

## **The Last Dab of Chanel**

Desolation becomes duty-free when ANNE SUMMERS recalls the joy of choosing gifts for her late mother.

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**Usually at airports my emotions hover at the anger end of the barometer, mostly ricocheting between outright rage and mere frustration as flights are delayed, gates changed or luggage fails to appear on the carousel. So I surprised myself recently at London's Heathrow Airport when I realised as I wandered round the shops of Terminal Four that what I felt was desolation, and grief. It was, I worked out, because I had no one to shop for. Usually I buy my mother's Christmas presents at Heathrow.**

**Sounds a bit tacky, I know, but December is when I travel a lot and rarely get to the shops in Sydney and there's always time to kill at the airport on the way home. Besides, my mother said she could never have too much duty-free Chanel and she got a kick out of being able to bring out the Harrods ginger biscuits to her bridge friends. But she died in April so this is the first time in something like fifty years that I am not able to buy my mother a Christmas present. It did not really hit me until I was at Heathrow.**

**It used to give me guilty pleasure. I told myself that I was not like one of those harassed businessmen whose only thought of family when they travel is at the gift shop in the Arrivals Hall. I liked to think that I put forethought and purpose into my shopping as I wandered through the British Museum Shop, Caviar House and pondered the various products at the Molton Brown spa shop. And if she thought I was taking the easy way out, she never said, and whenever I visited her, in Adelaide, the Chanel dusting powder was always on prominent display in the bathroom and the now empty Harrods tins would have been put to good use storing biscuits she'd made herself.**

**Christmas was always a fraught affair for my family. Some of us always planned overseas travel to avoid the ordeal of the forced conviviality and the undercurrents of resentment that invariably erupted, like Christmas sparklers. Others used the excuse that this was the year they had to spend with their in-laws, something my mother always took as a personal repudiation. Mum usually began her Christmas campaign around August but sometimes she'd start even earlier, ringing each of her five children and asking with studied casualness what we each planned to do that year. As year after year failed to produce the happy event she played out so often in her mind, she became more and more agitated. She announced a couple of years ago that she was determined to have us all together for Christmas "just once before I die". I never had the heart to give her a copy of *The Corrections* so she never knew that in Enid Lambert there was a literary version of this demented and doomed**

longing, just as she died not knowing that my partner and I were going to disappoint her again this year by spending Christmas with his family in the United States.

Had we known that last year was to be my mother's final Christmas, would we have behaved differently? Of course we would have, but then the gathering would have taken on an air of foreboding. It would not have had the artificial gaiety she longed for. As it was, I always brushed aside her pleas and perhaps over-compensated by my extravagance with her gifts. Two years ago, when I had to wait an unexpected twenty-four hours for a delayed flight, I took the tube into Knightsbridge and went to the Victoria and Albert Museum shop where I bought her an armful of Morris products and stuffed them into a signature blue and white patterned cotton tote bag. She'd loved them and had become quite emotional about the (non-Christmas) card, a sentimental painting of young girls in the 1930s, which was when she was a teenager, a less complicated and stressful era that she looked back at with nostalgia and regret.

The last time I saw her was at the airport in April when I waved her off from a pleasant and uncomplicated four-day stay in Sydney. Shockingly, a week later she was dead. She died as she'd always prayed she would, in her own home, in her bed, not knowing, not suffering. The best way to go, everyone said. Hers really was "a very easy death", so unlike the hideous disintegration described by Simone de Beauvoir in her memoir of that name of her mother's death from cancer.

Mum was lucky, and so were we, that she was spared the humiliation of losing her drivers' licence, the indignity of the nursing home, the ravages of old age and illness, of debilitating pain and dementia and loss of body function. Instead, she went into the night a young looking and vibrant 82 year old who'd played tennis a few days before and who'd been to three parties over the weekend. She described in the diary we discovered to our astonishment that she'd kept every day since our father's death in 1988 just what she'd done throughout that day, right up until she'd got into bed. The dead live on in many ways. In my mother's case, it was with bright and triumphant colours. Eight weeks later, the ranunculi tubers she'd planted that afternoon were blooming in a tub near her front door.

She'd been wanting to come to Sydney for a long time and we'd finally found a time that worked. She was curious to witness the details of my life, and to see how my brother was getting on in his new flat in Dulwich Hill. On her first night, another brother was visiting from Adelaide so we'd had a family dinner, not all of us, but more than we'd managed to accumulate in a long time. It wasn't Christmas; there was no pressure to enjoy each other's company so we found that we did.

We watched the Pope's funeral together, followed the next night by the Charles and Camilla wedding. We renegade kids judged the wedding was better than the funeral when it came to the clothes, the music, the order of service and the guest-list and Mum endured it all with uncharacteristic good humour. (There were two

things we could normally never joke about in her presence: the Catholic Church or the Irish.) We were glad she never knew that Cardinal Ratzinger was the new Pope. In the jumble of paper on her desk, I found a copy of a letter she'd signed protesting the directive, some years ago, by Ratzinger to the Sisters of Charity at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital that they not open a safe injecting room.

I also found a copy of a scathing letter she'd sent to Senator Amanda Vanstone, castigating her in the strongest possible language for her decision to deport the Bakhtiyari family. "I don't know how you and John Howard will be able to sit down to Christmas dinner knowing what you have done," she'd written. Although Mum lived in a blue-ribbon Liberal seat, she was not happy with the government then and she would not be happy today.

When I began the bleak task of going through her things, I found a box of Harrods rose-scented guest soaps in her bathroom cupboard, one of last year's gifts. I have no idea what I would have picked out this year but I realised that day at Terminal Four when I found myself looking for something for her, that I was now a middle-aged orphan, who had no parent to buy presents for. I suppose it's time I grew up because I somehow never expected this to happen and I'm having a hard time getting used to it.