

## Summer Reading

# Hello, petal

How flowers help us come to our senses.

BY *David Leser*

**H**ERE'S A dispatch from the frontline of masculinity: I buy flowers for myself often – if not once a week, then at least once a fortnight, depending on the health of the last bunch I bought. I took up this guiltless pleasure about 12 years ago, after my marriage had ended and I'd moved back to Sydney. I wanted colour and scent in my home and, now that I think about it, probably a sign of life, too, other than my own disordered one. Anything that was in season and about to bloom seemed to give me a keener sense of appreciation for the world and all its fragile possibilities.

I started with oriental lilies because of their height and fragrance – pink, white, hybrid, whatever was on offer – then moved to irises, because in the shock of the purple and yellow, and those exquisite, slender stems, I was able to contemplate the genius of Vincent van Gogh painting from his psychiatric hospital garden in Saint-Rémy.

For the past few years, tulips have been among my favourites – particularly yellow and orange ones – because of their spectacular spring show, their curvaceousness, their grace, their squeaky light-green stems and leaves and because they seem to last forever, even when they're on their last legs, drooping like fallen ballerinas.

Recently, though, I've also taken up with “big mamas”, a new chrysanthemum hybrid. I bought a bunch recently from my local florist, Anna Pizanis, who co-owns Tulipanna on Sydney's Bondi Road with her brother, George. When Anna asked if they were for a gift, I told her no, they were just for me.

“Why not have them gift-wrapped for yourself?” she suggested, then proceeded to tell me about a woman who does exactly that on a regular basis. “She's not waiting for someone else to buy her something,” Anna says. “She wants to be able to take them home, undo the bow, undo the wrapping, place them in water, then enjoy them all to herself.”

I tell Anna I think the story is beautiful and a little heartbreaking, and she says, “Oh, I've got so many stories about flowers.”

“Tell me another,” I ask, and soon she and George are regaling me with tales from the flower kingdom.

There's the man who knew he was dying and wanted to gift his wife flowers from the grave. So, before he went into hospital, he paid Anna and George for a year's worth of blooms, and, each month, after he was gone, a bunch would arrive with a card bearing the same message: “I am always with you.”

Then there's the man who, every week for the past 22 years, has had Anna and George arrange the same floral displays in his home: chrysanthemums and birds

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of paradise for the dining room; colourful posies of mixed seasonals in the kitchen and upstairs lounge room; and float bowls of orchid heads for the entrance, living room and bathroom. “He loves the same kind of flower,” says George. “He doesn't like change. And he uses the same vases.”

“They are his mother's vases,” Anna chimes in, “his mother's crystal, and we must be very careful with the way we handle them.”

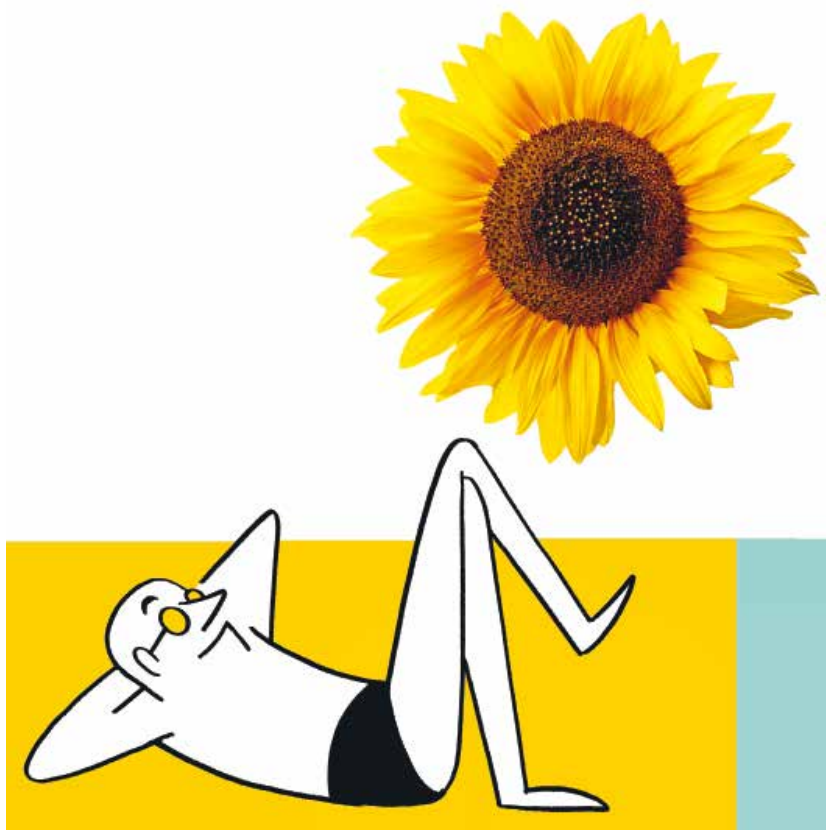
Anna and George grew up in a Greek family business that, at its height, boasted 13 flower shops in Sydney's CBD. They started their own store 25 years ago, after their father said they had to stand on their own four feet.

