

A Literary View



VIEW



FOREWORD

The Short Story Competition, begun in 1964, created wide interest among all VIEW Clubs and the enthusiasm of the members was evident by the number of women who felt inspired to submit entries. First Prize 30 guineas and a trophy, Second prize 15 guineas. The well-known author Kylie Tennant was the judge. That first competition, was won by Peta Hughes of the Lane Cove VIEW Club, "Monica and the Mink".

Over the next three decades the winning stories were published in the VIEW magazine. At times the magazine also published a range of other members' contributions. The authors chose familiar topics reflecting the world around them and the content of the stories cover a microcosm of the times.

There are stories of love, adversity, hardship, inequality and most commonly friendship; friendship burgeoning through adversity. Many stories reflect the underlying values of these VIEW women and reflect the latent literary talent which merely needed an outlet to flourish.

While reading through the magazines I realised this is a part of the VIEW history unknown to many of today's members. The idea of creating a collection of these stories has led to "A Literary VIEW", a compendium of VIEW Short Stories showcasing the amazing writing skills and creativity of our members.

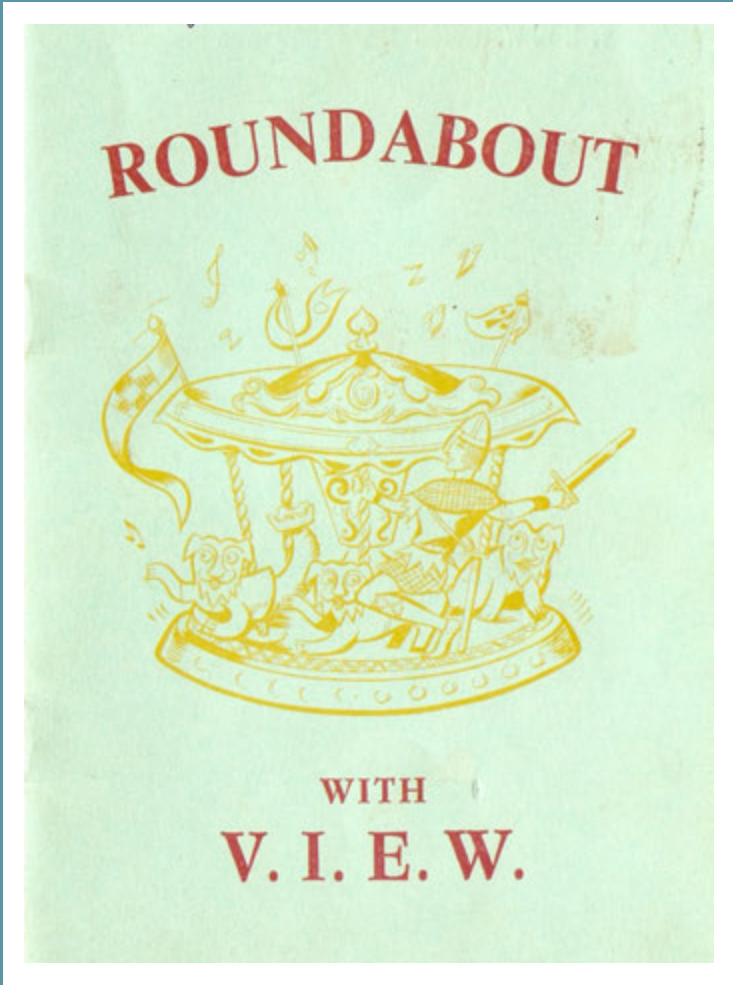
Some writers were prolific, their names appearing frequently, while others wrote only one or two stories. Poetry also featured in many editions of the magazine.

The award continued until 1999 under a number of names. Begun as the State President's Literary Award it later became the Literary Award and in the late 1980's became known as The Editor's Award. In 1999 the Short Story Competition ceased.

This second volume continues the story of the remarkable literary talent of VIEW Club members.

Susan Groenhout
Past National Vice President
Chair VIEW History Working Group





ABOUT VIEW

Our Vision

Women creating and leading a more inclusive society

A valued part of The Smith Family

VIEW Clubs of Australia is a leading women’s volunteer organisation and support network that empowers women to have their voices heard on issues of importance in Australian society. VIEW stands for Voice, Interests and Education of Women. Thousands of women across Australia belong to VIEW.

