 12 formal, me and Jason Miller stoned and out of it, the car rolled, Jason thrown clear, dead on impact. Me, not a scratch. I left town as soon as I could, came back six months ago to care for my mother. The job was serendipitous. How long before a town forgives? I didn't know.

The second reason was I liked Mr. Tilley. I liked his sense of being alone. We had that in common, that and losing people we loved and an appreciation

of puzzles. We understood each other, I thought, and I wanted to do something for him.



I started my research. Google yielded nothing, so on a windy autumn day I closed the library and drove to Port Lachlan, to the office of the Hope Coast Gazette, the Shire weekly. The Gazette hadn't digitised its archives but had got as far as microfiche. I sat in front of an eye-straining screen, scanning through issues from the late fifties onwards.

The first Jonathan Tilley mention came in 1958, when he captained the Silver Bay High rugby team to victory. Then, in 1963, a report that the *only son of Silver Bay mayor, Andrew Tilley, was last night arrested for assaulting a travelling salesman at the Silver Bay Hotel*. Jonathan claimed drunkenness and remorse and was released without charge. The same year, Tilley senior died and Jonathan took over the family construction company.

The sixties scrolled by, space travel, the Kennedys, Vietnam. Finally, in 1967, a photograph, titled *Grand party to celebrate Tilley – Viner engagement*. It read: *Two of the Shire's most popular young folk, Susan Viner and Jonathan Tilley, last week celebrated their engagement at Silver Bay RSL. L-R: Susan Viner, Jonathan Tilley, Glen McNally, Frances Ryan.*

Four people seated at a table, the men in ties and sideburns, the girls' hair straight and long. Susan Viner looked at the camera. Even in grainy black and white you could see she had something, a girl-next-door appeal. Jonathan Tilley, smiling, had his arm around her shoulder, declaring possession. Across the table, a taller, thinner boy and a larger, dumpier girl gazed at them wistfully.

I recognised the girl, Frances Ryan. As Principal of Silver Bay High, Miss Ryan tried to put the fear of god into me. Retirement hadn't sweetened her temper. She visited the library sometimes, never once acknowledging she knew who I was.

Six months after the engagement, another photo, the wedding. Glen McNally and Frances Ryan were best man and bridesmaid. Susan stood beautiful and serious in her long white dress. Jonathan smiled his golden boy smile.

The Gazette reported Susan Tilley's death on 3 January 1969, presumably the first edition after the end-of-year holiday. A banner headline read *Tragedy at Silver Bay*, and under it *Local Teacher Lost At Sea*.

Jonathan, Susan, Glen and Frances had spent New Year's Eve together, barbecuing on the beach. They had been drinking. Some time after midnight, Glen and Frances left, separately. It was a hot night and, according to Jonathan, he and Susan fell asleep. The next morning he woke to find Susan missing. At first he thought she'd

gone for an early dip but after a while he grew anxious.

They searched for days, police and SES and even light aircraft, but there was no trace. The culprit, they said, was the rip that sometimes sweeps the bay. The coroner ruled death by misadventure.

Soon after that Jonathan Tilley's mother died. Tilley Constructions began work on the library, and after they finished it Jonathan sold his company. From then on, he devoted himself to seeing the library was well run, and to his daily crossword puzzle visits.

I had enough information, I thought, about Mr. Tilley's later life. Now I needed to know more about the young Jonathan, what sort of man he was, what made him tick.



Frances Ryan lived in Beach Road, in one of Silver Bay's original stone cottages. My ring was answered by multiple yapping, then, 'Wait on!' and after a longish time she opened the door. She was bowed over a cane, but her eyes were bright. Two small fox terriers leaped at me.

'Monty! Angus! *Here!*' The dogs came to heel. 'Well,' Miss Ryan said, without inviting me in, 'what can I do for you?'

'Actually, Miss Ryan, I've come about the memorial for Mr. Tilley...'

'I heard about that. What exactly are you after?'

'I'm preparing a presentation on Mr. Tilley, and know that you were friendly with him and his wife. I wondered if you could tell me more about them.'

'No,' she said flatly, 'I couldn't.' Her mouth was set in a straight line. 'Is that all?'

Caught off-guard, I began, 'But...'

'Still won't take no for an answer, Louise?' So she did remember me. 'Let me be clear. I have nothing to say. I want no part of this. Do you understand?'

And I was on the pavement, the door shut tight, dogs going crazy behind it.