They regard themselves as being in the “happiness business”. “Even one flower can change a person's

day,” says George. They celebrate all the reasons people have for buying flowers; not just for births, deaths, marriages and anniversaries, but because someone got sick or well, or lucky or unlucky, or because someone was sorry (maybe even *very sorry*), or they were hopeful for love or grateful for love – friendship and hospitality, too – or they simply didn't know what to say.

Or, in some cases, because they were so rich there was no limit to what they could do. As with the Middle Eastern prince, who flew into Sydney one morning – the day before Valentine's Day – and asked for 12,000 roses to be delivered to his hotel suite in secret, while he and his girlfriend were sleeping. He wanted to surprise her in the morning.

They were instructed to deliver the flowers at midnight, then be gone by 1am, and they had to ensure that every available space in the suite – except,



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of course, the bedroom – was filled during that hour. “We came in two vans,” George recalls. “We had to take off our shoes. Phones were on silent. No coins in the pockets ... and then we had to slowly place them everywhere, all over the kitchen, all through the lounge room, in every corner of the room.”

So what happened in the morning? Did the girlfriend shriek with delight? Did she agree to marry the prince?

“She woke up at 6.30am,” George says with wry understatement, “saw the flowers, had breakfast in the room, then checked out at 10am.”

Earth has been spinning for about 4.5 billion years and, at some point, probably about 149 to 256 million years ago, the first flower suddenly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere.

Imagine the moment. For millions of years our planet had been covered in vegetation, then, one day – possibly at first light – a small bud miraculously emerged from its shoot and set the stage for what was to follow: an explosion of colour and perfume that would one day blanket the planet.

According to Eckhart Tolle, the German-born spiritual teacher and author, the human capacity to recognise the beauty of a flower awakened in us, however briefly, a recognition of the beauty of our own essential natures. And this recognition, he

believed, was one of the most significant events in the evolution of human consciousness.

“Flowers were most likely the first thing [humans] came to value,” Tolle wrote in his book *A New Earth*, “...which was not linked in some way to survival...[and] they provided inspiration to countless artists, poets and mystics.”

“Do you love this world?” asked the American poet Mary Oliver. “...Do you also hurry half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden...[to] fill your arms with the white and pink flowers, with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling, their eagerness to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they are nothing forever?”

No, because I don't have a garden, but if I did, I would take up this singularly cheerful work with relish, particularly now that

summer has burst forth again, and Earth is tilting ever more dangerously on its axis.

What better way to love this world?

My girlfriend Abby has been a shameless flower thief since her childhood, although she insists she's always been the “Robin Hood of floral thieves” because she only steals from abundant gardens.

She's teaching me to notice the newest seasonal blooms on our local walks, encouraging me to tune into the first scents of jasmine and how they portend the beginning of spring and the flinging open of

windows. She tells me that every September she goes a little crazy for wisteria – a “wisteria hysteria” she calls it – because of the sudden and passing explosion of purple, and the way their flowers, shaped like bunches of grapes, droop, then carpet the ground.

Even though she's not religious, she believes flowers are proof of God; that they're offerings from another realm, “divine creations” forever enchanting us with their colours, fragrance, shapes and textures. I often see her swooning over their unapologetic beauty, particularly the orange hibiscus with its pink centre which – just like the butterfly – is here only fleetingly, and wonder, “Why so long for me to wise up to all this splendour and magic?”

Just down the road, my neighbour Jackie has created her own Monet's garden in front of her apartment block. I don't know the names of half the flowers but she tells me the pink and red ones are snapdragons; the purple, larkspurs – which the bees seem to always orgiastically gravitate to; the fluffy yellow showoffs, Mexican marigolds; the ones with beautiful, big cones, swamp banksias.

All these factories of loveliness gifting themselves to us, reminding us that even in these shuddering times, beauty keeps revealing itself in hundreds of thousands of different ways, every day.

Such pleasure they give in their “short and beatific” lives, Mary Oliver wrote. “There is nothing in the world that can be said against them.”

How lucky we are. ■

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