VIEW is the only national women’s organisation solely focused on supporting and advocating for the education of young disadvantaged Australians. It is a non-religious, non-political organisation.

VIEW provides women with the opportunity to meet regularly with other women from all walks of life, establish lasting friends and help disadvantaged Australian children through supporting the work of children’s charity, The Smith Family. Education and leadership opportunities are also part of the VIEW offering, in addition to the chance to be purposeful in supporting community need.

VIEW is a valued part of The Smith Family. Through social, community and fundraising activities VIEW members have supported the work of The Smith Family for more than 50 years.

More than 16,000 members across Australia, VIEW’s reach and networks in local communities help to raise awareness and strengthen the impact of the work of The Smith Family.

VIEW is proud to be The Smith Family’s single largest community sponsor of Learning for Life Students. Nationally, VIEW members sponsor more than 1, 100 disadvantaged students, enabling them to get the most from their education through assistance and support from The Smith Family’s Learning for Life program.

We do this because we believe that by helping disadvantaged children succeed at school, we can have a lasting impact on their lives and potential generations to come.

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ABOUT VIEW MAGAZINE

Since the publication of the first V.I.E.W. newsletter in September 1960, the magazine has undergone many changes in style, content and title. Originally called VIEW Points it was typed and copied in The Smith Family office.

In September 1961 ROUNDAABOUT WITH V.I.E.W. was produced. A smaller book-like publication, “to give opportunity for clubs to publicise interesting activities and events and to keep members up to date and informed about VIEW Club ideas and programmes.”

VIEWPOINT, appeared in about August 1962 with members asked to pay 1/- (10c.) per copy.

In July 1963 V.I.E.W. WORLD was published and continued in the same format for two years. Then in 1965 the magazine became more compact but with more content and was produced quarterly, with colour introduced VIEWWORLD remained as the magazine for twenty-eight years continuing as a forum for the women to voice their opinions on many issues and to develop their literary skills

In September 1991 the Spring Edition became Women’s View. It was larger in size and contained 40 pages.

The name of the magazine again changed slightly in the Spring Edition of 1992 to WOMEN’S VIEW and in the Summer Edition 1997 to WOMEN’S VIEW.

In 2000 the magazine again changed name to VIEW which remained until 2010, the 50th Anniversary of VIEW Clubs, when it became VIEW MATTERS and remains so today.

Blow the Whistle

**MARGARET DAWSON
SPRINGWOOD CLUB**

Well I think it's a good idea. A night out would do us all good. It's nearly the end of term, the best time for a celebration."

"Fine," replied the young man sprawled in a chair. "Let's make it next week. Anybody got any ideas about where to go?"

"There's a Swiss restaurant in town. I've heard it's very good," volunteered Frances Turner, smart and pretty. "What about ringing them?"

"Everyone else agreeable?" Madge looked around the group.

"Couldn't we go somewhere a bit more exclusive?" The question came from Barbara Fisher. She was in her late 20s, aloof, never really fitting in with her colleagues.

Madge's heart sank as she looked at Barbara's set face. Why was she always so prickly?

"Oh no, Barbara," Bill said, "what's wrong with the Swiss restaurant?" He had little patience with her uppity ways.

"What does everyone else feel about it?"

"Fine with us." The rest were in complete accord.

"Still want to come, Barbara?" Madge asked.

"Oh, very well."

"Right, I'll ring the restaurant and book for next Friday. It's bring your own wine at this place I believe."

"No problem," Edward, another of the group, grinned. "See you all later, duty calls," he added as a bell rang dispersing the group.

Madge called the restaurant and booked for a party of eight. Should be fun, she thought. Middle-aged and widowed with two grown children. Madge enjoyed a night out. Since her husband died these had been few and far between. She only hoped that Barbara would not be a pain in the neck. Still, between them they could handle her!

The following Friday they arrived at the restaurant about 8.30pm. That is, all except Barbara, who seemed to take a perverse pleasure in keeping people waiting. They stood in the doorway, wrapped wine bottles tucked under their arms.

The waitress came forward, smiling, to meet them. "Good evening. You have a table booked?"

"Yes, Sims for 8.30," Madge answered.

The waitress consulted the book. "Table 8. Follow me please."

They were seated at a festive looking table. Flowers in small holders and dim lighting highlighted their feeling of anticipation.