The electoral roll pointed me to Glen McNally, to a part of town tourists don't see, weatherboard houses with sagging gates and yards full of car parts.

I could hear his television from the ramshackle stoop. I hammered hard. No answer, so I did it again. This time the sound stopped and after a while the door opened a crack and a rheumy eye gave me the once-over.

'Meals on Wheels?' he said.

'Glen McNally?'

'You're the library lady.' He opened wider. 'Come in.' I followed him into a darkened living room yellow with cigarette smoke. 'Have a seat.' He pointed and I perched on a cracked leather couch. Glen McNally did an old person's drop next to me, into the TV-watching spot.

I found copies of the Gazette photos in my bag. 'Is this you?'

He leaned over to take them and I could smell him, cigarettes and something worse. 'Jesus, mate,' he said, shaking his head slowly, 'too long ago. What do you want?'

'The town's going to honour Mr. Tilley with a memorial service in the library. I'm doing some background on his life, and wonder if you can help?'

McNally tried a chuckle, which morphed into a phlegmy cough. Thumping his chest, he said, '*Honouring* him, eh, as usual he gets away with it.'

'What do you mean?'

He turned his gaze on me. 'Feel like making an old man a cuppa?'

The kitchen had the bare look of a place nobody uses. The milk smelled passable, just before the turn. I found a couple of mugs and took the tea through.

'Ta. You wanna know about Jonno Tilley? Long ago. Gone now.' McNally put his mug on the floor. 'Ruled the world, Jonno did. Know what? We were like this since nippers, before that even, kindy. He was OK, Jonno. Except...except when he got mad. Bugger of a temper. Broke my bike once. Forgotten why, now....'

I remembered the report about Jonathan attacking a salesman. 'Did he get mad often?'

McNally chuckled again, coughed again, took up his mug and slurped. 'Ropable, if he had a few. Then

you never knew...mind you, he was a good bloke, too, mustn't speak ill of the dead. Meant well, Jonno.'

'What about his wife? I pointed to Susan Tilley in her wedding dress. McNally took the photo and gazed at it, head bowed. I wondered if he was thinking about the day Susan Tilley drowned.

He was quiet so long I thought he'd fallen asleep. 'What about Susan Tilley?' I repeated.

He started, sighed hard. 'Suzie? Jonno was all she could see. Don't blame her, he had money, looks, everything.' He ran a thumb softly down her image.

I felt for a question, tried to frame it diplomatically. 'Did you – did you have feelings for her?' I was miles from my brief but it was too late.

Glen McNally pointed to a shelf across the room. On it, three framed photos were arranged around a candle. I got up to have a closer look. They were all of Susan Tilley. Two were head-and-shoulders shots, the other of her and Glen in bathers with shadows of people on either side.

From the couch Glen said, 'Answer your question? She had my heart, she knew it. Everyone did. If I – if I hadn't gone home that night, Suzie would still be alive, for sure.'

I went back to him. 'Why did you say Mr. Tilley would *get away with it*?'

McNally wasn't listening. He was crying, making honking noises, his nose running. I smelled urine. 'Here,

have some tea.' I passed him his mug, produced some tissues and sat with him till he calmed down. 'You OK?'

He patted my hand. 'She was going to leave him, you know. She was going to tell him that night, she said so herself.' He kept patting, sighed hard. 'She's out there, somewhere. I sit on the bench, asking the sea to give her back to me.'

I knew how it felt, to want to undo a death. 'Sorry,' I said, 'sorry.'

'Not your fault,' he answered.



The day of the presentation arrived. I tidied the library. Volunteers appeared and, helping them organise tea and cakes, I came across Mr. Tilley's belongings in the kitchen. I put the thermos and Tupperware in a cupboard and stood quietly riffling through his notebook, looking at sets of clues alongside their neat solutions.

Further on, I noticed something different. Pages of words and letters, some crossed out, others underlined. *By labyrinth or die*, one read, *badly by inheritor* another, *inhabited by lorry*, a third. Unlike the other entries these were untidy, the pencil digging into the paper, hard enough to tear it in places. Then, on the last page, my name, *Louise*, with an arrow pointing to the phrase *thy ordinary bible*, circled.

Mr. Tilley had left me an anagram. I had half an hour before the party so I took the notebook to my desk and got to work. It was hard without accompanying clues but I cracked it. Then I realised all the phrases had the same answer, the only one that made sense. But what was the message?

