

# ELIXIR

Stories, reminiscences, poems  
and other entertainments



The 60th-Anniversary Anthology  
of the Eastern Writers Group

EWG

*The Eastern Writers Group's fifth anthology - Elixir*

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## Foreword

This is the fifth anthology of the Eastern Writers Group. Our previous anthologies were: Zest 1 (1990), Zest 2 (1991), Zest 3 (1992) and Epacris (1996). We have decided to call this one Elixir. Why? Because an elixir is any preparation having the power to transmute base metals into gold, to prolong life or to cure whatever ails the soul or body. Writers seek to transmute the base metal of raw experience into literary gold; and although we cannot make life longer, we hope, for at least a few moments, to make it a little more enjoyable. As for curing the soul's ills—well, a good story or a successful poem, encountered at the right moment, may nourish the spirit even when the subject, at first glance, seems downright earthy.

There is a second reason for this choice of name. When this anthology was being planned, the Eastern Writers Group celebrated its sixtieth anniversary. The word “elixir”, suggested by one of our contributors (Josephine Mackechnie), happens to contain the letters LX, the Latin notation for sixty.

The Eastern Writers group was founded in 1938 and has functioned continuously since then. One of its founding members, Wynne Whiteford, was still regularly attending meetings until just before his death, at the age of 85, in September 2002.

Meetings are held once a month (third Sunday in every month, 2.00 pm at the Box Hill South Neighbourhood House, 47-49 Kitchener Street, Box Hill, Victoria, 3128). Writers are welcome to attend meetings and read samples of their works. This gives community writers a chance to hear their work discussed and to help other writers by freely expressing their opinions. For details phone 9802 2205 or 9720 1973.

As for the theme of this collection—there is no theme. Some of the contributions are feather-light, some are reflective, some are decidedly grim—but so are the many incidents that make up our lives.

We, the contributors, hope you enjoy Elixir.

## To the Reader

Perhaps with feet on stool and book in hand,  
You're thinking: Now the world is far away;  
And all I need to do is understand  
The words upon the page; but we must say  
That if you read these pages, you will find  
The world comes close indeed - because we write  
Of what is in the heart and in the mind—  
Things just as real to us as smell or sight.  
All writers must, like readers, come to know  
That no amount of writing can conceal  
What is and must be. So we undergo  
Our writing tasks in search of what is real.  
We write, we speak, we hope that we are heard,  
For us, the great salvation is the word.



## The Ballad of Kenny Mudford

Lissa Mitchell

**(This story won first prize in the Eastern Writers Group 1998  
Biggest Little Short Story competition )**

**K**enny Mudford was found naked and face down in a storm drain near his home in Rockhampton. He was eight years old. The TV news showed a picture of Kenny as I had never seen him—with his hair brushed and his nose clean. I was eight years old too and went to the same school.

We were in the fourth-grade class. I was top and Kenny was bottom. He was little and brown with white-blond curly hair and scabby skin. His feet were broad and very tough and he always wore the regulation grey school shorts and shirt, even on weekends. Kenny lived in a falling-down house on the outskirts of town—the Aboriginal area—with too many skinny, blond, curly-headed brothers and sisters. Most days he came to school with no lunch and no money to buy any.

I didn't like Kenny Mudford. He snivelled and stank, hung his head and twisted his dirty feet around his sore-covered legs. Apart from his death, I remember only two things about him.

The first happened in religious education class. The Methodist minister asked us, "On what day was Christ crucified?" And of all the hands raised to answer, he chose Kenny's.

"What do you want to pick him for?" Craig called from the back of the room. "He doesn't know anything."

The minister was a mild man, so it frightened us to see him suddenly angry.

"Everyone knows something, even Kenny Mudford," he boomed.

"What's your name?" he asked Kenny.

"Kenny Mudford," Kenny replied.

"What's your address?"

Kenny gave it.

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"How old are you?"

"Eight."

"You see, he does know something," said the minister. "And if he can learn those things, he can learn anything."

He smiled down and rested a priestly hand on Kenny's head.

The class was silent, impressed more by the minister's unsuspected temper than by Kenny's display of intellect. But Kenny beamed up at the man as though he was Jesus come down from the cross. That was the first time I saw Kenny smile.

§

The second time Kenny smiled was when I drew kisses on his Christmas card by mistake. Crosses always went on girls' cards, but you didn't put them on a boy's unless he was your boyfriend. I don't know how I ended up putting kisses on Kenny's.

My hot-cheeked denials made no difference to Kenny. After all, he had the evidence. Three small crosses right under my name. He would have shown them to every kid in the school, if it hadn't been for Craig.

"I reckon you drew them on yourself," Craig said, and Kenny's fifteen minutes of fame was over. But afterwards I would glance up during class to find Kenny staring at me. I always looked away.

§

So you see, it's not hard for me to imagine how Kenny Mudford ended up in that ditch. All you had to do was take notice of him, even by accident, and he thought it was love.



## The Man in the Leather Jacket

Wynne Whiteford

The tension between Mark Sarasin and me had been building up for a long time. In fact, the first seeds of it were germinating when we were at school together.

We were competitors in a way, both outstanding in our exam results, but we seemed to reach our goals through different avenues. I was a careful planner, studying, long and hard, whereas Sarasin breezed through each subject without apparent effort.

Throughout our later schooldays I was obsessed with a career in flying, while Mark didn't seem to care where his future lay. When I took a course in aeronautical engineering he followed suit, mastering it with the same spectacular brilliance he had shown at school.

As I had planned, I worked in an aircraft assembly plant while I mapped out my next step. I began my flying career with an old four-seater Cessna 180, but within a few years I was operating a twin-engined Cessna in which I could make charter flights down to the islands in Bass Strait.

Sarasin re-entered my life when I had already established a viable business, operating out of Moorabbin Airport, where I had obtained the use of a small hangar. He showed up one day and announced that he wanted to get back into flying.

"What have you been doing?" I asked him.

"Public relations. Made a lot of money, but I want something else out of life."

He was persuasive, and soon we entered into a partnership where we shared the flying and he handled the publicity. It soon turned out that I was doing about eighty per cent of the flying while he managed to create the impression on clients that he was the principal of the organisation. He looked impressive enough, lean, dark, with intense black eyes that some people seemed to find hypnotic.

I talked him over with Glenda, whom I planned to marry when

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work began flowing in more steadily, but to my surprise she seemed to take Sarasin's side.

"At least, Mark has imagination and drive, Jack," she said without smiling. "Perhaps you could learn a little from him."

This was probably the beginning of a rift between Glenda and me. I could see that she found Sarasin more exciting—more filled with limitless potential, the way he told it.

Sarasin announced that he was going to sell the old aircraft he owned and buy a replacement. When I saw his new acquisition, however, I was shocked. It was a Second World War Wirraway, rebuilt after a crash; admittedly with a good reconditioned Pratt & Whitney engine—but it could take only one passenger.

"I'm going to use it for aerobatics," said Sarasin. "Plenty of power in that engine, and she handles well. There's an air show coming up—remember? Should be good publicity. I'm going to get her painted red and black."

Friction between Sarasin and me became more frequent as we neared the date of the air display where he was going to make his mark in aerobatics.

"Give her a final checkout" he told me imperiously. "I'm giving her a full tryout tomorrow—loops, Immelman turn, terminal velocity dive, the lot. But don't touch the motor. I've had a P & W expert look it over."

Late that evening I was working alone on the Wirraway, with everything silent in the hangar—and outside it, except for the occasional roar of some aircraft landing or taking off.

I looked at the machine in front of me. One of Sarasin's phrases kept coming back to me—terminal velocity dive. That would put maximum strain on the upper elevator cable when he pulled out of the dive.

The side panels of the fuselage were held on by dzus fasteners—Jesus fasteners, as the profane air mechanics called them. Easy to release with the special tool. I took the left-side panel off and laid it aside.

I marked with a spot of oil the upper cable where it lay against one of the fairleads. Then I went to the cockpit, reached in and moved the control column forward. I walked to the door of the hangar. No one nearby, just a couple of distant aircraft taxiing along runways.

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Back inside, I closed the door of the hangar and returned to the Wirraway. Locating the oil spot I had marked on the cable, I inserted a sharp tool between the strands.

The cable was made with half a dozen high-tensile wires spiralling around a heart wire. I broke four of the outer wires, leaving only two with the central heart-wire. I covered the break with grease, then returned the control column to its former position, sliding the break in the cable along until it was hidden in the fairlead. Side panel on, quickly. Dzus fasteners snapped home. Tools away, lights out.

It appeared Sarasin made his terminal velocity dive over the sea, not far offshore. Witnesses said they saw the machine go straight down into the water without making any attempt to pull out of the dive. When I was told of this I expressed the necessary amazement that an experienced pilot could have so misjudged the distance between his plane and the water.

They salvaged the plane a few days later. The propeller blades were bent by the impact with the water, and the plexiglass canopy over the two cockpits had been stripped off. Strangely, there was no sign of Sarasin's body. His safety belt lay empty, as though at the last moment he had realised that it was useless at the speed he was travelling, and that he might have a slight chance of survival if he were thrown out.

Eventually, the Accident Appreciation people came up with the cause of the crash being the parting of the upper elevator cable, but their report made no mention of some of its strands being deliberately cut. Perhaps time had helped me here.

I breathed more freely. A perfect, coldly planned murder. And I had got away with it.

§

Some time later, I awoke from a vivid dream. I was in the Wirraway, taking off, with Sarasin flying it from the back seat. I was sitting in front of him. I turned my head to look at him, but he gave no sign of recognising my presence.

In a flight that would have been exhilarating in other circumstances, we climbed rapidly until we came close to the service ceiling of the machine. Then Sarasin put the craft through a series of slow rolls, barrel rolls, loops, and other manoeuvres. Our course

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had taken us out over the sea, and he headed down in a steep dive.

I wanted to call to him not to pull out too sharply, but my voice did not operate above a harsh croak.

The speed of the dive grew, the roar of the engine rising to a frightening pitch. The nose lifted slightly, very slightly, as Sarasin pulled back on the control column. Then I heard the snap of the cable, and we went on downward, the direction of the dive steepening until we were travelling almost vertically down. Slowly, the vista of sea and coastline began to rotate in a slow spin.

I turned around to look at Sarasin again, and this time he appeared to see me. His dark eyes blazed with diabolical hatred.

Then the sea came up at us like a slamming door.

§

I awoke drenched with sweat. The clock on the wall showed two, and through the window I could see moonlit trees against the black sky. I slid out of bed and went into the living room to pour myself a drink, the bottle rattling against the glass.

Normally I don't dream often, and my dreams are brief, fragmentary and meaningless. But this was different. It had consistency, and a chilling sense of reality. I remembered the area of the sea where the aircraft had struck the water, near an easily recognisable little headland jutting into the bay. I could have driven down there in a few minutes and located the exact spot.

Call it obsession if you like, but within ten minutes I was out in the car, heading along almost deserted roads towards the coast. I found the little headland and drove off the beach road, parking in a moonlit space under the tea-tree.

When I stepped out of the car, the night air was cold. Shivering a little, I walked through the trees to the sand, then sat down on a small hummock.

The headland looked to me exactly as it had appeared in the dream. Over to the left was the area where the plane had plunged in, although now there was nothing to identify the precise point.

As I looked there, a streak of white foam flashed on the dark surface of the sea, like water breaking over a reef, or something swimming beneath the surface. I knew there were sharks about, but just as I was looking at the area with narrowed eyes a sheet of drifting cloud hid the moon, and the whole region became dark.

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Continuing to stare at the dark water, I had the distinct impression of something moving closer inshore, like something wading out of the sea. In the last flicker of light from the obscured moon, I thought I saw the figure of a man coming out of the sea on to the sloping sand.

I decided it was time to go. I was starting to see things. I almost believed I had seen the figure of a man in a black leather jacket and black flying helmet.

Once I had begun to move through the trees, I had the eerie sensation of something behind me. I began to run, trying to convince myself that I was moving quickly to counter the cold of the sea air, but I could not prevent a few glances over my shoulder.

Through the contorted trunks of the tea-tree, I had the illusion of something following me as I ran. An illusion, of course—but I ran faster as I neared the car.

My hand shook as I selected the key and fumbled it into the ignition lock. I raced the engine without looking back, slammed into gear and drove forward, reached a dead end among the trees, reversed, spun the wheel frantically, then drove out onto the beach road.

At last, I was able to breathe again normally, and I dried my sweating palms against my trousers to gain a better grip of the wheel. This was no good! I had let my nerves get out of control.

I drove fast, and when I passed under a bright cluster of street lights near a small shopping centre I glanced in my rear-view mirror. My heart seemed to pound like a jackhammer.

There was something behind me in the back seat. The figure of a lean man, crouching forward, dressed in a black leather jacket and flying helmet. I forced myself not to look around. There was nothing there—I knew that. Yet why was the car filled with that smell—the smell of the sea?

In a few minutes I would be home. I increased my speed, careless of travelling far above the legal limit. Then, abruptly, I seemed to freeze.

Something slid over the back of the passenger seat beside me. A lean, almost skeletal hand with flesh partly rotted by the sea, protruding from the sleeve of the water-damaged leather jacket. I suddenly realised the thing was coming over beside me, and I think I

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must have screamed.

Still moving at high speed, I missed the bend in the road, crashed through the wooden fence and the bush behind it, over the small cliff. The sand and the sea came up at me like a slamming door. . .

§

When I awoke, my first thought was one of surprise that I was still alive. I regained consciousness on a trolley, being wheeled along a mostly dark corridor—it was still early morning, and there was little activity about. As we passed some oblique light from one of the rooms, I saw the reflection of myself in the glass of a large, unlit light fitting in the ceiling. My face was still covered in blood.

I was transferred to a bed in one of the wards, still partly numb from whatever tranquilliser or anaesthetic they had given me.

Even in here, I am aware of the overpowering smell of the sea. Even in here . . . .

Oh God! By the door! What's that? . . . .



## **Brown Snake**

Gwayne Naug

Sometimes there is a brown snake out there  
Who moves across the landscape of my fear  
Swimming through the caverns of my mind  
An uninvited visitor to my dreams.  
Oft times at midnight he invades my space  
And silk-like twines around my waiting limbs.  
Yesterday I heard him rustle bark  
Shed by a haughty, high-stepping lemon gum.

My cat watches with jealous topaz eyes  
Hissing at this interloper in my life.  
They tell me he was seen drinking dew  
In the first glow of dawn's ethereal light.  
In monthly homage to the gibbous moon  
He uncoils to stage a sinuous dance  
His bewitching eyes scan the universe  
Seeking knowledge hidden under layers of time.

Is he an omen who guards my paradise?  
Or but a vision I fail to understand?  
He changes with the seasons every year  
And sheds his skin of gleaming copper.  
In winter he disappears in a dark void  
Full of mystery which I cannot solve,  
And I recall his strange mesmeric power  
As I await his heralding of spring.

## Everyone Can Dream

Josephine Mackechnie

**(This story won first prize in the Erotic Muse Inaugural Literary Competition 1998)**

Henry froze. Good God! She was coming across the road. He fled to the back of the shop.

The past few weeks he'd been in agony, yet ecstasy, waiting to hear the clack-clack-clacking noise of her shoes that echoed down the deserted early-morning street long before she came into view. Then he'd watch, through the slatted blind on the door, as she walked towards the bus stop opposite his shop.

He was fascinated by her calf muscles as they tightened with each step taken in the backless shoes, supported by perilously high heels. Her feet were forced downwards, almost in a straight line, like a ballerina on her points. Teasingly, her thighs disappeared under a skin-tight, short skirt that barely covered her tiny, swaying bottom. Sometimes she wore a figure-hugging sweater with a deep vee in the front, promising things he could only imagine. Women were a total enigma to him.

Once he'd seen her lick her palms, then sensuously drag the sheer nylon stockings up her legs, easing out any unsightly wrinkles that may or may not have been there.

Then, looking over her shoulder, her breasts a thrusting wonder to him, she'd studied the dark seams in her stockings, checking that they were dead straight. He'd felt like a voyeur, but couldn't look away to save his life. His mother would have called her a Jezebel. Henry didn't care. This woman was everything he'd ever wanted. In his reveries she was "available", though of course she wasn't. Not to him. Girls like her were always for other men. She wouldn't look twice at him. If she did, he knew she'd look right through him. He didn't think he'd be able to cope with that. She was "the unattainable" in his world, but he could still look at her. Everyone can dream.

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When he woke up each morning, he'd visualise her waking up too, stretching languorously, her nightie ruffled up around her body from tossing and turning during the night. He wouldn't let himself think it was for any other reason. Couldn't bear to think of her with a man. She'd get up and pad to the bathroom, half asleep, hair mussed, and shower. He'd seen magazines. Knew what women's bodies looked like, and imagined hers, stretching up, letting the water play over her curves. Soaping herself.

The visions he conjured up nearly drove him crazy, inevitably succeeding in making him "all unnecessary", as his mother used to say. Until he was about nine years old, she'd insisted on bathing him, not trusting him to wash himself properly, and the first time he'd become "all unnecessary", his mother had chastised him, smacking his backside hard. After that he'd locked the door, refusing to let her in, and bathed himself.

§

After, thankfully, leaving school, he'd started working in his parents' dark and antiquated bookshop. At first it had been a sanctuary from an unfriendly world. Then they'd died. First Dad, then Mum, and he'd stayed on, terribly lonely. He'd always been a loner, but lately the shop seemed more like a prison. Life was passing him by.

Then he'd seen—her . . .

§

The shop bell jangled. What could she want? In an old bookshop? He forced himself forward.