"Barbara isn't here yet," Madge remarked.

"With a bit of luck she won't turn up at all!" Sylvia, a small, dark-haired girl who had little time for her fellow teacher's snobbish ways, commented.

"May I open the wine?" The pleasant waitress stood at the table. Bob handed over the bottles of wine and they settled back to enjoy the evening. The opened bottles were brought back to the table and the glasses filled.

Bob lifted his glass to his friends. "To us."

"To us," they echoed.

They were looking at the menu when Barbara arrived. Every smooth hair was in place and her make-up immaculate. Her black silk dress was beautifully cut, albeit a little severe.

She didn't apologise for her lateness, just sank into the vacant chair and patted her hair.

Sylvia gave her a look of exasperation but held her tongue.

The group, except for Barbara, quickly chose an entree. Barbara looked closely at the list. "Are the prawns small and fresh? And the oysters the best river kind?" Her voice gave the impression that she was an experienced woman of the world who had eaten at all the best restaurants.

"Christ, who does she think she's impressing?" Bill muttered.

"All our sea food is fresh." The waitress, who had seen it all before, was quite unmoved by Barbara's airs.

"Very well, then I'll have oysters natural." Barbara was at her snootiest best.

"That girl is a pain in the neck," Sylvia whispered to Madge.

"Ignore her," Madge advised tersely as the first course was brought to the table.

As the meal progressed more wine was drunk and by the time the main course arrived, the party was getting merry and noisy.

Mischievously Bill kept filling Barbara's glass. "Really," she protested, "I don't drink," but her glass was soon emptied.

Bill encouraged her. "It'll do you good to let your hair down and have some fun."

"I think that you've had too much wine, Bill, if you don't mind me saying so." Barbara's voice was frosty.

Bill leered at her. "Fun, isn't it?"

The waitress cleared the table and opened more bottles. Just as the girl was leaving Barbara called her back. "Could I have a bowl of water with lemon in it to wash my fingers?"

"Of course," Ann, the waitress, thought: "We've got a right one here — she's really bunging it on!"

She brought the bowl to Barbara and the group watched fascinated as the fingers were daintily dipped in water then wiped on the owner's elegant handkerchief.

The wine was flowing more freely and every anecdote regarding the school was greeted by gales of laughter.

After the main course, Madge had stopped drinking. She thought that



one of them needed to keep a clear head. She watched Bill refilling Barbara's glass every time she turned her head to speak to someone else. "Maybe I should stop him," she thought. But when she remembered all the snubs the staff had been subjected to, she smiled to herself. This could be quite a revelation!

Barbara's cheeks were becoming pink, her eyes were shining and even the immaculate hair-do seemed a little tipsy. Certainly this side of her had never shown through at the school.

The party became so noisy that people at other tables looked their way with raised eyebrows.

Madge, concerned that things were getting out of hand, summoned the waitress.

"Could we have coffee for everyone, please?"

"I've got to go to the powder room." Abruptly Barbara stood up, staggering a little. "Where is it?" Her voice was slurred.

"I'll come with you." Madge pushed back her chair and, taking Barbara's arm, led the way. In the pale pink room she helped Barbara fix her hair.

"Barbara, don't you think you've had enough to drink?"

Perhaps a cup of coffee would clear your head a bit." She didn't like to use the phrase "sober you up".

"Coffee, I don't want coffee. I'm having a wonderful time." Barbara leaned forward and gazed into Madge's eyes. "I always liked Bill you know." She spoke confidentially.

When the two women returned to the table Bill was not there. Barbara looked around, a full glass of wine in her hand. By the time she had finished it Bill still had not returned. Rather shakily she got to her feet and made her way around the table. The girls she

THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER

Winifred Potts
Mudgee VIEW Club

ignored, but the men she embraced, pressing her face against theirs.

"I'm having a lovely time. Are you having a lovely time too?"

The men mumbled something and looked embarrassed.

When Bill returned Barbara uttered a little scream and threw her arms around him. "Give me another drink."

Bill looked at Madge, shrugged and handed over half a glass of wine.

Barbara grasped the glass and drank the wine in one gulp. Then she started dancing around the table, hair in disarray, face flushed as she twirled around clicking her fingers. "Everybody dance."

"Barbara," Bill spoke sharply, "sit down and stop making a fool of yourself!"