Suddenly it came to me, the leap of intuition that happens when you solve puzzles. One moment a clue is impenetrable, the next the answer's in front of your eyes, as if a cover has been peeled away. I knew what it meant, and my hands and feet went cold as ice. A moment later the door opened and the first guest appeared.



I'll never know how I got through the afternoon. People told me the presentation was good, just the right mix of familiarity and interest. I even included the story about Jonathan Tilley beating up the salesman. But the highlight of the day was the mayor's speech, where he announced Mr. Tilley had bequeathed everything he owned, all his money and assets, to securing the library's future, provided his ashes could be stored here. And then we had tea and cakes.



As soon as the last guest had gone I closed the library and hurried back to Beach Road. Frances Ryan came to the door, dogs at her feet. She opened her mouth to say something but saw my face and waved me inside.

In the kitchen she sat me down, fetched a bottle of Johnny Walker and poured two stiff shots. 'You look like you need this,' she said. 'Sit. You have something to tell me?'

I was calm. 'I think Jonathan Tilley killed his wife.'

Miss Ryan's eyebrows went up but she was unsurprised.

'You know already?'

'I suspected. Susan was going to leave him. That's a fact.' She took a sip of her whisky. 'The drowning story...I never believed it. It was too easy, and Jonno, afterwards, the way he changed...'

'Why didn't you say anything?'

'What could I say? I had no evidence. All Glen and I could do was stand back and watch. Question is,' and she looked at me with bird eyes, 'how did you come to that conclusion?'

I showed her Mr. Tilley's notebook. 'He left me a message. All these anagrams, they all translate to *body in the library*. I think they're a confession. I think Susan told him she was leaving him and he was drunk, and he had a temper. Maybe it was an accident. And then he buried her body, and as soon as he could he built the library around it. That's why he was always there, to be near her. These anagrams – he wanted me to find out.'

Frances Ryan was quiet for a long time. Then she said, with something resembling defiance, 'So. What are you going to do now?'

I hadn't thought about it. 'I don't know. What should I do? Doesn't Susan Tilley deserve justice?'

'Hasn't she had justice? Jonno Tilley wasn't bad, you know. He didn't mistreat Suzie. He loved her. I can still remember the two of them, solving those bloody puzzles together.' Her voice cracked. 'And as you said, he was there, day after day, doing penance.'

'I'll have to think about it.'

'You do that.' said Miss Ryan. She finished her drink. 'You do that. Now, time for you to go. I need to make my dinner.' She got up slowly, heavily, and stumped with me down the passage. At the door, as I stepped out into a bleak twilight, the first real winter evening, she grasped my sleeve with a bony hand. 'I have one favour to ask. If you decide to – to make this public, you leave me out of it. Promise?'

'But all this time you suspected him, you and Glen McNally. And didn't Mr. Tilley ruin more than Susan's life, and his own? Glen's made a shrine to Susan. If she had left her husband, wouldn't Glen's life have been saved too?'

'Is that what you think? That Susan Tilley was going to leave her husband for Glen McNally?'

'It's the logical conclusion...'

'You stupid girl!' Suzie never loved Glen McNally!

She was going to leave Jonathan for me, you hear, *me!* We were going to be together. In a town like this, so long ago, do you know what price she was prepared to pay, and me, too? If you want to get sentimental about lives lost, you think about mine. Now go!' and she gave me a push, closing the door with a thud.



The Council installed Mr. Tilley's ashes in an urn, in a display case near the library entrance. The plaque reads *These are the ashes of Jonathan Tilley, who built this library in memory of his wife, after whom it is named.*

I said nothing, of course. Because even if I had, even if they found her body, what then? Mr. Tilley was dead so he couldn't be called to account. And fifty years later, what did it matter?

For fifty years, every day, Mr. Tilley had visited his wife's grave. He'd made his life one long memorial to her. Mr. Tilley had punished himself enough.

I know this, because I know about punishing yourself. That night, the night with Jason Miller on the way back from the formal, he stopped the car. *I'm off my face, babe*, he said. *Need a little zizz. What a wuss*, I laughed. I got out of the passenger seat, staggered across to the other side, pushed against him. *Move over*, I said, *I'll drive.*

Natalie Conyer

Natalie Conyer is a late-onset writer scrambling to make up for lost time. She's read and loved crime fiction all her life, so much so she's now doing a doctorate on it, hoping to finish before she loses her marbles completely. She is a serial offender in the Scarlet Stiletto Awards. She won 3rd prize in 2015 and the overall Body in the Library Award in 2014.