"Are you open yet?" she asked, with an infectious grin. Suddenly all the black clouds that hung over his day-to-day existence were gone. He just stared, dumbstruck, at her beautiful face with its flawless skin and the blonde hair piled up high on top of her head.

Her lips, with a cupid's bow, were painted scarlet, and large, long earrings dangled from tiny ears. Taking his silence as assent, she sashayed into the shop, and he heard a faint swishing sound as one nylon-clad leg brushed the other. He mentally photographed every inch of her, to savour later in his lonely bed.

"I'm looking for a book," she said, then laughed, putting a hand over her mouth, seeing the funny side of her words. He momentar-

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ily glimpsed her perfect white teeth, then found himself joining in her mirth, mesmerised by her startlingly blue eyes surrounded by heavily mascara'd lashes and realised he hadn't laughed like this for a long time, perhaps ever.

"Well, you've come to the right place," he said, then, delightedly, realised he'd been "funny" too, and they both laughed together. Amazingly, he felt more relaxed, then noticed she looked a little disconcerted, feeling for the tiny crucifix hanging on a gold chain round her neck. His eyes followed her hand and he found himself staring into her cleavage. Realising where he was looking, he felt himself redden and looked up quickly, horribly embarrassed, but she hadn't seemed to notice his discomfort.

"Actually," she said, "do you sell second-hand books? I can't afford much."

"Oh yes, yes," Henry stammered. "Perhaps I can help? Anything in particular?"

"No, that's okay," she said, "I'll find what I'm looking for", and clacked across the floorboards, leaving a trail of perfume in her wake, and leaving Henry desolate.

Magnetised by her, and intrigued, he found her poised on the top rung of his wheeled library ladder, gradually pushing it along the shelf, her shoes discarded on the floor. Henry was hypnotised by her black-stockinged legs. He wanted to run his hand along her feet, feeling the silkiness, then up and up and . . .

Spotting him, she chuckled, saying, "I think I've found it." Henry's heart danced, beholding her excited face. Holding a weighty tome, she twisted round, her breasts pushed out by the action. As she teetered on the step, Henry darted forward, started climbing the ladder, and grasped her around the waist. She giggled, amused at her precarious position, unaware of the new and strange emotions he was experiencing at the touch and feel of her body under his hands.

Never had he known such incredible softness. Her warm, giving flesh beneath the thin sweater melted under his fingers, and all he wanted was for the world to end right there and then.

She handed him the book and he had to release her. Placing the book on the floor, Henry held her again, revelling in the feel and movement of her hips, so completely new to him, as she descended,

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carefully feeling for each rung.

Standing close together, just inches between them, her head only up to his chin and surrounded by her perfume, she looked into his eyes and said, softly, "My name's Gina. What's yours?" He managed to croak, "Henry". Then, to his utter disbelief, he realised he was becoming "all unnecessary"! Humiliated and feeling betrayed by his body, he dashed towards the counter to literally cover his embarrassment.

"Are you all right, Henry?" she asked, a tiny frown creasing her brow.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out. "I just felt . . . a bit dizzy. Do forgive me."

"Oh, don't be silly," she said, patting his hand. Then, placing the book on the counter, she said, "Can I do anything?"

Henry thought: You've already done it, but said, "No, thank you, I'll be fine." Unable to take his eyes off her, he waited as she slipped her shoes back on. Then, out of the blue, she asked, "Are you here every day, Henry?" He couldn't believe she could care enough to ask "Yes," he assured her. "It's my shop."

She leaned on the counter and once again he had to drag his eyes away from her pushed-together breasts, and the cross nestling between them. Coquettishly, she asked, "Have you noticed me—at the bus stop?"

'Oh, yes," Henry said, thinking, incredibly: She's flirting with me. "I have."

With a twinkle in her eyes, she murmured, "Well, fancy that. I'll give you a wave, tomorrow, if you like?"

"I'd like that very much," he said, smiling back at her.

Henry was in a dream as he picked up the book to put it in a bag. It was a copy of 'War and Peace'. Astounded, he looked at her and said jokingly, "This is going to be heavy reading!"

Her eyes opened wide as she burst into laughter. "Oh, you! I'm not going to read it! A leg's broken on my bed and this will prop it up just the right height."

Henry stared at her, astonished, then roared with laughter, and she joined in. The old bookshop had never heard or seen such merriment. When it subsided, he felt he'd known her all his life and refused to take any money for the book.

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As he escorted her to the door, with his arm around her, she looked up at him, and said, breathlessly, "Till tomorrow then, Henry," and he hoped and prayed she meant it. He gently closed the door after her, then realised, proudly, he was "all unnecessary" again!



## The Cockroach

Pip Kalajzich

**(This story won first prize in the Eastern Writers Group 1997  
Biggest Little Short Story competition.)**

"He's a cockroach." She lit another cigarette, and blew the smoke upwards where clouds were billowing against the nicotine-stained ceiling. "Always scurrying about in dark places. Hiding from something or someone, that's what I reckon."

I've introduced myself as a journalist, doing an article on The Cockroach, for 'The Morning Sun', and I have a rolled-up paper with me, which she seems to accept as identification. In fact, I'm a PI. In my pocket, disguised as a glasses case, I have a camera, and the cord to take a photo runs down my sleeve. My client is a hell-raising MP who has been making a lot of fuss about paedophiles recently in State Parliament. The Cockroach is a judge, and I've followed him to the Bum Steer Bar, a gay haunt in the Cross.

The Cockroach is wearing a dark suit and tie and drinking soda water. He's found a shadowy booth and buried himself in the corner. Alone. Betty, which probably isn't her real name, or sex, is the barmaid.

"I take it he's a regular?"

"Sure. Most nights. But that's no secret. It's well known that he's gay."

"So what's his problem? He's not here for the drinks, and I don't think he's enjoying the music. Is he waiting for someone?"

She nods, drops ash on the bartop and wipes it up.

I look around the bar. Someone I recognise is near the stairs. A bent copper.

"What's up those stairs?" I ask.

"Rooms. For sex. For druggies, but he's not a druggie." She shrugs her shoulders and looks back towards the cockroach and sneers. "Watch this."

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I follow her eyes. The Cockroach emerges from his cavity and, head down, does a dash towards the stairs at the back of the bar. I leave my stool to follow him. He speaks for a moment to the bent copper, who turns towards me. The copper's gun glints under his jacket, as the metal catches a flash from my camera and he moves towards the toilets under the stairs. I start up the stairs after The Cockroach.

There's no lights beyond the landing. The corridor is full of closed doors. I peer into the gloom. Empty as far as I can see, but I can hear a scuffling. Missed him again. I slap the newspaper in my hands.

Downstairs, I see the copper stuffing a wad of fifties into his wallet. I track him outside, keeping my distance. In the lane, it's raining. A group of young boys follows him as he re-enters the bar by a back door. They're wearing green garbage bags, bare legs, bare feet—and shivering. I wonder if their parents know where they are.

On the wall opposite is an ad for insect spray: "When you're on a good thing, stick to it."



## Diamonds in the Mud

Joy Dettman

I can't say if it's green or just mouldy-like. It looks alive—sort of like some venomous mushroom what's taken root on his head. Its brim comes down to his nose where his chin sort of juts up to meet it; but there's got to be a mouth under it somewhere, I'm thinkin', cause it talks to me.

"How far are ya goin', mate?" it says.

"Balranald," I say.

It's brim's level with the window of a vehicle a sorts. A ute, it's been. Rust red. Mud red. I'm starin' and I'm thinkin' it's probably only the bloody mud what's holdin' the rust together, like, and I'm thinkin' of the storm what's threatenin', and maybe of me own mortality.

I'm standin' there and I'm starin' at the hat 'cause there's no eyes for me to stare at, see, and I'm thinkin': He's the only wheels what's answered me thumb in the hour since the cop dropped me ten mile outside a Kerang. And I'm thinkin' of how I wouldn't of been ten miles out of Kerang if we left Melbourne yesterday like we was supposed to.

"I can take ya as far as Swan Hill," the hat says.

"Ta," I say, and I yank the door wide, step up and in, feelin' for a foothold between coats and papers, toolbox, dog chains, yesterday's stubbies and last month's butts.

"Watch me floor, mate," the hat says.

I look down then to the bit a floor space I've reclaimed like, and there's daylight underneath me bloody shoe. Quick as a flash I kick his coat back over a hole as I see a fossilised sock disappearin' back to the earth from which it came, like.

§

His gears mash. They grind. His wheels buck and squeal as a tailshaft tries to whip the bastards into a team. He kicks the clutch, stomps on the accelerator and he gets the crate movin'. She's doin' all

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right once she's in top gear, so I let go the door handle, sit back and try to wriggle me bum in between the springs and the kapok while proppin' me heels on a toolbox. The air is weighty with the scent a dog, and dead socks, and cigarettes, but I've lived with the scent a dog and dead socks before. It's the butts what sort of like awakens in me memories of that last sweet fag of three months ago.

We gave it up.

We.

Not all I've given up neither. Sometimes I think I sold me soul to become half of a We.

Me and me girlfriend, like, are payin' off a house. Smokes are too bloody expensive she says—well, she doesn't say bloody expensive, like, just plain expensive, but I can read the bloody all over her face.

She's sort of different to the usual type of chick I've mucked 'round with—sort of talks a bit posh, like, comes out with things like, "The female genitalia should not be used as a curse word, Norman."

§

"Help yourself, mate," the hat says, tossing me the pack as he pushes a fag under his brim. He must of found a gap there 'cause the fag stays where it's put.

"Given 'em up," I say, handlin' the weight of the pack, smellin' it before I toss it on the springs between us.

"I gotta give 'em up," the hat says. "Ruinin' me health. Gettin' to the stage where I'm coughin' out lumps a me lungs when I roll out of the sack in the mornin'."

He coughs up another lump, hawks it out a the window, and the wind what's gettin' stronger, catches it, blows it back and sticks it to the mud on the rear window. I watch it slide like a great grey slug down the mud, leavin' a shiny trail behind it. I watch it until we're drivin' into Swan Hill, which, due to his drivin' is better'n tryin' to watch the road ahead, like. He hits the brakes outside a Swan Hill. Nothin' happens much. Then a back wheel sorta grabs, and as it grabs he rams the clutch down and grinds her into first.

"Gotta do a bit a business," he says. "Least I got ya a part a yer ways."

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"Yer. Ta," I say.

He drops me in the main street a Swan Hill where I buy a pie and a Coke before headin' out on the highway.

§

Nothin' is stoppin' this arvo. A Commodore tootles past with a snooty-nosed pair a wealthy pensioners in the front. The back seat's empty. I'm wearin' me bike gear, due to the weather, right—but its not like I'm one a the Hell's Brigade or nuthin', still the old dame gives me a look saved for cockroaches and lice.

§

The rain is pourin' down. I stop under a tree and start thinkin' this trip is sort of like turnin' into a nightmare. Maybe somethink don't want me in Balranald, I'm thinkin', maybe fate, like me best mate, is tryin' to turn me head for home.

I mean, who needs a weddin' and a house half a city away from ya job? Who needs a bloody job, anyway? I didn't used to—not till she started talkin' weddin's.

As me mate said when the cops dragged him off to the lock-up, "There's got to be more to life than pussy-footin' around a sheila who had to go and get herself born in bloody Balranald."

Well I'm thinkin' of his words and his bike, what the cops confiscated, and I'm lookin', sort of lookin' back towards Swan Hill, when what comes rattlin' down the road but the hat and his rust bucket.

"How far are you goin', mate?" he says.

"Still Balranald," I say, lookin' at the mouldy hat and searchin' for the eyes I know he must of had underneath it someplace.

"Second bloke I picked up what's goin' to Balranald, today. What's the drawcard?"

"Me weddin'."

"Take ya as far as Tooleybuc."

I never heard a Tooleybuc. "Is it on me way?" I arst,

"Only way to go, mate," he says.

I yank the door open and climb in—don't make the mistake a lookin' for no floor space this time. I gotta admit, I'm pleased to be out a the rain, like. It's pourin' down—washed his bloody wind-screen so I can almost see where we're goin'.

I sit back in me damp clothes. Me leather coat is now addin' a sort a familiar wet-cow odour to the dog, and the dead socks, and

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the sweet stale scent of the fag.

He lights up a smoke a course. Offers me the pack a course.

"Gave it up three months back," I say

"I'm off 'em after today, Bloody things are killin' me," he says.

He has three cigarettes before we get to the Tooleybuc turn-off.

"Do you live in Tooleybuc, mate?" I arst.

"Me? Na. I knew a bloke once what did," he says.

"Yer?"

"Yer. The bastard married me sister, then pissed off with the sheila who worked at the Tooleybuc pub."

"Yer?"

I take a long hard look at the hat; and you can say what you like, there's no denyin' family—not that I can see a face like, but I'm thinkin': I couldn't rightly blame any poor bastard married to his sister for pissin' off with a barmaid.

"I'm pickin' up a new dog in Tooleybuc. S'posed to meet him there at twelve."

"Ya runnin' late," I say, checkin' me watch what me girlfriend gave me for Christmas.

I used to own a good one—one a them novelty ones what have this naked sheila on the face. Amazin' what it could make her hands do. Me girlfriend didn't like it, said it was sexist. I'm thinkin' of it now and I'm smilin'. I'm not listenin' to the hat.

§

We drive across a bridge. Welcome to New South Wales, it says. Christ, I'm finally interstate, I'm thinkin'.

"We're here," he says. "Gotta pick up me dog."

"Where's here?"

"Tooleybuc. Nice little town. They got the pokies now. Place has gone ahead since they got the pokies?"

"Yer?"

I'm lookin' for Tooleybuc and I'm wonderin' where its gone ahead to and where it was before the pokies, like, then he sort of does his no-synchro change-down and we slide to a halt in front a the pub.

"Havin' a beer, mate?"

I think long on that one. I need one real bad, I'm dehydratin' fast due to the do me mates flung for me—which lasted twenty-

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four-hours longer than it should've like, but I'm thinkin' of me girlfriend who'll be startin' to panic, and of the cop who only let me go on account a me weddin'.

I shake me head.

"I better keep goin'. Gotta be in Balranald by six at the latest or me girlfriend's gunna be sendin' out the cavalry."

"Ya got another thirty-odd miles."

"Righto. Thanks for the lift, like."

"See ya, mate," the hat says.

"Yer," I say, but I'm thinkin': Not if I see you first, mate.

S

Rain's pourin' down. Every time I step off the bitumen I sink down to the top a me boots. Hardly a decent tree to shelter under so its not much use shelterin', like, so I keep walkin'.

I'm gettin' cold feet in more ways than one. Me boots are leakin'. They wasn't never made for walkin', and I'm thinkin' of the bike I used to ride, which I sort of inherited from one of me mother's old boyfriends. He left it with her to look after when he changed his address to Coburg a few years back. He gets out soon—that's like why I let me girlfriend talk me into buyin' a house out past Dandenong—which is a hundred light years away from West Melbourne.

I kept his bike-boots. Mum reckons he paid a fortune for 'em. He got took. The bastards have rubbed both me heels raw so as I don't know which foot to limp on; but I keep limpin', sort of lookin' back over me shoulder more frequent, like, and thinkin' of how I shouldn't a sold his bike.

But me girlfriend, who thought it was mine, kept naggin'. They can wear ya down with their naggin'.

"I can't wear me nice clothes on the bike, Norman. Cars are more comfortable, Norman."

More comfortable for her! We bought an old Falcon on Saturday and she took it on Sunday and drove it up to bloody Balranald to organise the weddin'!

Bitch.

I start thinkin' of me head a hair what I used to have, what I let her cut off—after she tossed me mother's old boyfriend's snake-skin headband in the Salvo bin.

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Take over, bitch.

Old Samson lost his strength with his hair, but my best mate reckons I lost my bloody wits with mine, 'cause the next thing I do, I goes out and gets a job, see, gets the first one I goes for too—what only proved the bitch right again.

“No one’s goin’ to employ you with that hair, Norman,” she used to say.

So she’s got me workin’, bringin’ in nearly as much dough as her, and it gets so I can afford a packet a fags when ever I want one like—so she makes me give em up and start payin’ off a three-bedroom house what I can’t bloody afford and don’t want neither.

Who needs more than one bloody bedroom at a time, any rate?

I’m mud in her hands, I’m thinking. She’s got me on the potter’s wheel. She’s reformin’ me into . . . into a what’s-his-name.

“A snag! A snag fer a Balranald bag, can’t have a drag on a fag . . .”

Oh shit, I’m thinkin’, what am I gunna do? Oh Christ, I’m thinkin’, what I wouldn’t give for a drag on a fag right now—a whole packet of fags. I’d chain-smoke me way to Balranald. A packet a fifty. I’d smoke one a kilometre. A good smoke can last ten minutes. I reckon if them runners can do a mile under four minutes then I can walk a kilometre in ten. I start doin’ some multiplyin’ and subtractin’ as I walk.

§

The light is fadin’ real fast. The sky’s lookin’ like someone’s took to it with a greasy mop, formerly used for cow-yard duty. It’s sorta looks green, sorta eerie. I feel like I’m the last poor bastard left on the earth. Maybe I am.

I look ’round me, wonderin’ if they’ve got dingoes out this way, and wonderin’ if dingoes hunt in the rain, and how hungry they might be, like. I look at me watch, change me rucksack to the other shoulder, take a match from me pocket and start chewin’ on it, pretendin’ its a fag.

It’s gettin’ close to five o’clock. I reckon I can pulp this match, usin’ no hands, in ten minutes. I start steppin’ it out, gnawin’ on me match, and spittin’ out the splinters—but there’s no joy in eatin’ bloody matches.