"Bill," she stopped by his chair and put her arms around his neck, "I like you, Bill. I've always liked you. Don't you like

me?" She kissed him on the cheek.

He looked at her in amazement. Was this Barbara, cool, detached, confident Barbara?

Why had he never noticed that her eyes were green?

By now Madge was feeling embarrassed and quite angry. Their night was rapidly becoming a nightmare. She hoped that no parents of the children of the school were present. The time had come for them to leave.

She got up. "Come on, Barbara, and everyone else, let's go."

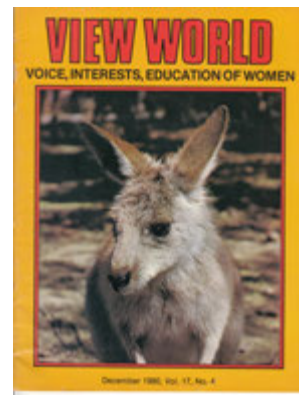
"Don't want to go." Barbara swayed. "I'm having a lovely time. Not going."

Madge had picked up her handbag. She realised it was her everyday bag and had a sudden idea. Opening the bag she took out her school whistle and blew it loudly. There was an instant of frozen silence. Barbara

stood perfectly still for a moment then, without another word, picked up her bag and walked towards the door. Silently the rest of the group filed out behind her.

Head held high Madge paid the bill, tucked her bag under her arm and followed them.

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I was sitting on the pub step when it all started. The damned heat already shimmered on the strip of asphalt that began at one end of the scattered shopping centre and died at the other. In a spurt of benevolence, and the hope of catching votes, the Shire had laid it a few months ago. We were too small to warrant much attention.

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Not a soul was in sight. A dog lolled outside the pub, too worn-out with heat to lift his tail and hunt the dopey flies. The heatwave had been intense for a week and all the talk at the pub last night had been of bushfires, past and future.

Half asleep from heat and last night's grog, I fairly leapt when the drowsy silence was smashed by the raucous clanging of the fire bell. As if by magic the school bell added its donging to the shattering of the stillness.

Where a second ago there was no sign of life, men began to spill out of the stores, the bank, sheds and the garage. Singularly, then merging into one body, all headed for the corrugated iron shed which housed the fire engine.

To cries of "Where, where?" a voice yelled, "Out Jorgenson's way", and to the west could be seen the sinister billowing smoke. Someone else shouted "Looks like it could be close to Ed's place. A good wind and it'd be here in half an hour!"

We all knew Ed was getting away early today. He'd been at the pub last night and told us he was leaving at daybreak to do a bit of fencing for Regan, about 20 miles away.

In the shed the volunteer firemen were scrambling aboard the fire engine, dragging on their beloved coats and helmets, proud signatures of their office.

The captain was at the wheel preparing to drive out. It had been backed in months ago ready for a quick getaway.

This was when the fun really began. It wouldn't start. The driver almost flattened the battery while his anxious crew sat tense and used vile language to relieve their tension. The garage bloke got off and lifted the bonnet but

couldn't see any obvious fault.

Someone yelled "the smoke is rising again", so the crew hopped off, uncoupled the water tanker and pushed the engine out of the shed, over the rise in the lumpy pavement and onto the road.

All the beer they'd sunk last night now oozed out of them. Their beautiful coats and helmets were discarded. Using what breath and strength they had left they abused one another for "not starting the bloody thing every night in weather like this".

Now we were joined by the school kids, pushing, shouting, laughing, enjoying every minute of the circus. The carrier took off to get his lorry to tow the water tanker out. When he arrived back the fire engine was still stationary in the road and he couldn't get near it until someone arrived with a tractor to tow the fire engine out of the way.

Tractor and engine sailed westward to the fire, which now had taken second place to the fun on hand. Cheering, roaring kids were still running behind.



Even the dogs were roused to excitement, rushing hither and thither, barking, biting heels, bringing forth further bursts of vile language.

The carnival reached the end of the asphalt when, with a splutter and bang, the fire engine showed signs of life. With roars of "keep her going Len", they uncoupled the tractor and the exhausted firemen ceased pushing and sprang aboard — minus their lovely helmets.

A straggling mob of kids and dogs continued to follow on foot. I'd hopped on the water tanker still being towed by the carrier. We passed the protesting, spluttering fire engine and headed towards Jorgenson's place. At least we had the water, even if we had no way of dispensing it.