I haven’t seen a car since I left Tooleybuc. There’s no signs nowhere. I’m limpin’ down the middle a the bitumen, thinkin’ I’m

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gunna be late. I'm gunna be late for a very important bloody date.

§

I see him before he sees me. He's weavin' all over the road, and if he's got any headlights, then they're covered in mud. He brakes. The wheels swerve at me. I jump back off the bitumen and the mud comes up to me knees.

"How far you goin', mate?" the hat says.

"Bloody Balranald you crazy bastard," I yell, sinkin' down deeper.

"Every coot on the road is goin' to Balranald today."

"You goin' there this bloody time?" I say.

"Just picked up me new dog. Goin' piggin' with Groover Powers and Murph Lawton. Ya know em?"

"I don't bloody know no one. Me bloody girlfriend comes from Balranald."

"Got a girlfriend, ah. What's her name?"

"Mary bloody Lamb."

Shit! That name sends shudders through me frame. What sane parents, with the name a Lamb, would name a daughter Mary? Me best mate, who at six-thirty this bloody evenin' was supposed to be me best man, but who is now languishing in the bloody Kerang lockup, sleepin' it off in bloody comfort, always calls her Hadda Little. Jesus it narks her.

"Are you gettin in, mate, or lookin' for pneumonia?"

"Might as well. Only one better way to commit suicide."

"Watch me floor," he warns.

"What bloody floor?" I say as I crank the door open and look at a dog big enough to make two of me. I'm no giant, like, but I don't communicate with kneecaps neither. Any rate, I'm aware by now that its no use goin' in feet first on account of no floor, like. It takes me two attempts to get half me bum on the seat on account a the dog's pushin' harder'n me. I make it on the second try, and sort of lift up, drag the door shut and sidle up to the dog.

It growls.

"Is she related to the Wakool Lambs?" the hat says.

"Who? What?"

The dog's snarlin'. His head is bigger'n mine. He's a white-and-brindle bastard, and I'm not feelin' lucky.

"Ya sheila?"

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"I dunno."

I'm tryin' to find the end of the seat belt, not for safety, like, but attemptin' to take some stress off the door what I'm sort of half sittin' on, but the dog's sittin' on the seat belt and its teeth are six inches long. It's shovin' 'em in me face.

I give up. I sit on the door handle.

"Hope she's not related to the Wakool Lambs. Never heard a good word said about that nest of wowsers."

"Coal? War-coal?"

"Out that way." The hat waves an arm. "You been around much, mate?"

"Around West Melbourne."

"Bloody Melbourne. I knew a bloke who got took to Melbourne fer a operation once. He never come back.

"Yer. I know a poor bastard what tried to get to Balranald one day, too. No body never heard a him again neither," I say, but I'm thinkin': Coal? Wars? Wowsers? Money?

"The Lambs," I say nonchalantly, "I spose they made a bit a dough out a the war like . . . with their coal?"

"Dunno nuthin' about coal. Knew a bloke what was gunna marry one of 'em. once though. Grab us a fag outa that toolbox will ya.

I open the tool box what is devoid of tools. There's a shirt, old socks, dog collars, a dead loaf a bread, bullets, and, down the bot-tom, a unopened carton of fags.

I rip it open, still remembering how. I pass him a fag.

He pushes it under his hat, lights it. "Help yourself," he offers.

"Gave 'em up three months back."

"I gotta give 'em up. Coughin' me guts out."

For five minutes the cabin shakes with his coughin' and his hawkin' and his dog barkin' while he rides the centre of the bitu-men.

The land is flat. The crate is wound up and we're flyin'.

"Ah, bugger that cough," he says. "Lift the lid on a stubby for us, will ya, mate. There's a six-pack at your feet somewhere. Help ya self."

I help him and myself to a stubby, still thinkin' about the bloke what was gunna marry one of the Lambs, and I'm sinkin' me stubby like it's the last one I'm ever gunna sink—which mightn't be too far

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from wrong, neither, after tonight—but I gotta find out about that poor insane bastard who was hitching up with a Lamb, so I says, “So what happened to him, like?”

He hawks one more time while I’m tryin’ to look for his eyes under his hat. He’s jugglin’ a beer in one hand, a smoke in the other and the dog must a seen somethink on the road, cause he makes a dive across the hat an’ knocks the wheel.

We hit the side of the bitumen and the wheels sink down in the mud.

The hat belts the dog in the jaw with his stubby, he heaves on the steerin’ wheel, and the bloody car rolls, don’t it.

§

I wake up lyin’ face down in the mud, me rucksack on me head. I think me neck’s broke, so I try to roll to the side, like, and take me last breath a air, and me rucksack slides off me head.

I lift up me chin, and in the last a the daylight I see this heap a rust, sort of like wrapped ’round a lone tree. And I see his ugly bloody dog hangin’ by its collar from a low branch. It’s dead and I don’t care.

I crawl then. I’m too scared to stand in case I can’t—too scared to wipe the mud from my eyes in case it’s blood, so I crawl on me hands and knees. I’m half blind in one eye and can’t see outa the other and I’m turnin’ the clean country air blue with female genitalia-sexist-curse words and all. I’m just crawlin’ and I’m spittin’ mud and curses.

Then the pile a rust starts talkin’ my language.

I crawl up to where I recognise broken glass sort of twinklin’ like diamonds in the mud, and I’m thinkin’: Can’t be nothin’ alive in there, like, but it’s lettin’ go with some language what I never heard put better, so I pulls meself up and I sees the hat jammed between the steerin’ wheel and the tree—sorta wrapped around with rust.

“Are you hurt bad,” I ask.

“How’s me dog?”

“Dead.”

“Shit. Haven’t paid for him yet. Find me a fag, mate.”

Where? There’s no front, no back no more. It’s all one and the same. He’s a rust beetle, pupatin’ in his rust cocoon. We’re bug-

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gered. We're up shit creek in a barb-wire canoe and he wants a fag.  
But I know that wantin' feelin'.

I look 'round me feet—recognise a wheel. I kick it. I kick it again.  
I recognise the corner of his toolbox. I kick it too and it falls free.

"I got you a fag, mate," I say, sorta proud a meself.

"Arm's stuck. Light her up fer us, mate."

I've got me chewin' matches in my pocket. I dig one out, and,  
shelterin' a fag with me hands, I light it, tryin' hard not to suck on  
the weed.

Smells good. Tastes even better.

I pass it grudgingly through the metal pulp to him. "Here y'are,  
mate," I say. He's not movin'. Stopped swearin'.

I look at his hat. It looks sort of different. I lift his hat.

He's got eyes all right but they're starin' at me cross-eyed. I lift it  
a bit further and half his head starts comin' off with his hat, and I  
sort of see why the hat's changin' colour.

I jump back, the cigarette is in me mouth, and I'm suckin' on it.  
I'm suckin' and suckin' on it. I'm standin' there in the rain, shelterin'  
the fag like it's the only thing what's alive in a dyin' world and I'm  
suckin' on it.

Nothin' comin' from neither direction. Must be almost halfway  
to Balranald—or halfway to Tooleybuc?

I pick up his carton of fags, shove em down the front a me coat  
and start runnin' back to Tooleybuc. I'm suckin' on me fag and I'm  
runnin', and I'm not lookin' back over me shoulder neither. I'm  
runnin' and suckin', I'm suckin' and I'm runnin'. Oh Christ! how  
I'm suckin' on the glorious weed.



## Screaming is a Health Hazard

James R. Vanselow

She screamed. And screamed again. I hit her and hit her, but she wouldn't stop. If only she had stopped screaming so that I could have stopped hitting her. After a long time she stopped screaming. She stopped breathing, too.

It wasn't my fault she started screaming in the first place, but after she started I had to stop her. All I did was ask her for a cigarette and she started screaming. So what if I did have a knife in my hand at the time, I was only holding it by my side. Life under the overpass is rough and a guy has to protect himself. Christ, it's not as if I went up to her and waved my blade in her face and said, "Give us a cigarette or I'll cut your face."

§

I want a cigarette all the more now, so I go through her coat pockets and bag and she doesn't have any. Why the hell she couldn't have told me, I don't know. Here I am with a dead woman who is not screaming any more and no cigarette between the two of us. Pathetic really. The newspapers would headline this as Killed For A Cigarette if they knew the details, but in fact she was killed because she'd rather scream than tell me she had none.

She hasn't got any money either, apart from a few coins that don't add up to a dollar. The only jewellery is a gold wedding ring. It's an effort, but with some twisting and tugging I manage to separate it from her finger.

A gold ring, some coins, and a dead woman is what I have, and all I want is a cigarette.

I have never had a corpse of my own before, but instinct tells me there is something I am supposed to do. The Egyptians are good with corpses. They wrap them up and build a pyramid over them so you don't know they're there. I could pile some rocks over her to make a pyramid but there isn't any under the overpass. I wonder where the Egyptians get their rocks from in the desert. I

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remember something about grave robbers and feel the gold ring and coins in my hand. I don't want anyone thinking I don't take proper care of my corpse, so I push the ring back on her finger and put the coins in her bag.

The lamps of the roadway overhead light some patches and not others. Someone might come along in the dark and trip over her and get hurt real bad. I am reluctant to be too familiar with the lady, especially as we haven't been properly introduced. I say "Pardon me" and take her real delicate-like under the armpits and drag her over to a pillar where I sit her up. She looks a bit better now, but the wind is cold so I unroll my blanket and put it around her. Looks just like any down-and-out sleeping under the overpass. If it wasn't for the blood on her face she wouldn't look all that bad.

I don't want to lose control of the situation, so I step back and think about what to do next. I get an idea. I hear around that the police have lots of corpses and I hope they may be in the frame of mind to give me a few free tips as to what I should do for mine. I take a chance on bothering them at such a late hour and make a call from the phone box at the end of the overpass.

§

A patrol car slides to a stop, lights flashing, and two guys in uniform get out. I direct their attention to where the woman is sitting. They shine their torches on her for a while and then one shakes her by the shoulder and she doesn't wake up, although I can't say I'm all that surprised. "Looks dead," he says to his partner.

The two police officers now look at me and one says, "Do you know what happened, mate?" I don't want to get involved with police officers I don't know all that well, so I decide to say as little as possible—leaving myself out of the picture so to speak.

"She was walking along and all of a sudden she started screaming and flapping her arms. She started bleeding from the face and fell down screaming and jerking around.

"After a while she stopped screaming and jerking and I made her comfortable."

"God, that must have been a terrible thing to see," the police officer says and fumbles in his pockets with his right hand before it comes to rest on the butt of his holstered revolver. "Damn! No fags again. I could kill for a smoke."

## The Bridge

Brian Le Marquand

Tom Begg looked ahead at the road and felt perspiration sticking at his collar. His hands were damp on the steering wheel and the air-conditioner did not work. He should not have had that extra Coke at lunch because now it was doing uncomfortable things to his bladder, and the next town was fifty kilometres up the track. His wife Angela had the map spread on her lap, trying to work out where exactly they were going. She should know. It was to her grandparents' place, and even though she had not been there since she was a kid, she had been there, which was a lot more than Tom.

"Are we there yet?" he said.

Angela chewed on her little finger the way that had made Tom fall in love with her on their first date. Even now, after twenty years' of marriage, it had a strong affect on him. They could almost be newlyweds if they didn't know each other so well.

"I think the map is wrong," she said.

"How can it be wrong? We bought it not an hour ago at that Tourist Information centre. It shows the entire region in detail. And that's where we are, in this region."

"I know we are, but I don't think grandpa's old town is."

"Of course it's here," said Tom. "Where else would it be?"

"I'm not saying that . . ."

Whenever she was "not saying" something it meant she was about to slam it right on the head with a sledgehammer and splatter Tom's brains with it.

"What I am saying is that the town might not be on the map nowadays. When the mill shut down in the Seventies it just about killed the place. The train doesn't even stop there any more."

Tom had heard this a hundred times the last week with Angela on the phone to aunts, uncles and cousins trying to pinpoint the place out in the middle of the sticks. Which is where they were right now.

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He nodded his head. "I know." Yep, his brains had splattered.

"Then why did you ask?"

She chewed her finger again and an involuntary smile lit up his face. "I just wanna know if we are there yet."

"We'll have to stop at the next town and ask directions. There is a fork in the road and we should bear west, but I want to be sure."

"I'm gonna have to stop before then?"

"Why?"

"Make use of a tree."

"You should not have had that extra drink."

Tom pulled over and disappeared behind a line of bushes. He came out a couple of minutes later looking immaculate, if a little weary from the heat and the long drive. He liked to look his best. Before getting back in the car, he opened the boot, unlatched the suitcase and changed his shirt. He got behind the wheel refreshed and pulled back onto the road, spinning the tyres in the gravel.

"Why did you do that?"

"You don't always need a reason for doing things," he said. "The kid in me erupted for a second."

"Just watch out for speed cameras."

He pushed the needle just above the speed limit. Angela kept her mouth shut in case he pushed it a lot over the speed limit. She did not relish the idea of driving back with him sitting next to her fuming over a suspended licence. At times it was best to let the kid erupt now and then.

It was partly her fault, though not exactly, but time had been kind to her. She looked a dozen years younger than she was. Tom tried to keep up, in a puerile sort of way.

She knew the signs: the fresh shirt was for him, not her. At the next town he'd be looking over the girls. It didn't matter, not really. She got plenty of stares from the blokes. Tom's friends were not above tweaking her bottom when they'd had a few beers. It never went further. Certainly not as far as Tom had gone on the rare occasion.

They were happy enough for her to turn a blind eye to his inflections, none of which were ever serious. The love between them was still there, somewhere. They had seen too many friends unable to ride the tide go through the public pain of divorce. Angela

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did not believe she could turn her back on two decades of marriage. It was comfortable and others were doing it harder.

"This could be a holiday house for us," said Tom. The hint of a new beginning or a jump-start on what they already had. "A house by a lake in the hills."

"Uh-huh," said Angela.

It was an idea they had tossed around since Angela became the beneficiary of her grandfather's estate. But it was a repressed area, nothing much to do, the nearest neighbour a lazy five-minute walk down the road. The remaining residents were pensioners living in the past. The population of Windella was ten and declining. There was not even a post office.

Angela doubted that she could even sell the house. There was no real estate market for a dying country town. The reason she wanted to go out there at all was to put flowers on the grave and say goodbye. The last time she had seen her grandpa was ten years ago, when he came to the city for a visit. She owed him that much. Blood called to blood.

"Why did your grandpa die?" asked Tom.

He was ninety-five years old.

"Because Grandma died," answered Angela.

He died the day after she did.

Tom and Angela wanted to understand but found it difficult. An uncomfortable silence settled between them. Tom ignored the speed limit completely. He didn't see any cops and stuff it anyway. It was with relief that they entered the next town and pulled up outside the pub. They went inside to stretch their legs and check final directions. The locals in the pub should know.

Angela went into the ladies' room to freshen up. A tree by the side of the road was not her style. When she came out, she saw Tom talking to the girl behind the bar, pouring on the charm. She must have been all of twenty-two and the peroxide fresh out of the bottle that morning. Angela considered getting in the car and driving, leaving him behind, finishing the trip on her own. She might know in a day or two if she would pick him up on the way back. Yet she had to admire him, the brashness. She had fallen for his lines with barely a second thought. Of course they were both twenty at the time, married a year later.

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Blondie seemed to be succumbing when the wife arrived. "Find anything out?" Angela asked.

"This is Kim."

"I meant how we get there?"

"Not yet."

Angela picked one of the older gentleman and went and talked to him. He was a mine of information about the olden days of the district. He knew the location of every tree stump, who cut down the tree and why. He even bought Angela a beer. She accepted only because Tom and Kim were mooning over a drink.

Back outside, they both clutched pieces of paper with drawn instructions to the intended destination. Both scraps of paper were remarkably the same.

"Let's go," said Tom.

They were half an hour along the highway when Tom stopped for a pair of hitchhikers. Angela had her doubts but Tom was eager to give a lift to a couple of young folk who looked as if they had been walking most of the day. Besides, the girl with the pack on her back was a stunner. The bloke was an unfortunate but necessary accessory. He could not really take one and leave the other. Angela would hit the roof if he tried.

"Thanks," the hitchhikers said as they piled into the back seat.

"Where to?" asked Tom.

"Darwin," they answered together.

"The Top End," mused Tom. "You have about four thousand kilometres to go. But I guess we are headed in a northerly direction."

"That's okay," said the young bloke, who called himself Max. "We have to start somewhere."

The girl introduced herself as Ilona. They were a couple of university students on break, seeing the countryside together. They had a one-man tent. "But we manage to fit into it all right," said Max.

Ilona grinned demurely.

"Sleep under the stars to save money."

They gave themselves three weeks to complete the trip to and back from the northern capital. Others had done it. It was all the rage.

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The afternoon was getting late when they reached the fork in the road. Angela invited the young couple to the house in Windella, rather than stay on the road so close to evening. Max and Ilona did not seem to mind. They were happy anywhere. The old house in the nearly deserted town by the lake sounded interesting.

The setting sun lit up the waterscape as Tom pulled into the yard of the locked house. Angela lifted the door key from the glove box and walked up the front steps. They had seen nobody on the streets, just a few lights in a few houses. A chill wind came off the lake and Angela led the way inside.

The air was musty, but five minutes with the windows open as the last of the day billowed the curtains freshened the rooms.

The electric power was off, but a wood stove provided heat, a place to cook the contents of tins and boil water. A pile of wood and an axe by the back door gave Tom and Max exercise. The four of them ate by candlelight. After discovering the toilet was not inside, they snuggled into sleeping bags on air mattresses on the floor of the main room. In the middle of the night Angela woke up to the muted sounds of love farther off in the dark. Ilona woke up and thought it was the older couple and kinda cute. It was a possum snuffling between the walls. Tom and Max slept like logs until an hour after dawn when the aroma of coffee peeled back their eyelids.

Angela poked around the house and found a pile of photo albums. There were pictures of her on the lap of grandpa and grandma. Tom thought it might be worth getting an antique dealer to look at some of the furniture. He rather liked the rocking chair in the living room.

Max and Ilona walked down to the lake and found a pretty spot. They came back holding hands and giggling. At the edge of the property a ravine dipped down to the rocks on the shore. It was easy enough to walk around on the grass but across the middle of the gap was a spar. A single narrow beam spanning the precipitous drop. It was not a fallen tree, as it appeared from a distance, but a wooden plank purposely placed there. A worn foot track leading to it was clearly visible. It was a bridge.

The track led around to the other side, beginning and ending at the bridge, as if the idea was to walk around in a circle. Go across

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the bridge, around the edge of the ravine, and back across the bridge. It made no sense. To walk out there was a balancing act of the most dangerous sort. There was nothing to hold onto but air.

Max called to Tom who had brought the rocking chair onto the verandah to enjoy the view and a beer. Angela also came down to the ravine to see what Max and Ilona had discovered.

Tom couldn't make it out, but Angela blinked and said, "The love bridge."

A faint memory kindled: of her as a child overhearing a conversation between her parents about the mad coots at Windella walking the "love bridge" in the moonlight. "Stupid idiots could fall to their deaths," said dad. As a young man, grandpa had been an officer in the Merchant Marine. He came across a mountain village in Asia where a local custom at the wedding ceremony was for the couple to walk out on a thin bridge over a deadly drop and meet in the middle, with nothing to hold onto but each other. A test of love. The people in that village were the happiest he had met anywhere.

He brought the idea home. For nearly seventy years he and grandma met on the bridge whenever they took the notion into their heads. They lived long, spontaneous lives, dying safely in bed.

Angela explained what the bridge was for and Max and Ilona could barely wait to try it. Max ran around the ravine to the far side. Ilona paused while he got in position. Before Tom and Angela could tell them not to be crazy, they pranced out to the middle, met and embraced. The bridge was only five metres across but the drop was fifty metres straight down to the rocks.

Letting go of each other, they parted and walked back to the safety of the ground.

"Your turn."

There must be a trick to it. Maybe an illusion of slenderness, a perspective against the hole it hung over that made the bridge appear less substantial than it was in reality. Nobody could run out there as Ilona and Max had done without falling. Their smiles did not give away any hint of the mystery. Tom walked around the rim of the ravine, looking at the bridge from different angles, trying to properly size it. He stood at the far side and gingerly placed a foot upon it. The thing was not a matchstick and neither was it a tel-

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ephone pole, but wide as the sole of his shoe. The beam did not wobble or shudder as he put his weight upon it. He stepped back onto the ground. Max and Ilona watched with an arm around each other. Angela noticed this with a dash of envy. There is nothing as impervious as young love, she used to think.

"C'mon!" she called across to Tom and stepped out onto the span.

She took a step.

And another, sticking her arms out for balance. Tom came towards her, eyes bulging in their sockets. A breeze caught in Angela's dress, tugging. She leaned into it but not too much for fear of the gust passing and the still air taking away balance. Wearing a dress here was a bad idea. Best do it naked. She seemed to recall in that long-ago overheard conversation whispers of her grandparents doing just that. No wonder the shame in her mother's voice. Angela being seven at the time, it was over her head. Now she understood the practical importance of the extra support it would offer . . . and the added danger.

Her grandparents were stark raving lunatics! Ready for the rubber room! How the hell did they survive as long as they did without straitjackets?

Tom buckled at the knees and began to sink, but there was nowhere to go but over the side, so he straightened up again. He kept coming, hands groping as if in the dark.

Love! What did the young and starry-eyed know about love, except enthusiasm? It's easy to run to each other's arms and hug for what seems like forever. But every day, over the years, is something else. The mortgage, paying the bills, the second mortgage, going to the supermarket and buying for value, putting a meal on the table, raising the kids, the mind-numbing housework with soap operas for company. The weekends that slip away because you are too busy. The long hours at the office. The doubt that maybe he is not at the office. The nagging thoughts of greener grass. Time pulling at the first grey hairs. Knowing each other so well it becomes a bore. Only trust holding a promise.

Tom's foot slipped and he fell hard on the plank, cracking his nose in a splatter of blood. His hands gripped the wood as he steadied himself. Angela reached out but he waved her off, saying he was

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all right. She stood still as he sat. He swung one foot up and then the other, propping his legs, almost splayed either side, and pushed himself to a standing position.

They were close enough to hold hands and kiss on the cheek. Tom turned around and with Angela grasping his belt they stepped back to safety.

Tom dabbed his nose with a handkerchief.

"Got a bit scary," he said.

Angela nodded. "We managed all right."

Max and Ilona held each other a little more tightly as they suspected the couple were not talking about the bridge.



## The Button Jar

Gwayne Naug

We had just returned from a sojourn in Canada and that delightful country taught me much, including my resolution never to complain about Melbourne's weather again.

The tenants had cared for our house and had added a mauve rose to the garden, two more goldfish to the pond, and a few empty cartons in the garage.

"Can I come over, Mum and take those cartons?" asked Gavin. "I can use them to store books in."

With Gavin came my granddaughter Trisha, who spread enthusiasm like honey over everything she did. She tossed her amber plait back and forth. "Nana, I'm going to search for treasure in the garage. If I find any, can I keep it?"

"Need a licence for treasure, my poppet."

"Don't worry your grandmother, Trisha," admonished Gavin.

"Oh, she could never do that," I replied, holding in check the love I felt for her as I watched the movement of the bridge of freckles which spanned her nose.

As we were removing the cartons, we spied a box of doll's clothes which Trisha inspected and announced, "Quite unsuitable for my doll Kimmie—I don't think she would wear them."

There was also a pile of women's magazines, mainly full of the doings of royalty before they really "did" it. We also found a few jars embossed with an advertisement for ginger marmalade, which I had always considered an abomination. One of the jars sparkled, even in the dim light.

"Oh, look Nana, a button jar?"

"And you mind out for spiders, young lady," warned Gavin as he tried to disentangle himself from a web which had caught his unruly red hair.

"Spiders are my friends," announced Trisha as she rubbed the dust from the button jar with her lime cotton T-shirt.

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I sat down on a wobbly stool and thought of my mother who had collected green buttons of every shape and size, and never used any of them, and my grandmother who loved pearl buttons. As children we had thought them priceless artifacts from the south seas.

And there was stylish Great Aunt Emily—why are they called “great”?— who wore black jet buttons which looked for all the world like chunks of coal.

Suddenly there was a yell from Gavin and I sprang up.

“Bloody stepladder! Why is it left there just to trip up innocent people?”

“Damn it!” he added, hopping about.

“Don’t swear, Daddy,” said Trisha as she picked up an empty bird’s nest. Then her eyes saddened. “I wonder what happened to the eggs.”

“See the buttons, Trisha,” I said to distract her.

“Can we take them outside, Nana? It’s too dark in here.”

Gavin smiled and I noticed there was a button missing from his shirt, and I wondered why his wife Irene didn’t sew one on. But then she never did look after him properly, didn’t realize how lucky she was to have married my Gavin.

We spread the buttons out on a gnarled tea-tree seat and the sunlight danced on the jewels of a family, each jewel sparkling in readiness for the story it would tell.

“Who wore those fancy wooden things, Nana?”

“An uncle of mine who dressed in duffel coats all the time after he returned from a scientific expedition counting seals and penguins down in Antarctica.”

“Where does he live now, Nana?”

“After he was mixed up in some kind of scandal he moved to New Zealand’s South Island.”

“What’s scandal mean, Nana?”

“I’m not sure—it changes fashion from season to season much like buttons do.”

“Are those funny-looking small round buttons outside of the fashion?”

“I should think so. They look like boot buttons worn by Queen Victoria; although they did come back into fashion briefly a year or

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two ago with the grunge look.”

“See these, Nana? They have flowers sewed on them.”

“Yes, tapestry buttons, when I went to my first dance and met a blond god, and we danced all night and kissed under the stars.”

Trisha’s hazel eyes widened. “And. . . and . . . Nana?” she urged.

“Oh, he married my best friend.”

“Did she become your worst friend, Nana?”

“You could say that, my dear.”

“Diamonds, rubies, emeralds . . .” gasped Trisha as gorgeous colours trickled through her fingers.

“All made of paste or glass with painted golden backs that reflect their fake glory.”

“Who wore those flat silver ones?” asked Trisha as she sat down and made a silver circle on the grass with the buttons.

“They are from my young brother’s reefer jacket.”

But some stories are too sad for the telling, so I focused her attention back on the buttons.

“This button has a strange lion on it under its green colour,” she said.

“The lion of Ashoka from your great-grandfather’s uniform when he served in Burma stitching up the wounded by the light of a hurricane lamp, and gouging out bullets from limbs with his pocket knife.”

“Ugh! How horrible,” shuddered Trisha theatrically, then she grinned.

“Any more war buttons?” she asked hopefully, “perhaps some stained with blood?”

“Another great-grandfather spent his entire life on ships between the two world wars, so I expect there are lots of naval buttons amongst the pile. Look for anchors and crowns.”

“Did his ship blow up, Nana?”

“No, but it did sink in Singapore Harbour. However, he escaped from the enemy by sailing through the islands in a native craft.”

“Here is a button with wings on it,” said Trisha, doing an imitation of an aeroplane bombing the flower bed. “Were you flying planes and dropping bombs in the war, Nana?”

“No, my poppet,” I laughed, “I just reported what other people did. I wrote heroes into history.”

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"Here are some alive buttons," exclaimed Trisha as she fixed them to her plait.

"Scattered with sequins like glittering stars," I murmured softly. "They decorated dancing dresses in the days of Strauss waltzes, when velvet evening bags contained lace handkerchiefs."

"It must have been nice to live in days of long ago—pretty days."

"No, Trisha, I think you live in prettier days."

"This button has a strange smell—it must be very old."

"It's from a sandalwood tree, from the fabled lands of apes and ivory."

"Here's another from that land, an elephant button."

"Afraid not, my poppet, it's not real ivory, just plastic."

"This green one is greasy—feel it, Nana."

"My goodness, it's real jade! See if there are more of them."

"I've found another. Where did they come from, Nana?"

"A second cousin, a missionary in China. Isabella Maria—she founded a school in the Imperial city of Peking."

"I saw a picture about a siege in that city, but I don't know who won," said the puzzled looking eight-year-old.

"No one ever wins in a war, no one," I said softly, as Trisha put two buttons over her eyes.

"See, Nana—cat's eyes."

"Yes, but they are from shells washed up on a tropical beach I strolled along with your father when he was a little boy."

"Trisha, come on," called Gavin. "Time to go home now. I've stacked all the cartons in the trailer."

As Trisha finished her farewell twirl around the lawn and waved to a watching magpie, I handed the jar to her. "Take the lot, keep them and tell your granddaughter stories about them."

"But I don't know their stories like you do, Nana."

"Make them up—weave them out of the magic of your mind, with colours to illustrate history, fashion, love, the passing of time."

I did not tell Trisha I had found a scrap of faded paper in the bottom of the jar indicating that the buttons belonged to someone else's family, not mine.

## Cave Paintings

Judith A. Green

On ancient walls  
Galleries of rock  
Unbounded  
Unhung  
The stories  
The dreaming  
Faint marks on a rock wall  
Stories of ancient times remain

Trapped behind wire mesh  
Scarred by vandals  
Decorated with litter

Man of the Dreamtime  
We've let you fade away  
Almost lost you  
Except for a few faded marks  
on ancient rocks



## Life's Tapestry

Stella van Tongeren

A little bit of pleasure, a little bit of prayer,  
A pipe-dream here, a sentiment there.  
These are the threads that twist through the years  
Weaving a tapestry of happiness and tears.  
The colours are subtle. You can't see the start,  
How a promise can lead to a broken heart.  
A burden once resented, a problem overcome  
Will change the whole pattern of pictures to come.  
A joy unexpected is a warm burst of flame  
Then follows a patch of grey ash again.  
Often the pattern will not make sense  
The joy gets thin. The prayers grow tense.  
A dream gets broken. A love is lost  
You wonder however you'll meet the cost.  
But life goes on. There's one more thread  
To replace the one that's suddenly dead.  
A new bit of pleasure will bring a new glow.  
Then as time continues, a meaning will show.  
A picture emerges. The tapestry unfolds.  
A lifetime of achievement to eternally behold.  
You finally realise, the great plan is thus:  
Life is a gift, its use, up to us.  
Our tapestry may hang in a golden frame.  
But if it is rejected, then no one's to blame.

## Rachel's Garden

Robert Dalvean

Max had said he was going away for a while. It was a business trip, he said, which couldn't be put off. And Rachel said, "Hurry back. I'll miss you." A kiss, a rumpling of her abundant red hair, and he was gone.

It was raining hard the day Max left. Autumn had been one long drought, merely an extension of summer with weakening sunlight. Max and Rachel fell into winter as if it were a concealed pit. They had lived together for six warm and pleasant months.

As ill-matched a pair as you could find, Rachel and Max seemed somehow to complement each other. Max was precise, orderly and ever-alert. Rachel lurched absent-mindedly through her days, seldom aware of time, losing things. The house belonged to her. Max had come into it like a breeze through an open door. He organised, saw that bills were paid on time and insisted on meals being served at the same hour each day. Then he attacked the garden.

Rachel had liked to look through her kitchen window at the weeds. She didn't know they were weeds because nobody had ever been able to teach her the difference between weeds and all other flora. She liked what she saw, ragged thistles and straggly clumps of grass with blades so tough they looked as if you could shave your leg with them. Good, she thought. That's my garden. Once a month Rachel would go out into the back yard with an old-fashioned scythe that had belonged to her grandfather. She looked after the scythe as if it were a living thing. She oiled its wooden parts and kept its edge bright and keen. Grasping its twin handles, she would slash away at anything that dared to grow above knee-height. Then, sweaty and fulfilled, she'd go into the kitchen, make herself a cup of herb tea and stand at the window, lost in contemplation of her garden, which most people would have seen merely as hacked vegetation.

Max preferred to use a power mower.

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The house was built on a sloping block of land. A builder who fancied himself as an architect had fashioned it, working from a changing design in his head, adding, deleting, modifying as the mood took him. The result was a rambling, ill-proportioned weatherboard structure that might have been called split-level. The builder seemed to have had stumps of only one length, so where the ground fell away he dropped one level down. The steps he installed to give access to the varying levels were more like ladders than staircases. The house was placed in such a way that it was not possible to separate the land into front and rear. To Rachel the entire surroundings of the house were just one back yard.

The block was so irregular that you might think no sane local administration could have allowed the title to be registered. Yet there it stood, her property, her lot, bounded by a fence that rose and fell and twisted and turned in a frantic attempt to contain the land

§

She met Max at the local library where she was in search of a book on carpentry. He, standing on a stool, had been hunting through a shelf of legal tomes, one of which he dislodged. As Rachel walked past him the book fell on to her shoulder. She caught it, handed it back to him and then winced. The book had bruised her. Max jumped down from his stool and landed as confidently as a cat.

"I'm sorry," he said, and his voice was smooth and comforting. "Did I hurt you?"

Suddenly aware of a desire not to lose this man's company, she smiled bravely and said, "Oh, no, it's nothing."

She saw a dark-haired man of medium height, wearing neat casual clothes. He had a thin moustache that seemed to have been machine-cut. She wondered later what he had seen—a shapeless, thirty-five-year-old woman with abundant red hair; an injured nymph; or just some anonymous creature wearing a violently flowered caftan?

She could never quite remember what happened next. They were out of the library, they were in a restaurant. She was talking, while he listened as if nothing in the world could be as interesting as what she had to tell. And then he was in her house, which be-

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came their house, and then slowly turned into his house.

§

Two days before he left they had fought. And she, unused to battle, had felt anger rising up her spine and exploding inside her skull.

"I can't understand," said Max, "how anyone can live the way you do. You're a walking, talking disaster."

It was to do with his letters. For a week he had been watching for the postman each day and seemed almost to salivate whenever the letter box bulged with mail. (And bulge it always did. Rachel had built it herself from timber scraps, and built it too small.) On the day that she beat Max to the box Rachel took out its contents and laid them on the flat top. Then it occurred to her that the cat had not been fed. She went looking for it and forgot the mail. Rain fell, a vicious shower that lasted only twenty minutes. But that was enough to soak everything. When Max ran hopefully out to find the thick envelope he'd been waiting for it was sodden and its contents unreadable.

He came into the house looking murderous.

"Did you collect the mail this morning?" he said, very quietly.

"Yes, I got out early and . . . and . . . I don't remember bringing it in."

"This it?" he said, holding up a grey soggy object.

"Ah!" she said, drawing her breath in sharply. "It's your letter."

"No, it was my letter."

He dropped the papier-mache mess on the floor and methodically ground it with his heel.

Then, in cold fury, he attacked her. He neither shouted nor snarled. He merely described, telling her how he saw her.

As her world began to disintegrate under the impact of his words she felt panic. At all costs this process must stop. But then she heard the word "shapeless". Later she realised that he was referring to her life, condemning her for lacking discipline. But at that moment she thought he was criticising her figure, and she gave a wild snarl and said, "You liked it well enough to use it."