Now Jorgenson lived about two miles out of town. He had a few acres on a hard dry hill bounded by a rocky gully — the usual leftovers from the big squatters, garnered by the less fortunate on which to build a home and raise a family. You could see their green rolling downs from Jorgenson's hill. Lovely view but that wouldn't fill empty stomachs.

They'd reared a big family there. Ed used to shear and fence — any sort of hard yakker that paid money. A great man with an axe years ago, when axemen were artists.

Anyway, the kids were gone now. All did well — better really, than the squatter's mob on the lush country. They'd come home from their colleges and married and multiplied on the family acres, multiplied themselves into genteel poverty.

Ed's wife would see to it that her brood did well. Very sedate she was, like a neat little bird. They reckon Ed used to pick her up and carry her about when he came home full, and when he put her down she'd still be unruffled and sedate like. But you can't always believe these yarns.

Anyway, the smoke wasn't billowing up but, as we approached from the town side of Jorgenson's hill, we couldn't see much. Arriving there, we sprang out and ran to the gully where smoke was still rising, but the precipitous rock face had confined it to the gully. Looking along the flat ridge on which the house stood, we saw one small patch where the fire had found a crack in the rock and a scorched yard or so of earth showed where it had reached the flat.

Then we saw her. A neat little woman with a huge white "poe" in her hand. You never see a "poe" now in these unsewered areas — people go for that modern atrocity, the coloured plastic bucket. I've seen 'em sneaking out in the early morning with their bucket.

We just gaped as she remarked quietly "I stopped it". Without a sign of embarrassment she moved to the tank and rinsed the "poe" at the outside tap, carrying the waste water to the steaming patch of burnt grass.

In dumbfounded silence we busied ourselves for a few minutes making sure the fire wouldn't rise above the rocks. Then the carrier heaved a sigh and regained his voice, "Just as well Ed had a bellyful of grog last night!"

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1. Belair
2. Past Presidents with NSW Volunteer Award
3. Women of View
4. Christmas 1964
- 5.
6. Brunswick Charter - Olga Denham (in hat)
7. Campsie B'day 63- Dulcie Callaghan (l) Heather Woods
8. Dec 1964 New Lambton VIEW Club (l-r) Josie Conway, Marie Gippel, Amy Sanders_wearing original VIEW badge.
9. Workshop 97
10. New Lambton VIEW Club President Mrs Inward with guest speaker_1964



A CHILD WENT FORTH

Grace Walker
Hornsby VIEW Club
2nd Prize Short Story Competition

Strange pulsating sounds greeted the Harpers as their car stopped outside their new home beside the two-room country school. The boys raced off immediately to investigate the source of the noise which 'seemed to be coming from behind the clump of trees beyond the house.

David and Laura walked around the house which would be their home for the next three years and estimated its possibilities. They had not yet collected the key as they were to stay at the hotel nearby until their furniture arrived.

Three large trees on the western side protected the house which had wide verandahs, one glassed-in as a sleep out. They would need it.

The sounds still struck their ears, insistent, all-pervading.

"We'll never get used to that noise," Laura stated emphatically.

David was more hopeful. "Perhaps we'll notice it only when it stops, as with a clock."

He whistled loudly through two fingers — a very useful accomplishment, Laura thought. The boys — Andy, eight years old and Lennie four came running back, excited and full of information.

"Calm down," said their father, "one at a time. Now, what did you find in the bushes?"

"Whatever is making that noise?" Laura asked

"It's a chiller," shouted Andy. "A freezer as big as a room for freezing rabbits. A truck takes a load to Melbourne twice a week."

"Some boys there had black hands and faces," added Lennie. He was not old enough to go to school.

"They wanted to know who we were," continued Andy.

On the first morning of term, Andy set off for school with his father. He would be in third class this year and David would be his teacher.

At home Laura watched the children passing on their way to school. Many were very dark, surely Aborigines; she had not been prepared for this. Who would become the friend Andy

needed to help him adjust to this very different environment? She thought of the invisible playmate he had invented before he started school.

When Andy came home for lunch his mother questioned him, unable to hide her anxiety. "What games did you play? Did you make any nice friends?"

"The white boys wouldn't play with me," David replied. "They said I'd be the teacher's pet. I played marbles with a dark boy named Eddie. He's nice, Mum."