Which stopped him.

"What do you mean?" he said, puzzlement written all over his face.

"I'm getting out of here!" she said and stormed out of the kitchen,

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along the short passage to the back door and down the steps into the nearly immaculate yard. She had banged shut each door as she passed through it and her ears rang as she left the house in a staggering run, nearly falling. She rushed blindly, furiously about, looking for someone to gore.

Anger was new to her. Briefly she revelled in it, and then began to fear it. She looked back on the days of her serenity and longed to relive them. But to do that she must calm herself. She began to move cautiously, her heart thumping and her breath coming in great gasps. She needed to fix her mind on something, anything.

Half way down the irregular back yard upstanding grass and weeds abruptly formed a fence. Rachel stared at the line between garden and wilderness. She thought about boundaries, borders, margins, limits, edges. The winter sun was too weak to warm her, yet she was hot all through.

Now she knew how much she disliked the neat lawn and its squat, isolated shrubs, its little beds of flowers. Six months had passed since she had been able to feel that the back yard was really hers. She had thought it would become theirs. But it was his.

The world became nothing but a line that divided his and hers. She looked at her small area of wilderness and wondered why he had left it. Why hadn't he cleared all the way to the fence? She stared, and found herself changing from complex person to simple eye, nothing but eye.

Things seemed to be moving down there where order met chaos, not living things, mere interruptions. Small objects—twigs, a tiny shred of plastic wrap, a twist of paper, a fragment of bark—marred the perfection of the boundary, bits of the jungle trespassing on the cultivated part. She stared in all-eyed contemplation, rapt.

She turned her eyes briefly to look at the tool-shed Max had installed, with its bright aluminium sides, its blue-painted roof and its bland, louvred window. She would gladly have melted it with her gaze. All the order that confronted her she longed to disrupt. Ruin she needed, but not the ruin of sheer neglect. She lusted for destruction.

And then, tiny aftershocks of rage setting her hands shaking and her teeth chattering, she stared again at the wall of uncut vegetation, where the push towards complete mastery of the house and

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its surroundings had ceased, and she thought: That's where he keeps me; he locks me up down there.

She heard Max come down the back steps, heard the squish of his shoes on the wet grass. But she heard them as she might have heard a train whistle far away—nothing to do with her. A hand touched her shoulder and then rested there. She did not shake it off but turned to look at it. The hand, his hand, was now like everything else, a coloured shape in a coloured world of shapes. He was making sounds but she could not interpret them. His hand left her shoulder. She heard the sound of his shoes again, retreating.

For the rest of the day she was too much aware of herself. Her legs were heavy, her shoulders hunched. Her mouth either sagged open or was clamped shut. Nothing she did was easy or natural. Everything needed careful thought and planning. She would gladly have declared herself sick and let Max do all that needed doing, but Max was nowhere to be seen. His car was missing.

§

She began to wonder what he actually did for a living. He had said that he was an agent, but for whom? She had delighted in his company and so never questioned his odd comings and goings and the apparent fluctuations of his income. Sometimes he disappeared for several days and she would receive reassuring telephone calls from distant places, and promises to return soon. She never probed for details. Now, intending to wound, she resolved to find the truth.

Late in the afternoon, worn out by her endlessly circling thoughts, she went to her bedroom and, wrapping herself in a quilt, lay on the big bed that had belonged to her parents. She had not expected to sleep. When she woke it was dark and she was calm. Max had returned. She could hear him moving about. Soon he came into the bedroom and asked if she wanted to eat. She found she was hungry. Max had cooked a full meal which they ate together, talking as if nothing had happened.

They spent the night like honeymooners and the next day he told her about the business trip he must make. Something in his tone suggested that this would not be the usual two or three days away.

§

"Max," she said just before he left, "What do you do?"

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He spread his hands, smiled in bewilderment and said, "Do? What do you mean, do?"

"You're an agent, you say. What does that mean? What do you do when you walk into someone's office? What do you say?"

"I usually say, 'Good morning' or 'Good afternoon'."

"Yes, but from minute to minute, what are you doing? I mean, I know what a plumber's doing, or a shopkeeper. But what are you doing?"

"Do you know what an actuary does? Or a copy taster on a newspaper? Most of us only know our own lives, and that's the way it should be."

And then he was gone. This time there were no reassuring telephone calls. I'll give him time, she thought, as much as he needs.

§

Days, passed, weeks. She itched to restore her land to what it had been, but she knew that once she started there would be no going back. To live as she pleased would mean living alone.

She was helped to decide by Max's possessions, which were mainly clothes that would not fit into the suitcases he had taken with him. A pair of his shoes sat in the wardrobe. She fetched them out and looked at them. She knew they had been often worn, yet they looked new. No speck of dust and very little wear underneath. She smelt them and smelt only clean leather. A wave of irritation seized her at the thought of a man who left no traces.

She packed his clothes and telephoned the Salvation Army to take them away.

Now she was able to make a start on the restoration of her garden. She had dreamed of attacking the task like a vandal, slashing, burning, destroying. But when she got down to the task she was sluggish. Her feet dragged, her brain felt heavy. She sweated in the cold and craved the comfort of her bed. Her life now seemed to have been very long, too long. I'm odd and there's no place for me, she said. She imagined herself lying face down in the ooze of time and by means of frantic wriggling touching the present with her fingertips, while the greater part of her dragged through what had been.

Having chopped out a shrub that she had tolerated only because Max planted it, she rose, spread her hands, tilted back her

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head and groaned. She thought she might like to dig her grave there and then, and fall into it. But who would come to shovel the earth into it? She knew of people who had killed themselves. She had never heard of anyone who had buried herself.

So it went on for some days. She woke, she fed herself, she went shopping, as she always had, on foot. The shops were only five minutes walk away. She had never had much to do with her neighbours. The odd arrangement of the fences prevented intimacy with them. But now, as she slouched to and from the shops, she felt that they were staring at her. Eyes were active behind gauzy curtains. She wanted to turn and make faces at each curtained window as she passed but hadn't the energy.

She got some pleasure from her nights. The house was well heated and she could cocoon herself in bed.

At 10.30 on a frosty Tuesday night, Max having been gone for a month, Rachel was watching television in her bedroom on a small black and white set that stood on her bedside table. The room was to her eye pleasantly disordered. She was nibbling on carrots and sipping from a mug of steaming herb tea. She had been waiting . . . waiting. But if someone had asked what she was waiting for she could not have said.

The sounds, when they came, did not disturb her. She lifted her eyes briefly from the television screen and then returned to it. The back and front doors crashed in simultaneously. Then, as each window in the house was smashed, she heard incomprehensible words bellowed through a loud-hailer. She reached forward to the television set and turned up the sound.

They came into her room looking like Martians, three men in strange uniforms clutching weapons. Two of them swept her from the bed and pinned her to the floor. The third lifted the valance and briefly looked under the bed. The house was full of stampeding men, and she knew that the street would now be filling with curious people who wanted to know what the fuss was at the mad woman's house.

She was not at all curious. Passive beneath the men who pinned her, she waited. Then, weapons still trained on her, they got up and ordered her to get up.

She gathered herself, wrapping her voluminous dressing gown

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about her, and slowly rose to confront them.

"That's it. Don't move. Just stand there," one of the men said.

She could hear the banging and smashing and trampling and shouting going on in other parts of the house.

"It's Max, isn't it?" she said. "You're after him."

But she got no answer until the following day, when a senior member of the police force visited her as if she were royalty. By that time she had been seen on television and heard on radio. A mistake had been made. Max, it seemed, had closely resembled a dangerous man who had escaped from custody. The police had been watching her house for two days, waiting for Max to emerge, and when he didn't, they had attacked, believing he was aware of their presence and was lying in wait, armed and dangerous.

The police dignitary was courteous, apologetic. He said that she was entitled to have her house repaired and restored, no matter what the cost. The Government would pay compensation.

"And what about Max?" she said.

"Ah," said the senior policeman. "Well, that's another matter. He is wanted for questioning. But that's something for the fraud squad. They don't break doors down to apprehend con men."

"So he was using this place, using me, just as a base, somewhere to have his mail sent."

"I'm afraid you'd have to ask him about that."

He repeated his apologies, made further comforting noises about compensation, and left.

Rachel, now notorious in her street, went out into the back yard and smiled. The special-effects men (which was how she referred to the queerly attired police who had attacked the house) had trampled riotously over everything, churning the neat lawn and crushing shrubs, flowers and spindly young trees.

"He used me as his home and office," she said aloud. "He was bored, so he did the gardening."

She went inside and ran a bath, sprinkling the water with herbs and drops of fragrant oil. She lay in the water, surrendering her body. In here, she said, I am light and graceful. And she floated with her thoughts. When she had had enough of sweet imagining, she got out of the bath, slowly dried herself, tied her hair back with a ribbon and dressed in jeans, T-shirt and her favourite leather jacket.

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There was nothing she had to do immediately, so she walked down to the tool-shed that Max had erected and took from it the old scythe. It had grown rusty and needed sharpening. She oiled it and then sat down on the back steps to stroke its blade with a sharpening stone. She listened to the sound of stone on metal, harsh at first, then changing its tone as the edge became keen. On and on she stroked, steadily, surely. She could have been drawing music from a cello.

She had made peace with time. The Government could provide her house with new doors and windows. The back yard could look after itself until spring. Then, she thought, feeling the scythe's edge, then I'll be ready for it.



## Secret Places

Michelle Michalos

**(This story won second prize in the Eastern Writers Group 1998  
Biggest Little Short Story competition.)**

**T**iny white daisies sprinkle like stars across the green slope of the hill. The morning sun lights their faces as they watch me make my progress towards the house. Their heads seem to turn as I pass, not judging, just watching.

Perhaps questioning, too, mirroring, my own thoughts in their small white faces. What will you tell her? How will she react? Who knows? Maybe she'll be happy, maybe not. I don't know. Things haven't been good between us. Not for a long time.

The grass becomes lawn as I near the house. Windows, reflecting the sun, stare blankly back at me. Giving nothing away, like she gives nothing away. Just withdraws within herself, unreachable. Staring at the wall, or at the coffee cup in her hand as she moves inwards towards that secret female place where nobody can get at her, nobody can reach her.

My footsteps crunch on the gravel path, the front door looms ahead of me. Blank. Impassive, it's shut. Maybe she's still asleep? No, she wouldn't be asleep. She's in there, nursing her moodiness like a mother breast-feeding her infant. Totally focused and oblivious to externals. Blackbirds forage in the garden, scratching and jabbing at the soil. The cat appears around the corner, winds herself in figure-eight's around my legs as I step on to the veranda.

Silence from the house, just like the silence she pushes at me. Silence like a hard, impenetrable wall, with no way over or around it. Pushing me away with her silences. Maybe she'll be glad I'm going. I don't know. I can't reach her any more. Gone is the free-spirited happiness we used to have. It's been replaced by prickly resentment and those blank, unreadable silences.

I lift my hand to the door, knock lightly. Why lightly? I don't

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know. Why don't I bang my fist on it? After all, I'm the one who's being pushed out here. She's pushing me out with her refusal to let me into her world.

She opens the door, her eyes meet mine.

"Where have you been?"

"Out."

"Out for two days?"

"Two days, two months, what difference does it make to you?"

She turns her back, walks down the hall. If only she'd show some relief that I'm alive, or even anger that I didn't call her. But this impassive wall she's built up, I can't stand it. I take a deep breath as she moves to the stove to put the kettle on.

"I'm leaving."

She turns slowly,

"Why?" she says.

"Why? Why the hell do you think? You don't want me here, you won't talk, to me. You shut me out. You push me away and now you ask me why?"

And then I say, "I'm pregnant."

She turns back to the stove.



## Just Thought We'd Drop In

Patricia Larkin

Some people count to ten, apparently enough time in which to compose themselves. Others just roll their eyes up in their heads, perhaps asking for divine intervention, but for me, well, a certain occurrence makes my teeth grind!

"Just thought we'd drop in," I hear, as friends from Tasmania, complete with family and dog, appear unannounced for one of their extended stays.

What do you do when they "just haven't had a chance to have dinner yet" at nine o'clock at night? You prepare a late-night snack, then make polite conversation as a couple of extra mattresses are dragged out. Where do I put the dog? Our three cats bolt!

"I hope you have a feather Doona," says a small voice as you are almost smothered under an assortment of bedding.

"It's too warm up here for feather Doonas," I say with much delight between clenched teeth.

"Where are you travelling to this time?" I ask our friends Harry and Pam. It sounds much better than: "How long are you staying?"

"Oh, just up to Canberra for a few days. Might drop in on my brother, George. But don't worry, we'll see you on the return trip," Harry assures me in his boisterous manner.

After snatching a few hours of agitated sleep, I face the onslaught. What am I going to feed this lot—again?

"I prefer muesli flakes"—from the one who also preferred feather Doonas.

"Try this instead," I say as I slide a rather unappetizing looking, plain-label packet of cereal across the table.

"I could go a banana on top of this cereal," says Harry, fully ensconced on the couch, TV remote control in hand. I select the most ghastly looking, mottled-skinned banana and offer it sweetly.

Meals over the whole weekend are a fiasco. On the Sunday evening and three days into the "dropping-in", I make a statement that resem-

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bles the opening of Parliament!

"Well, you will all have to fend for yourselves tomorrow morning. I'm working."

Work has never looked so good!

When you return home to a feeding frenzy, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at work look enticing! In fact, I'm quite happy to swap my Friday rostered day off! I'm grateful for at least having a foolproof lasagne at the ready. I open the fridge door. Where's the confounded lasagne?

"Might stay a couple of extra days in Melbourne and do the rounds," I hear as I am searching for a frozen dessert.

What rounds, I wonder—the tourist hot spots or the "hot spots" of other refrigerators?

Well, this happens on an average of four times a year with no telephone warning of impending attack! How can a family afford to cross Bass Strait by ferry so often anyway? And, shouldn't there be some quarantine law against shipping dogs across the Strait? They would never go away without Rufus. On the occasion when they visited on their return from Canberra, they all looked a bit the worse for wear—a bit thinner, actually.

"Gee, that drive down here sure was hot. I could go some of your boysenberry ice-cream." Harry's chunky hand opened the fridge door. "Oh what, no ice-cream!"

"No, we actually salvaged a morsel," I accidentally burst out.

"Oh well, I guess a cool drink will go down OK. What about that grape juice you had here?"

"I think that has already gone down," I chided. Thank goodness they at least came equipped with dog food!

"By the way, how was George and the family?"

"A bit strange, actually, they . . ."

"Yeah," Pam interrupted, "we seemed to get a cool reception. "Don't know what was biting them."

"Perhaps, you bit in a bit too much," I almost grinned.

The bedding came out again. The dog whimpered; he didn't seem too enthralled about the box with the soft rags again for his bed.

"I think Rufus prefers that sheepskin rug he had last time we were here," said a small voice.

Do dogs *prefer*? I hadn't bargained on Rufus preferring my prized

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sheepskin floor rug! The sooner some quarantine laws are brought in, the better.

The night passed without incident, to be followed by another breakfast fiasco. Some bananas were sporting some very mottled skins by now and it was strange how I still hadn't bought any muesli flakes!

"We'd take you all out to dinner tonight," said Pam, "but, we have to board the ferry by four-thirty."

"Perhaps for lunch, then?" I venture.

"We really need to relax a bit before we brace the queue at the terminal, don't we, Harry?"

"Yeah, maybe next time," Harry said as he changed TV channels and reorganised his feet on the coffee table!

Well, the tornado left with the usual trail of devastation—empty fridge, frayed nerves and three agitated cats! But a lull always follows the storm, or so I thought! Three days later, I jump at a loud knock at the door. A quick calculation—the ferry to Tassie takes overnight, and you can't board for the return to Melbourne until the next day. Then that takes overnight and . . . Hmm, it could be done . . . My thoughts were interrupted.

"It's okay, Mum, it's a different car." (My kids know me well.)

Another quick bit of arithmetic. They couldn't possibly have purchased a car in between the quickest return trip by ferry, surely! Reluctantly, I open the door.

"Hello, I am Anna and this is Ludwig. You don't know us," said a voice with a delightful German accent.

"No, I haven't had the pleasure."

"We met your cousin, Muriel's ex-husband Stan, when he was in Hamburg. He gave us your address and said for us to . . . how do you say, 'drop in', when we arrived in Melbourne."

Muriel? Why, I hadn't seen her for three years, and as for Stan, her ex, well he made a wise move from the country. Before I could answer, I seemed to be bombarded with names.

"Have Ingrid and Franz arrived yet?"

"Ingrid and Franz?"

"Ja," as if that explained everything. "Stan said for them to do this . . . 'drop in' too."

Their week's stay was relatively quiet after the Tasmanian tornado, except for the opening and slamming of the fridge door. Ingrid and

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Franz never did appear.

After farewelling them, I figured I deserved to pamper myself. My one vice is to sip expensive coffee, feet up on the coffee table (caught this bad habit from Harry), and indulge in my favourite snack of biscuits and soft cheeses. I open the fridge door.

“Where is my Camembert and my twenty-seven-dollars-a-kilogram King Island Brie?”

The teeth grind.



## Reflections

Anne Perkins

There is no break.  
Perhaps a winding-down,  
A little furthering,  
Today's needs become imperative  
in young lives and loves.

I do not grieve,  
Merely a little sadness  
shades my day.  
I know time makes its own dimensions  
in life, and I must accept.

Slowly, imperceptibly,  
What I have previously known  
Distances itself from me,  
Becomes engrossed  
In its own cluttered world.

I am moving  
Daily changing  
Out of the clustered  
Cluttered world of domesticity  
To a twilight of my own relativity.



## The Tree

Gret Racine

**(From: 'The Long and Winding Track', a book for young readers)**

“

**A**ren't you going to Veronica's party?”  
“She didn't invite me.”

“What do you mean she didn't invite you? I thought you were her best friend.”

“We had a fight.”

Melissa's mother stared at her daughter, dumbfounded.

“Well, really, Melissa! Don't you think you're a bit old for silly things like that? Why don't you just ring her up and apologise; forget the whole thing. I'm sure she'll let you come along then.”

“No. Ronnie's the one that has to apologise.”

“Well, all right then. Ring her anyway so you can at least talk about it. Fighting at your age! You should be ashamed of yourself, and so should she.”

“Mum! Just forget it, will you! She won't even be home. The party starts at three. It's already a quarter to.”

Melissa kicked out angrily at an innocent chair leg, unseen by her mother. The hot tears about to spill over and run down her burning cheeks were hidden too.

“I think I'll go for a walk. I'll take Ches with me. He needs a run after being shut in for so long.”

Melissa was out of the room before her mother could answer. She didn't want any more questions about the party, Ronnie or the silly falling-out they'd had over a stupid CD. She pulled on her gumboots because the ground was still very muddy where she intended to go. The much-needed rain hadn't stopped for several days in a row when it finally came, and the flatter parts of the countryside around the area had been flooded.

It was not cold and the sun was shining today, but Melissa put

on a parka anyway. She didn't want her mother to see the red T-shirt she'd put on as well. It was supposed to have been Ronnie's birthday present, except now she, Melissa, wasn't even going to the party.

"Ches! Come on, boy! Walk?" She swung the leather leash suggestively. It was all so stupid. It wasn't her fault Ronnie's favourite CD had been damaged, Melissa thought to herself as she shut the gate behind her. Ronnie shouldn't have let Robbie know about it, that was all.

Robbie was Ronnie's twin, and Melissa harboured a healthy dislike for her best friend's brother. He was a brat at any time, but had proved even worse over the broken CD by not owning up to being the one who actually broke it. He'd just let Melissa take the blame, and when Ronnie had asked if it was true and she'd denied it, Robbie had called her a liar and Ronnie had not asked her to the party. They had been friends all through primary school, and now into high school as well, but blood, in the end, had proved to be thicker than water. Ronnie had believed her brother over her best friend.

Melissa turned along a narrow path, still squelchy underfoot, glad of her gumboots. She let Ches off the lead and he bounded ahead. It had been nearly a week since he had had a good run, the rain only stopping earlier the day before.

Rounding a bend in the pathway, a vast sheet of silver met her gaze away to the left. The water had not had a chance to all go down yet.

The wind sighed in the branches overhead. It was a beautiful day after all the rain they'd had. The rain was necessary, of course, but Melissa was glad to be able to get out again. While intending only to keep to the higher ground, she found herself instead following the deserted road downhill, towards that bizarre silvery expanse, towards the old railway line.

She knew it wasn't really only curiosity about the water which drove her on. It was the railway. Ronnie's father had hired one of the old railway-carriages from the tourist railway for the party. Melissa knew it would have to pass this way to get to Yarra Glen, and she could watch it from the camouflaged concealment of the trees which grew adjacent to the embankment near the bridge.

She may not have been invited to Ronnie's party, but she could

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still watch the train go by without being seen.

She quickened her pace. Ches had already bounded far ahead of her, and Melissa found she had to run to catch up with him. The water could still be dangerous. Mentally, she took in the familiar abbey buildings to her left as she passed them at a cracking downhill run. Ches was already splashing through the muddy shallows of the unnatural lake, making up for the days of enforced inactivity. Yuk! thought Melissa irritably. He'll need to be washed now. Rats!

Without any regard for the dangers which may have lurked in the flooded plain, Ches, for whom this was familiar ground, just kept splashing on, towards the trees, the bridge and the line. Melissa ran after him, splashing in his wake.

Well, at least the water was only ankle-deep now. She made it to the concealed bridge in a drier condition than she had expected.

"Honestly, Ches!" she cried in exasperation to the dog, who only looked up at her with his great, soulful brown eyes, wagging his wet tail and spraying water everywhere at the same time. "Next time, I won't let you off the lead, so there! Come on, now! Heel!"

The tail slowly stopped wagging and, dejectedly, Ches walked over to her.

"I didn't mean it, silly," she laughed, climbing up on to the embankment and out of the water. "Just don't get so far in front again, that's all."

Up went the tail again, and Ches, with a delighted bark, immediately raced away down the track, towards the direction from which the train would come. Melissa scrambled up onto the line after him. At least it was dry up here. There was no sign of the train yet, because there was no zing! in the rails, as her father had taught her to listen for, nor any vibrations either. She still had plenty of time to find a good place to hide.

As she deftly skipped from one sleeper to the next, Melissa suddenly heard Ches begin to bark excitedly. He must have found a stray rabbit or something, she thought, because, once again, he was nowhere to be seen.

The trees obscured any view she might have had. The barking, however, did not stop; perhaps it was not "rabbit barking" after all.

Melissa increased her skipping to miss a sleeper here and there, then two, before she came across Ches, still barking like a mad

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thing. He had good reason to bark too. One of the old trees which had grown beside the line for heaven alone knew how long, the roots now rotten with age and softened by the recent flood waters, had been uprooted during the height of the storm. It now lay across the tracks, directly in the path of the oncoming train.

Immediately, Melissa tried to heave and push at the heavy trunk, without success. It was much too big and unwieldy. It would need more muscle than she could muster to move it. The abbey? The silent monks would surely have rope and tools, or would be able to phone for help in this emergency. Then she thought better of it. There was no time. The train was bound to come before she returned.

The tree lay at a point on the tracks which was just beyond a curve in the line. Under normal circumstances, any train approaching that bend would be travelling at a speed that would make it virtually impossible to stop in time before seeing the obstacle blocking its path. The embankment was quite steep, too, and Melissa knew without a doubt that any resulting accident would be bad.

Again, she tried to push the offending tree to one side, just enough to allow the train room to pass without an accident. It was impossible. The tree was just too big and heavy. She was wasting time and she knew it. Melissa knew just how long the train would take to make the journey from the station to the tunnel, and thence from the tunnel to here.

And then she heard it. Zing! The familiar shriek of the tracks as the still-faraway train approached. Then, almost immediately, the vibrating rumble that came with it. Faraway would turn to close within minutes!

Her blood froze. How could she possibly stop a whole train? The spot where she stood was as deserted as the moon! The abbey? No, she'd already rejected that solution as being too far. Ches? Why should the driver take notice of just another dog? Well, it would teach Ronnie a lesson, she thought violently, in reaction to what seemed to be the hopelessness of her plight. Then she pulled herself together. Don't be such an idiot, she scolded herself deliberately. Ronnie's not the only person on that train. But dear God, what could she do? How did you usually stop a train, especially out here in the middle of nowhere?

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Of course, she knew very well that signals stopped trains, but there were no signals on this part of the line. Tarrawarra had had signals, her father had told her once, but that was so long ago now that it was beyond remembering. And much good would they have done her, anyway, they'd probably have been rusted with age—if they'd still been there.

She needed a signal, but what? Without realising it, Melissa glanced unseeingly down at the red T-shirt she was wearing, ripped new from the packet only an hour or so before. It was still some seconds more before she fully understood the significance of the colour. Then she was tearing off first her parka, followed by the contentious T-shirt, and looking quickly for a fairly straight branch on the fallen tree. At last she found one and tugged ineffectually at it.

Zing! The vibration was becoming more pronounced now. She tugged again. And again. The branch snapped. Quickly, Melissa tied the sleeves of the T-shirt to the branch. Then she scrambled over the tree, suddenly breathless, racing towards the bend in the track. She had to get to the long, straight section beyond that shallow but blind curve, where she could see the winery. Only there would the driver have plenty of time to see her.

In her haste, she slipped on one of the still rain-sodden sleepers, but picked herself up and continued on. Then she saw the winery in the distance. She saw something else too. The train was approaching at an accelerating pace, a funny blue and yellow thing, rocking slightly from side to side, on its innocent way towards Yarra Glen.

Breathlessly, she stood up in the centre of the track, and raised her homemade flag. Slowly, she began to wave it from side to side. See me, she prayed silently, for God's sake please see me!

A loud honk issued from the approaching train. Did that mean they'd seen her or was it just normal for trains to do that when they were coming to a bend? It didn't seem to be slowing down at all. The funny honk sounded again, and frantically Melissa waved her flag as fast as she could. Someone, probably the driver, was leaning out of the carriage. He was waving his arm at her. She pointed towards her improvised danger signal, shaking her head. The train gave two sharp blasts again but the driver kept waving his

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arm. She pointed again. The waving continued. The train was still not slowing down, at least as far as Melissa could tell.

Then she heard the comforting sound of brakes being applied. The train skidded a little, jerked, skidded again. It was almost on top of her and she jumped deftly to one side, missed her footing and rolled down the embankment. When she stood up again, it was to see a young man slipping and sliding down the embankment towards her, waving frantically. The train was at a standstill.

"Gees, are you okay?" the young man asked her, a frown on his face. He had a shock of fair hair, vivid blue eyes and a short beard. "You gave us all a helluva fright."

Melissa blushed and dusted herself down. The red T-shirt lay at the bottom of the embankment in the muddy water.

"Yeah. Thanks," she mumbled.

Another man, middle-aged, balding and burly, wearing driver's overalls, had hurried up behind the young blond man.

"Gracious, girlie, that was close!" he cried, apparently amazed to see her still in one piece. He had a very slight foreign accent.

"If you're all right, I think you'd better tell us what the problem is."

Melissa didn't just tell them, she showed them as well. The older man gave a low whistle and shook his head when he saw the tree across the line.

"What a beauty!" he cried under his breath as he looked at the tree, at the same time quickly instructing the young man to fetch some implements from the train. He was obviously a no-nonsense kind of person.

The young man returned in a few minutes accompanied by three others, all of them carrying tools of various kinds. Within a very short time, all four young men, under the direction of the older man, had heaved the tree safely to one side of the track. It teetered on the edge, overbalanced and rolled to the bottom of the embankment, splashing gently into the muddy water.

The first young man, the one with the beard, returned to the train ahead of the others, to be greeted by curious heads craning out of windows, even doors.

"Sorry for the delay. Tree on the line," he announced laconically in a loud voice. "Everything's okay now. Please get back inside."

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We'll be leaving again in a few moments."

One of the craning heads was suddenly joined by a frantically waving arm.

"Liss! What the hell are you doing here?" Ronnie yelled. "You get on this train at once, dimmy. It's okay, I know everything," she continued, some decibels lower. "Robbie confessed everything just before we got on the train, the brat. Too late to ring you, but here you are, anyway! I'm really sorry, Lissy. I should've believed you."

Melissa shrugged, only to find herself, seconds later, grabbed in a tearful hug. Ronnie had jumped off the train in her eagerness to see her friend again.

"I'm afraid your present's all ruined," was all Melissa could say through her own tears, indicating the red T-shirt, which had been picked up by the young man with the beard and handed back to her.

Ronnie looked in some surprise at the wet and muddy garment with her favourite pop group on the front as the light slowly dawned in her hazel eyes.

"It's the best bloody present I've ever had," she cried, tears running freely down her face. "It saved our lives."

The delayed trip to Yarra Glen was shortly resumed, following two or three hasty phone calls from Ronnie's father's mobile phone. Melissa's mother was informed that her daughter would be home later than expected, and the relevant authorities were also contacted back at Healesville, so that arrangements could be made for them to come out and inspect the line more thoroughly as soon as possible and make right any damage caused by the fallen tree. Ches was rounded up—again—and the interrupted journey continued.

It was a tired but happy Melissa who was driven home by Ronnie's father much later that evening. A muddy Ches sat with the two girls in the back seat. "Oh well, all good things have to come to an end," she sighed happily, grinning at her best friend as if nothing had ever come between them to mar their friendship.

"But guess who'll be doing the wash routine tomorrow!"

"I'll be over about nine," Ronnie answered immediately. "Wash Ches early, then we can go and see where that tree fell, huh? I'm dying to see where it happened" Melissa laughed, hugging the great animal quickly. "Done," she answered with another laugh. "He's

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lost his collar and name tag anyway, by the feel of it. It could be anywhere Just so long as it's not somewhere in the water, that's all"

"We'll find it, then;" cried Veronica optimistically. "I don't care how long it takes. At least it'll keep Bratface out of our way for the day. After today, that's a bonus."

"Don't be late," Melissa called out as Ronnie's father dropped her at her front gate. "See you tomorrow." The car disappeared quickly down the dusty road and Melissa watched it vanish into the gathering dusk. Tomorrow still seemed a long way off. She looked forward to it now with that eager optimism all kids her age seemed to show in the wake of the obstacles that cropped up in their relationships with others from time to time. She and Ronnie were friends again.



## Starlight

Gwayne Naug

In starlight danced the spirits of history  
Wraithlike they moved in a miasma of dreams  
Sacrificing courage to gales of change  
Under canopies spangled with false moons

Abandoned, they mated with strange creatures  
And then produced issue of digital monsters  
That suckled greedily from Earth's motherlode  
As searching tentacles knowledge grasped.

Rainbows tinted with innocence promised gold  
But poisoned fruits bewitched their souls  
Icy mountains inhabited by a pantheon of gods  
Flung them firesticks to ignite their world.

When they floated upon the tides of treachery  
They were engulfed by the machinations of man  
Their voices were stilled by electronic blasts  
Now in starlight dance the computers of time.



## Behind the Clock

Janeen Samuel

**(This story was one of the prize-winners in the Eastern Writers Group 1998 Biggest Little Short Story competition.)**

Tick-tock, tick-tock says the large old-fashioned clock with a swinging pendulum. They hung it on a wall and every Sunday Annie wound it. She wound it happy, wound it sad, wound it even when she could scarcely bear to face the week ahead—until last Sunday night there was a “clunk!”, and the ticking stopped.

So they have taken it down and sent it to be mended, and on the wall there is now a pale, clock-shaped patch, still shiny with the gloss the walls bore all those years ago.

The patch has been there all that time, hidden behind the clock, while in front of the clock their lives have been ticking away.

Tick-tock: their first quarrel. Tick-tock: they make it up.

Tick-tock: for the first time they go off to work and forget to kiss each other goodbye.

Tick-tock: she is pregnant; and tick-tock go the months of planning and hope.

Tick-tock: marking off all the long hours while the baby cries and cries and will not feed, and tick-tock: the longer hours of the nights when it cries still and they take turns to walk it up and down and pretend to each other there is nothing wrong.

Tick-tock: he has been offered promotion but it would mean a transfer, and how can they move from here, where the Children's Hospital is, and the baby's specialist?

Tick-tock: the baby is dead and Annie's grief is loud and wailing and his is dumb and neither can understand nor comfort the other.

Tick-tock: the years go on and there are no more babies, and he has missed his chance of promotion, and her career was stalled and she has never managed to get it started again.

Tick-tock: his best man has had a heart attack and her bridesmaid

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has a lump in the breast. Tick-tock; then silence, for the first time in years. And now Annie is looking at the place where the clock has been and seeing for the first time how the walls have darkened with the years.

Only this one patch has remained bright, for it has been at the back of time. And she weeps because inside her there is a patch just like that, as fresh and shining as the day she was married and had all the world before her.



## In Memoriam

Rudy van Tongeren 1917-1998



**W**hile this book was being prepared, one of its contributors, Rudy van Tongeren, died at the age of 82.

Rudy was born of Eurasian parents in Java when it was under Dutch sovereignty. When World War II broke out, he joined the Dutch navy and was captured by the Japanese. Eventually he was taken to Nagasaki, where he worked with other POWs in the shipyards. Towards the end of the war, lacking shipbuilding materials, the Japanese authorities transferred him to a coalmine just north of Nagasaki. He was there when the second atomic bomb detonated, and he actually saw the mushroom cloud rising in the south.

Fortunately, his health was unaffected. After the war, he emigrated to Australia, where he became a teacher, married and raised a family.

He was highly regarded in the Eastern Writers group and we miss his gentle presence at our meetings.

He is survived by his wife, Stella (a contributor to this anthology), eight children, fifteen grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Rudy's main literary work was a detailed account of his experiences as a prisoner of war in the 1940s; but his story 'Inca Elixir', which follows, is in a lighter vein.

## Inca Elixir

Rudy van Tongeren

**I**t was quiet in the main bar of the Island Hotel during the second dinner sitting.

The guests who had already eaten were out beneath the starry sky, admiring the beach, but one couple was seated at the bar. As the barman walked by, a pretty brunette leaned across to read his silver name tag.

"Ben," she said.

"That's me," he said.

"I'm Liz, and this is my husband, Rick."

"Pleased to meet you. Are you enjoying your stay?"

"We've just arrived, and we'd like a glass of what's in those bottles."

She pointed to a shelf behind the bar.

Ben turned to the mirror-backed shelf, with its bewildering array.

"Those two black ones," Rick said. "Liz is intrigued by them."

"Ah, the Inca Pisca." Ben leaned across the bar, his voice low. He'd been a barman for forty years and he had a thousand stories to tell, true and false.

"Those bottles came from the royal cellars of Peru. They contain a mysterious liqueur—an elixir, distilled for royal palates."

"Well, Princess Liz wants to taste it," Rick smiled, and his wink suggested that whatever Princess Liz wanted she was going to get tonight.

Ben reached for one of the Peruvian bottles and handed it to Liz, who examined it closely.

"What unusual bottles. That's a face, a woman's face. What's on the other one?"

Ben placed the second bottle, on the bar.

"A man's face. How cute. I bet they were great lovers, Rick," she said.

"They are the Inca king and queen," Ben said, turning the bottles,

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showing the label Inca Pisco. The raised letters on the base of the bottle read: Lima Peru.

"How interesting. All the way from Peru," Liz said.

"A very interesting place, Peru. I worked in Lima for a few years," Ben said. Interesting country and a lovely city high up in the . . . the . . . er the Cordilleras de los Andes."

Liz's admiration for him seemed almost tangible, and Ben gave silent thanks to a recent edition of the National Geographic, the source of his South American knowledge.

He uncorked the Inca queen bottle, recoiling slightly as he poured a little green liqueur into two small glasses. "Enjoy," he said, setting the drinks before them, then placing the unopened bottle back safe on the bar shelf. He had plans for those bottles, they were rare, and already earmarked for his bottle collection.

"Wow!" Liz said, her face contorting into a grimace.

"A kiss from the gods," Rick agreed as a shudder travelled down his spine.

Knowing the customer's usual reaction to a first encounter with Inca Pisco, Ben was about to cork the bottle.

"No, don't put it away. We can't leave it at just one," she said.

"It's not cheap," Ben said as he poured another dose of green into their glasses, but Rick shrugged. What was money?

They had to be honeymooners, Ben thought as he walked to the other end of the bar. Business was picking up and he lost track of them until Liz pursued him. Her glass was empty.

He smiled and poured two refills. "It's strong stuff," he warned. She looked the type who didn't listen to warnings, but with a bit of luck they'd empty one of his bottles tonight.

Liz had emptied her fourth glass of Inca Pisco before she asked the question.

"What do you do with the empties, Ben?"

Now he knew what they were really after, the Inca queen bottle, and to get it they were prepared to pay for its contents. And pay they would tomorrow morning. He had tried the liqueur only once. Its flavour was a unique mixture of castor oil and vinegar, but it had the kick of a Peruvian mule.

"There's a long list of people wanting those bottles, Liz," he said. "I can't get enough of them. The liqueur being so expensive, it takes

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a while before a bottle is emptied. Leave your name and address and I'll put it on the list." Beneath mine, he thought.

Liz shook the bottle. "But it's nearly empty. We'll empty it tonight then it will be ours, Right, Rick?"

Rick's head lolled in agreement. He worked hard at emptying his glass but gallantly rolled it back for more.

"It will keep until tomorrow. Don't you think you've had enough?"

"No!" She was becoming loud. "No, it's now or never, Isn't it Rick?"

Rick's head lolled. It could have been a yes, or a no.

They were both lolling now. When they drank the last of the greasy green liqueur, Ben claimed the bottle and placed it beneath the bar, but Liz's hand reached for it.

"Pick it up tomorrow morning, Liz," he said, aware that these honeymooners were unlikely to surface for 24 hours, and when they did, even the thought of Inca Pisco might bring on a relapse.

"I want it." She thumped the bar. "I drank it and I want my bottle. Right now."

Ben would have to relinquish the Inca queen. They had sacrificed their wedding night for it. Still he gave it one last try, "Listen Liz." He leaned across the bar. "You leave it with me, and I'll deliver it to your unit tomorrow morning."

"No. Now. Give me my Inca queen, Now."

With a shrug, Ben handed over his prize.

Gripping the neck of the bottle with one hand and Rick's neck with the other, Liz left the bar,

"Never forget you, Ben. Never forget this night."

I'll guarantee that, Ben thought as he followed their unsteady progress away towards the staircase that led to their room.

The bar was raised above the main floor level. There was a step down, which Liz's high heel miscalculated. She fell heavily against Rick, and the two thudded to the floor.

But the bottle flew up briefly, then down, to smash on the parquet floor.

As a crowd gathered to assist the couple, Liz's finger pointed, found Ben, then pointed past him to the Inca king bottle.

"Tomorrow," she said. "See you tomorrow, Ben."

Ben nodded, then turned to look at the Inca king bottle as if to say: Better luck next time.

## Ma Dooley

Yvonne Fitzmaurice

**(From: 'Apple Bend', a novel in progress)**

The late afternoon sun was still beating down relentlessly, as it had since early morning when Ethel-May Green had been found dead beside the road, just north of Ma Dooley's property. Chief Inspector Murray, a Melbourne man, and his country colleague, Constable Horton, had spent a frustrating day knocking on doors.

Apple Bend, a small rural community, was in shock. Even the town gossips who gathered daily on Newspaper Corner had been momentarily silenced.

Inspector Murray looked at his watch, anticipating a cool beer and a quiet smoke in Horton's private quarters at the rear of the station.

"Time enough in the morning to talk to Mrs Dooley. She's an old dear, I take it?"

"Ma? I wouldn't say that in her presence. She'd be in her forties—seen a lot of life, though, you might say." Horton replied.

Inspector Murray closed the file. "She'll wait until tomorrow." He stretched and walked to the rear of the building.

As it happened, Ma Dooley wouldn't wait until tomorrow. She came barging into the police station, her scarlet skirt-tails on fire.

"I be wantin' to see that copper that's down from the city," she demanded, expecting him to materialise before her.

Ma Dooley never came willing to the station. Constable Horton smiled. For some reason she always made him smile. "Who are you looking for, Ma?"

"Don't you 'Ma' me, and you know who I'm lookin' for, Horton, and it's not your ugly dial. The one from the city, the one who's come here to ask questions about the girl that got herself killed." She lifted her rounded chin as if sniffing the air. "I know he's here."

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I can smell him.”

Horton made a show of opening and closing drawers.

“Come on now. Don’t you be playin’ games with me. That girl got herself murdered, didn’t she. That’s why you come snoopin’ around me place this mornin’.”

Horton was enjoying himself. In his frequent encounters with Ma, he had grown accustomed to her evasive rigmaroles. He was playing her at her own game when the door opened and Inspector Murray entered, clouds of Cut Plug pipe smoke floating behind him like a tired old grey scarf.

“I thought I knew that voice.” Murray was staring at the red-haired virago.

“What are you doing in this neck of the woods, Katie Monohan? You’re no country girl.”

“I knew it was you.” Ma’s hands were on her hips, and her head was shaking. “I seen that hat drivin’ by this mornin’ and I knew it was me old pal Billy Murray.”

Horton’s jaw dropped. He turned from one to the other as Murray offered a chair and Ma arranged herself, careful to expose a large expanse of shapely leg.

“You’ve obviously met,” Horton said to his colleague.

“We go back a long way, don’t we, Katie? So it’s Mrs Dooley now, and where is the lucky Mr Dooley?”

“Ah, and the poor man died on his weddin’ night—of ecstasy.” Ma shifted her hemline a fraction higher. Her smile marred by a missing eyetooth. Still it was plain to see she had been a beauty in her youth; a wild Irish rose, now somewhat overblown. She was a fine looking woman.

“So, what can I do for you, Katie,” Murray said.

Horton couldn’t believe his eyes, or his ears. There was Ma, the bane of his life, openly flirting with Chief Inspector Murray. He stood frowning there, watching the play.

“Ya haven’t got a fag on ya, Billy?” Ma asked.

“I can let you have a chew.” Murray offered his pouch of pipe tobacco.

“Chew that stuff! Forget I asked ya.”

“Out with it, Katie. You didn’t come here to bot a fag. What brought you in?”

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Ma cleared her throat. "Well, you bein' who you are and knowin' what you know, and me now bein' a community-minded person, I come in, didn't I?"

She nodded her head sideways at Horton, and added, "He turned up at me place this mornin' with his questions and I thought he was after one of the lads who'd had a bit too much to drink."

She drew herself up and took a deep breath. "Well, I couldn't be havin' any of that now, could I? They be me friends, and as you know, I always had a lot of friends, and I look after me friends."

She glanced meaningfully at Murray through eyelashes heavy with mascara, as she attempted to gauge the affect of her speech.

"You always were a popular woman, Katie," Murray replied.

"That I was, Billy. Now, that girl that got herself murdered. Would I be right in believin' that she be the Green girl? Young Ethel-May Green."

"There has been no mention of murder, Ma, and the name of the victim has not been released," Horton said. "How did you get the name?"

She flung him a look of contempt. "One of me friends told me—if it's any of your business. Told me she'd been done in. I got a lot of friends in high places."

"What can you tell us about the girl's death, Katie," Murray asked.

"Well I may be knowin' somethin' and I then again I may not." She sniffed haughtily. "I thought you'd be offerin' me a glass of somethin' wet. 'Tis awful dry in here."

Horton poured a glass of lukewarm water from a jug, Ma waved it away with her hand, so he drank it. His tone was dry when he spoke again. He knew her too well, and he had better things to do than to sit here listening to the town prostitute's prevarications.

"As I told you this morning, Ma, what we need from you is a list of your Sunday night clients."

"An' I told you this mornin' I have guests at me parties, not clients, an' as I told you, I got no use for pen and paper." Her voice and tone were belligerent. Murray repacked his pipe as he watched Horton's questions hit against a brick wall and bounce back. Ma Dooley hadn't come here to talk to Constable Horton.

"Cut the bull and tell us what you know about the Green girl, Katie."

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Ma jangled her bracelets and readjusted her skirt. She hitched at the neck of her blouse, showing even more of her wares.

"That Shreiber boy was at me party."

"Which one?" Horton asked.

"And how would you be expecting me to know all a their names? The tall one that liked Ethel-May, that's who." She waved a hand above her head. "A lovely big boy. Lovely hair." She winked, smiled at a recent and pleasant memory. "Hair the colour of cornsilk, he's got. And as soft—"

"A description that fits both Shreiber boys. What was his name?"

"I like me music loud, Horton—I don't be hearin' names."

"What time did he leave your premises?"

"We don't show much light down there. Too dark to be seein' the clocks."

She paused. "All I know is he sunk a few jars, had a few words with . . . with one of me guests, and the last I seen a the beautiful boy was him staggerin' out past me chooks."

The scent of Murray's pipe tobacco was strong, and the room small. He puffed more smoke, watching it rise, hang in a grey haze overhead as the slow tale continued.

"And her husband—the Green girl's husband, well he was outside my place this mornin'. Early. Up on the road. He was doin' somethin'. That's all I know."

"What time was this?" Horton forgot the heat and his dry throat as he sat forward.

"I told you before, I don't look at clocks."

"Did you see him leave? Was he driving his truck? What direction did he go in? Was he alone?"

Ma's eyes were on Murray. "I said all I got to say and now I'm goin'."

"You used to be allergic to the sun, Katie Monohan. I can't see you walking down here in this heat to tell us what we already know."

She stood then, eased her dress away from perspiring thighs and well-padded buttocks. "I'm a law-abidin' citizen who likes her privacy." She eyed Murray. "I don't want no trouble from you. What's past is past, is what I'm sayin' to you, Billy Murray."

The two men did not attempt to detain her. As she left the building, they walked to the window, the lower half of which was frosted

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glass. The words, Police Station printed in large capitals had been left unfrosted. Each letter was like an oasis of clarity.

"I haven't seen Katie Monahan in years. I thought she'd died or gone straight."

"She's about as straight as a dog's hind leg" Horton said, applying an eye to the P. "She's on the game. She's selling sly grog, and I'm pretty certain she's roped in a couple of the local girls—to help her out at her parties. Can't prove it. She's crafty as a red fox."

"Always was," Murray said, applying his eye to the A and following Ma's distorted progress across the road.

Her copper-red hair glinting, she sashayed past the group of young bloods, her hips swinging in time to their whistles of appreciation.

"Time for that beer," Horton said.



## The Third Eye

Joy Dettman

Unmarried? The poor old thing. Big Molly Murphy wheezed with genuine feeling while scanning up from the naked fingers to the face of her current victim.

"Seventy five . . . eighty," her eyes calculated. "Oh! What an awful mole!"

Overflowing with compassion for a population she studied like microbes under glass, Molly stared blatantly, safe behind her sunglasses and smokescreen. Then the focus of her attention, seated at the next cafeteria table, looked up from her magazine. Their eyes locked.

Molly's mouth, pursed in concentration around a cigarette, fell open, releasing the cigarette to slide into the inviting gully between her two bulging breasts. A desperate grab for it sent her half-filled coffee cup flying across the table to land upside down on her neighbour's lap.

"Oh, I am sorry!"

Molly floundered to her feet. The saved cigarette secured between her teeth, she swiped at the spilled coffee with a paper serviette, her eyes now studying at close range a mole that had no equal.

It was a purple-puce thing, crisscrossed by craters. Long bristles bristling, it crouched over the woman's eyebrow like a blood-gorged tick on a white rat. Her head shaking in mute sympathy, Molly stared.

"You like me badge, lady . . . me badge of membership to a flawed old human race? We all wear our badges, lady. Some of us flaunt 'em, some of us try to hide 'em behind clouds of stinking smoke..." And she was gone, lost in the crowd.

Molly shrugged, dismissing the old woman's words as she lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of the last one. Content in her den of delusions, she had long convinced herself that her life was without flaw—or would be when her marriage was blessed with a child.

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Still, as Stan says, there's plenty of time for children, she thought, overriding the one-minute blemish on perfection. Stan felt he wasn't ready for the responsibility of fatherhood. Not that he's selfish. No! My Stan is an angel—compared to some.

In almost ten years of marriage Molly had never said a harsh word to her husband. They had a good relationship.

Very good. She nodded to give emphasis to her thought. Very, very good. I'm lucky to have such a good husband.

Convinced, then, she collected her supermarket bags, made her way upstairs to the bus depot, then home to another lonely evening. Stan was working late again.

That night Molly went to bed early with a romance novel, and only after its hero had declared his undying love for the heroine did she turn out the lights. It was twelve forty-five. Stan still hadn't arrived home.

"He works too hard," she muttered to her pillow, then spreading her limbs in the lonely double bed, she attempted to compose her mind for sleep.

The old woman's face with its disfiguring mole kept playing before her eyes.

"Poor old love. What a terrible burden to carry through life. My word, some people don't know how lucky they are," she said aloud, and rolled onto her back.

§

The walls of her old home seemed to be breathing tonight. Aged ceilings groaned and creaked, windows rattled and worn door hinges, squeaked. She loved her house, loved the area, had never considered moving away. But Stan had explained how they had to sell it. In three weeks time it was going to auction and some stranger would be sleeping in this room.

Molly had inherited her family home. She'd grown to adulthood in this very room. Still, Stan knew best. She allowed him to make the decisions as her father once had once made the decisions for his family.

A plain and solitary child, Molly had evolved into a plain and solitary woman who at thirty was taking care of father and managing the family's electrical goods shop. Then father died, and Stanley Murphy walked into her shop and into her life. He saw and recog-

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nised a need—and he filled it for a time.

Courting sleep, she rolled to her stomach, but the debris of doubt and disappointments long buried, oozed and bubbled from their scaled tombs, rising like poisonous vapours through the thin crust of her subconscious to her conscious mind.

“Where will we live? What will I do without my garden? Shush. Shush now.

Stan loves me. He'll look after me,” she chanted, “Stan loves me. Stan loves me” until her litany of lies weighed down disappointment, reburied doubt—and Molly Murphy slept.

§

She hummed as she worked the following morning, dusting, sweeping, picking up pencils and bits and pieces left by a neighbour's child she sometimes babysat. She placed the items on her bench, checked the time, then efficiently cracked two eggs into the poaching-pan, capped them with the lid, placed bread in the toaster, morning paper on the left hand side of Stan's place-mat, tea in the pot . . .

She sniffed, lifted her head and slowly turned to the stove where a knob of plasticine had attached itself to the lid of the poaching-pan and was melting there into a liver-pink blob.

“Bloody plasticine,” she said. “Where did that come from?”

She scraped the plasticine away with a knife, recapped the eggs then stood a moment, holding the knife to her nose, breathing in the dear safe odour of childhood, when love and security had been her birthright.

“Memories,” she said, and with a shrug that placed the past back where it belonged, she walked to the rubbish bin, peeling the liver-pink plasticine from the knife.

The knife came clean but the sticky ball refused to leave her finger. Surprised by its tenacity she shook it; she flicked it. It stuck to her thumbnail.

It was the size of a large sparrow's egg . . . the size of the old woman's mole. Molly frowned. It looked like the mole. Slowly her hand rose and fingers pressed the ball to her left eyebrow, where it stuck fast.

“Stan. Stan. Breakfast's ready.”

§

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The plasticine was quivering with indignation by the time she handed Stan his second cup of tea. He hadn't seen it, hadn't commented, and when she tilted her brow for his kiss, amusement at her game turned to disbelief. His lips no more than an inch from the makeshift mole, he didn't say a word.

A hairline crack in her armour of fantasy opened.

"Poor Molly Murphy," the kitchen door hinge creaked as she passed.

"He hasn't seen you in years, Big Moll," a Holland blind flapped from the bay window.

"We warned you he'd never qualify for husband of the year, Moll," the kitchen chair offered as she sat on it, and the cigarettes squeezed together in a brand new packet, wheezed in harmonic appreciation of their own snide humour,

"Still, you never were a prize, Moll. He's thirty-six, you're nudging forty.

"I'm thirty-nine," Molly snapped. "Anyhow, life begins at forty."

Forty. Was it possible? It seemed like yesterday she had walked down the aisle to her Stanley, her handsome new sales-manager, three years her junior. Her own dear Stanley, who, threatened by her knowledge, encouraged her to step aside, and allow him to manage her thriving little electrical store into near bankruptcy.

"Stop it," she hissed. "Stop it. Stan is a good man. He works so hard. It's not his fault that the business is failing. How can a small business expect to compete with the big department stores?"

All day the plasticine mole tingled and burned over her eyebrow while the old house gave voice to Molly's thoughts. At four the bathroom mirror suggested improvements to her new facial adornment. Together they added contours and craters, colouring them with black mascara.

"All it needs is a whisker or two big Moll . . ."

§

Stan's Burmese cat, a state champion, was a bad-tempered little fiend Molly pampered because Stan loved him. As she backed him into a corner, threw a towel over him and helped herself to three whiskers, she allowed herself to admit how he had grown to resemble Stan. Sleek, well-brushed brown suit, pinched little features, cold blue near-sighted eyes. Then, with his small sharp teeth, he

nipped her wrist.

"Slim, bitching little stud, primped for strangers while biting the hands that feed you. I wouldn't give you bloody house room if it were up to me ... Oh."

Her lips clamped shut and her round eyes widened while her fingers wandered to her plasticine mole.

§

She fingered the mole while serving the evening meal. It soothed her. She sat in silence, watching Stan's sharp little teeth and listening to his monotonous high-pitched monologue of self congratulations, her mind far away.

"Mm," she nodded, "Yes, Stan," she agreed, all the while squeezing, rolling the mole from side to side, hypnotised by the sensual rhythm. A comforting barrier, it was blocking access to her conscious mind. She said yes, when she should have said no.

Stan's angry response caused her hand to flinch. It flattened the plasticine, entangled it in her eyebrow. She blinked her left eye, squinting as she asked, "Another slice of cake, Stan?"

The plasticine weighed heavy. Her words were followed by an involuntary, wickedly lecherous wink.

He caught its edge. He shrank from it. He closed his near-sighted eyes before continuing the monologue and she nodded and winked on until he left a space to fill.

"That travel agent from opposite our shop, phoned today, something about tickets to Disneyland. What did he mean, Stan?"

His line of thought interrupted, he sprang upright, mumbling a denial while his gaze traversed the room, seeking a place to settle on other than his wife's features.

"Oh, he must have made a mistake—got the wrong Murphy. You're right of course, Stan. We've got no money for gallivanting, although we are overdue for a second honeymoon. Keep in mind my biological clock. It's running down, Stan."

She saw it then . . . or felt it. His cold, cutting contempt shot like an ice-dart into her left eyebrow. The pain was sharp, intense. She froze as he pushed back his chair, deserting her in mid-sentence for the bedroom.

§

She sat on alone at the table, eating cake until the final slice waited

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lonely on the plate. She watched it for ten minutes then unable to bear its solitary existence, dispatched it down to its brethren. He caught her scooping up the last of the cream with her finger.

"You're not going out again tonight, Stan," she said, noticing his squash bag in hand.

His back arched, he hissed and left.

§

That night, burning indigestion—or perhaps the conception of original rage, rumbled and rolled beneath Molly's gentle heart. For the first time in a lifetime of people-watching, she was seeing people. She had a third eye entangled in her left eyebrow. It was focused on Stan and would sanction no more self-deception.

§

Two days passed. The plasticine mole spent several hours each day perched over Molly's eyebrow, and if the cat ran for cover when he saw her approaching with the towel and scissors, Stan didn't run. No comment came from the lips that had once promised to love until death did them part, yet those same lips soothed the donor of her whiskers when he discovered a few blunt bristles disfiguring his champion's features.

His high-pitched complaints jarred against Molly's eardrums now, and she snapped.

"I know he has to service two females next week, Stanley. Are a few missing whiskers going to effect his bloody performance? I don't notice your moustache inspiring you to new heights in the night."

Her unMolly-like tone didn't go unnoticed. With a feline recoil of a sneering lip, Stan looked through his wife to a far, far better place.

He suggested she take the cat to the vet.

Again she questioned his words.

"How? Am I supposed to take him on the bus in a supermarket bag? Take him yourself. I've got better things to do. I might go out and use the housekeeping on stud fees. I want to breed too, Stan."

Newborn fury was alive and breathing. Her head throbbed with it. Blood in her veins pounded, threatening to break free, but too long afraid of anger, she reached for her packet of prescribed serenity, popping two tranquillisers to her palm, bursting two sleeping pills from their bubble pack.

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She was out of control. It was an inopportune moment for the cat to spring to her shoulder, and with his sharp claws demand his meal, for he received far more than he expected. Molly dropped the pill cocktail into his can of seafood delight. Her expression menacing, she added two more sleeping pills to his last supper.

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty," she called. "Nice kitty kitty."

Champions are too inbred to possess great intellect. The cat's jaws didn't miss a beat—but his heart obviously did later that night.

§

"Your cat's dead, Stanley," she called the next morning, feeling a sense of achievement in a job well done. Scissors in hand, she crouched over the fresh corpse, considering the stockpiling of a few final whiskers as Stan came at a run through the door.

He pushed her away from his fallen champion, dislodging her plasticine mole. It fell beside his slipper. He trod on it, flattened it, then he walked it back into the house, and she trailed his murderous slipper and his mumbled accusations, her mouth open, her hands outstretched. Each time his foot was placed to the floor, she felt a killing, crushing weight on her fragile self-image.

§

Stan prowled the old house slamming every door. Molly tracked him, her eyes searching the carpet for the mole she needed to again locate the sweet pool of new-found acceptance of self. Without it, her tone was reverting to its familiar apologetic whine.

"I'm sorry, Stan. I'll call the pet cemetery. I'll pay for it, Stan . . . and I'll order a tombstone with his photograph on it. I'm sorry, Stan."

Sighting the puce blob beside the near-closed bedroom door, she pounced, and attempted to scratch the plasticine from the worn carpet. Her eyes, close to the floor, were also close to the door, close to the wide gap below an ageing hinge. With one hand she held the reclaimed plasticine to her eyebrow while, head to one side, she peered through the gaping hinge at the preening, primping little stud she had wed.

He was dragging his squash bag from the rear of the wardrobe. Hardly daring to breath, Molly watched cross-eyed as his hands delved deep into the chaos of his squash bag. Out came one boot, followed by a racquet cover. From the boot emerged a wad of tightly

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rolled notes; but the racquet cover was a treasure trove. A passport, a bankbook, two airline tickets he held to his new moustache. He kissed them and the plasticine mole fell to the carpet!

Weak kneed, Molly closed her eyes, praying for the sweet deception of cataracts, but her twenty/twenty vision had seen too much. Logic filled in the spaces. For ten years she had believed he was hers to have and to hold. True, he was flawed; he was also all she had, but she knew then that she didn't have him at all. He was having someone else.

Stunned, jaw sagging, she watched him slide the passport into his racquet cover and poke the cash into his squash boot. He placed the boots in the bag and the bag in the wardrobe, his pinched little face gloating like his cat's before it killed her budgie.

§

Habit tilted her head for the perfunctory slap of lips that for ten years she'd named kiss, and habit whispered a barely audible, "See you tonight, Stan, Try not to be too late." Habit set her feet in motion to follow him to the door, to stand watching until his car drove away, Her actions robotic, each step a stiff-kneed habitual thing, she wandered then to the bathroom to gaze vacantly into the mirror.

"Maybe he's planning a surprise trip for our anniversary."

"You need a passport to travel to America, Big Moll," the mirror declared.

"He won't leave me. He'll get me a passport."

Habit saw her arguing Stan's case. A husband, children, a home had always spelled success to Molly Murphy. "I bet he's been saving for months—so he can surprise me for our anniversary."

"Nothing he did could surprise you, Moll. He's stripped your business bare."

Her reflection shrugged before continuing: "He's going to sell your house, grab the money, then fly to Disneyland with someone, but it wont be you. Look in his squash bag, Moll."

Tears flowed then, loud, bawling tears that trickled in rivulets down her plump cheeks while she reached for the cloth and the known security of mopping up after Stan.

For years, she'd closed her eyes to his deceptions, knowing he'd eventually come home. As long as his towel was a soggy heap on

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the bathroom floor and his toothbrush swimming in the basin, as long as his hair-dryer was on the vanity unit, plugged in, switched on, ready to go, he was hers; and if turning her back on truth was the price she had agreed to pay for the prize of saying, "My husband and I", she had paid it gladly.

The price was suddenly too high.

§

Later, bath water nudging her chin, revenge within her grasp, she took a last deep breath and one wet hand reached for the hair-dryer. Its control switched to high, she held it screaming overhead for one last brief moment. "Take your girlfriend to Disneyland now, Stan Murphy," she wailed, and flung the dryer to her feet.

Stan's future flashed before her eyes. She heard a jury find him guilty of her murder, and a judge sentence him to two months' community service, while with eyes closed tight, Molly waited for the zing, the zap that would wipe away ten years of humiliation.

Not a whimper disturbed the water, not a wail, not as much as a mute bubble.

One eye opened gingerly. In slow motion, she turned to face the source of power. She was Molly, Electrician's daughter. She recognised the problem immediately. The plug had eased away from the ageing socket. Current wasn't getting through.

"Failure," the dryer taunted, balancing on her big toe, its long nozzle high. "Trust you to make a mess of it, Moll."

All planned suicides should be offered the opportunity of hindsight. Life suddenly looked sweet to Molly Murphy. Cringing from the proximity of death, she watched the dryer tilt and settle more comfortable between her feet, burping as it submerged, dragging the worn cord along the edge of the bath like a waiting worm, a hypnotising viper conjuring up a power surge to bridge the gap.

Revulsion clawed her hand. She snatched the viper. She flung it to the floor. She tore the power plug from its socket and with heart hammering, fled naked to the sanctuary of her bedroom and to the comfort of her plasticine mole.

It was where it had fallen, its mottled puce skin embedded with carpet hair and grit. It defied her attempt to press it to her eyebrow. She let it fall to the floor, then turned her back on plasticine.

§

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That evening Molly prepared a candlelit anniversary dinner for two. Stan came home late. He went straight to the shower.

Later, when the questions began, Molly said she couldn't be sure if she'd heard the bang before or after the television went off.

"I'd already lit the candles so I wasn't left in the dark, you see," she explained. She was positive that she'd called three times," Stan, the telly's broken down."

When he didn't reply, she had gone to the bathroom and almost tripped over him.

"The hair-dryer was still gripped in his hand," she said. Even by candlelight, the slim trickle of water drizzling from the dryer's handle and across his wrist was clearly visible to anyone with her twenty/ twenty vision.

She told her interrogators of Stan's poor eyesight.

"He would never have noticed that the drier was wet," she said.

She omitted to tell them how she'd leaned against the wall staring at Stan for minutes, noting that his hair was actually standing on end like the electric shock victims in cartoons. She hadn't expected that; nor had she expected her thundering laughter that echoed free again through the passages of the old mansion.



## Pub Kelly

Brian Le Marquand

I was sitting in a pub having a beer when Ned Kelly sat on the next stool. He took off his helmet, a bit dinged-up from bullets, and put it on the bar with a gentle but definite *thud*.

Ned had been dead more than a hundred years, but I did not want to miss the chance of having a beer with him. He looked a bit worse for wear, dazed. A drop of the amber fluid would not go astray.

"Like a cold one?" I asked.

His wild stare focused on me for a penetrating instant. In his hand he held a revolver with the smell of burnt black powder. He sure looked authentic. He paused before slipping the gun into his holster.

"Thanks," he said.

I signalled the bartender for two more schooners and paid with a five-dollar note.

Ned stared at the note, mesmerised.

"What do you call that?" he asked me as the bartender made change. The question struck me as odd— except that it was Ned Kelly, a century in his grave, asking.

"Five dollars," I said.

His eyes went wide. "Dollars is it? Am I in America? Where I come from it's pounds, it is!"

I smiled. Of course, it was British pounds in the days of the bushrangers—that, and coins of gold and silver, currency of the world, the price of the metal being the value of the coin. Australia was a land of ports, sailors coming from the four corners and bringing money from their home countries. There was no local currency in the colonies.

"No," I said. "This is not America, seems like it sometimes, I guess, but good old Oz will do me."

This did not make him calm; if anything he became more agi-

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tated. His hand rested on the stock of his revolver.

"The air smells different, not clean."

I picked up my beer and said, "Cheers."

"What? Oh." He handled his glass and took a swallow. "Cold," he said, surprised, as if he had never tasted cold beer before. "Chilled, like ice."

I enjoyed a joke as anyone did—Ned even smelled as if he only got in the bathtub once a week—and I went along with it.

"We have refrigerators these days, electricity."

Ned drank the rest of his beer, getting a taste for it. He signalled to the publican and ordered two more, one for me. The tradition of the shout was old when Kelly was a kid and it was comforting that some things last.

He laid a gold sovereign on the bar.

The publican stared at it. So did I.

"Is that real?"

Ned slitted his eyes in a mean gaze. "Are you questioning my intentions?"

His hand went back to the stock of his gun.

I thought I was looking at a king brown ready to strike and put up my hands in supplication.

"It's just that paper money is the common coin these days, or plastic."

Ned relaxed. "Plenty more where that came from," he said to the publican. "Keep it if you like."

The bloke behind the bar snatched it up, knowing reality when confronted with it. I noticed he did not put it in the till but in his pocket.

"You're carrying a lot of iron," I said, by way of conversation.

"Brilliant, isn't it," he answered with a broad smile. "I got the idea from the knights of olde England, King Arthur and that mob. Bullets just bounce off. Sets up a terrible din inside, though."

"Can't have everything."

"No." He sounded genuinely disappointed. "Just as much as you can grab."

"I hear you give most of it away."

"Some," he said. "People are doing it hard on the land."

"Drought, fire, flood, taxes," I said.

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"One day it will change," said Ned. "The big squatters won't run it all forever."

I glanced across the street at a fast-food outlet with doubt and cholesterol in my veins.

"Maybe."

"It's true we are all here for a short time," he said. "The temptation is for an easy life before it's too late. Let someone else worry about it."

"And the world goes like it always has," I said.

"Vicious cycle."

"So what do we do?" I asked the most famous Australian.

"The best we can."

I shrugged. "What else is there?"

He grinned. "The worst we can do is sometimes entertaining."

He nursed his beer in silence.

I had to get to work soon. I was a journalist for a city paper and had come to this well-known country town for the annual festival. I could hear the parade approaching. Ned and I were the only patrons in the pub. Crowds outside lined both sides of the street. Painted faces and costumes added colour. I had a few more minutes before earning today's pay.

Suddenly Kelly said, "This is not my year, is it?"

"We all go through rough times," I said, thinking this street performer was about to confide personal problems best kept to himself.

I made a move to go, but he grabbed me and I fell back on the stool. His grip was stronger than any man's I had encountered before. Being a journalist, I met many people from different walks of life. But Ned's grip knew no rest from the round of horses and scrabbling for a living. It was the grip of a pioneer. It would have fitted well on the handles of a plough behind a team. My arm hurt where he held it. He let go.

"Puny," he said. "You wear funny clothes, too."

Sitting at a computer screen for most of the day did not help my muscle tone, but I had gym membership for that. My suit did not fit into the holiday crowd, unlike his costume.

Ned drained his glass. "May God forgive me, but that tastes marvellous," he said. "The traps had the hotel surrounded, bullets

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flying. We were holding them off but reinforcements were on the way. I know doom when I see it. I snuck outside, deserted the others, and somehow got through the line of the law, carrying this iron and all. Next thing I know I'm in here, where the beer is cold and electricity does everything for you." He said "electricity" as if it was the first time he had uttered the word; it stumbled off his tongue.

"I know that I can stay here in comfort, safe and sound. Live a life I was not meant to live."

The noises of the parade were getting closer. Ned Kelly looked at the television in the corner above the bar, momentarily fascinated. He saw the calendar on the wall and mouthed the date quietly.

"If I go back, I know what awaits. I can feel a stinging in my leg from another time, a tightness in my throat." Ned stared into the distance. "But the traps won't see me coming. I got through the lines. I will be behind them and can make a stand as Ned Kelly should!" He sighed. "Before they realise I am gone."

I rapped him on the iron shoulder knowingly. "It is a matter of historic record that Ned Kelly vanished from the siege of the Glenrowan hotel for an hour. To his dying day, Ned never divulged where he went."

He looked at me in horror. Then he put down the empty beer glass and picked up his heavy iron helmet. Pulling the gun from his holster he ran out into the daylight. I thought I heard gunfire and jumped to my feet. Then the first float of the parade rolled past amid exploding firecrackers.

I made sure my pen and notebooks were in my pocket before I went out to cover the story for the paper. I looked up at the float and saw Ned Kelly in his suit of armour made of tin.



## Creativity

Yvonne Fitzmaurice

**B**eing a creative person can be very difficult, especially when one's muse is working at full pressure. Ideas must be released in the form *they* choose or the carrier of them may implode under their pressure.

Ignoring the creative side of our nature is like sending a part of the mind into a void of frustration and dissatisfaction. This could lead to deep melancholy, because a part of the vital self is suffocated.

When creativity is allowed to flow normally and naturally, there is a sense of deep satisfaction and contentment which is reflected onto others.

But when the flow is excessive, it can manifest as instability: swarms of expressions rushing and tumbling, vying with one another to break free and take on physical form—all at the same time.

Do you still want to be a writer?



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## Tomorrow I'll Write a Poem about a Sunflower

Judith A. Green

tomorrow  
when the washing is hung out  
committee minutes typed  
phone calls made  
I'll write a poem  
when the last hole is mended  
shopping done  
biscuits baked  
about a sunflower  
the one my child reached for  
as I worried  
about the mud  
on his shoes