"Some of the boys about your age might stay for a game of cricket after school," David suggested. "They won't have to go home early to do the milking like the boys on the South Coast."

But none of the boys wanted to play cricket when school was dismissed. Andy took Eddie to the school residence to meet his mother, feeling that the meeting was important.

"The boys don't play around after school. They all go rabbiting. Eddie is the only one without a mate so he wants me to go with him."

Laura looked at the boys, her mind in turmoil. She was not ready to give a decision on the problem she had formulated only vaguely while she watched the children going to school. What kind of influence would an Aboriginal child have on Andy? She had not thought she was racially prejudiced; this was a crucial moment for her as well as Andy, and Andy was only eight years old.

Eddie was taller than Andy and a year or two older. His clothing was neat and of good quality. When Laura gave him a sandwich and a glass of fruit juice, he said politely, "Thank you, Mrs Harper. I'll look after Andy if you'll let him go with me."

Laura went to meet David as he came into the garden. "Andy wants to go rabbiting with Eddie. What do you think?"

"Eddie is well-behaved and speaks well. Graham tells me he comes from a respectable family."

So David had been making inquiries about Eddie that was significant. Graham was

David's assistant at the school.

The boys came towards them with Patty, the Harpers' Irish terrier.

"Can we go, Dad? Eddie says Patty would be a good rabbit dog. We could use your small tomahawk for sharpening sticks."

"You seem to have it all worked out," David commented. "Be home before sundown."

"And watch for snakes," Laura could not help adding.

"Don't worry, Patty looks on that as her job," David said reassuringly.

The boys returned with five pairs of rabbits strung out on a stick, showing them to Andy's parents before taking them to the chiller. Andy was very proud of his share of the payment; he wanted to put it into his school savings account straight away.

"Some of the boys have quite large amounts in their accounts," David told Laura. "I wondered how they came to have so much so young."

The Parents and Citizens Association gave the Harpers a welcome social the following Saturday night. The winner of the euchre tournament for the evening was Mrs Morton, Eddie's mother, whose beautiful speaking voice proclaimed her education at a Presbyterian mission school.

During the week David gave his classes a talk on first aid and procedure in case of snake bite, and showed them how to make a tourniquet. Andy made a snake bite outfit in a tobacco tin, fitting in a razor blade, Condy's crystals, two nails, cotton wool and a piece of string.

David told Laura about this to allay her fears and added "Patty is their best protection. She has killed four snakes already."

One morning Laura was in the local grocery store when Mrs Sewell, the policeman's wife, came in. In a loud, fault-finding voice she said to Laura, "I saw your boy on the cart with the Morton family on Easter Monday. Why doesn't he go out with the white children?"

"It's a question of team ship. They work in pairs," Laura answered, as calmly as she could.

"Well, there's another white boy coming when the hotel changes hands next week." Mrs Sewell always knew what was happening in the district before anyone else.

Laura passed on the news to David.

Brian, the son of the new hotel keeper, was about the same age as Andy, so David seated them together.

Andy walked with Brian as far as the school residence at lunch time, inviting him to go rabbiting with Eddie and himself that afternoon. Brian came back jubilant.

The three boys set off together in the shade of the tall river gums, while Patty raced from tree to tree, sniffing among the long bare roots that reached towards the water.

When they arrived at the big warren in the clearing on the river flat, Patty barked excitedly at one of the entrances, scratching frantically. The boys blocked some of the other exits and waited tensely. A scared rabbit scrambled through the obstacles at one hole and was despatched by Eddie's "boondie" — a stick with a knob at one end. More rabbits ran out and Patty caught some that escaped the boys' sticks.

Brian was elated; he had always lived in the city. "I'll bring my bike next time so we can tie the rabbits to the bars," he said happily.

"It's much better with three of us," Andy said. "We can watch more holes."

They were trudging contentedly along the track towards the town when the two Sewell boys caught up with them.

"Hey, Brian!" shouted Johnny Sewell. "Why did you go out with a boong?"

"Come home with us," added his brother. "Johnny can dink you on his bike."

He wobbled towards Andy and tugged the white canvas hat from the smaller boy's head. Flinging it onto the top of a tall prickly bush, he yelled, "Get your boong friend to climb up for it!"

Brian looked uncertainly from Andy to the Sewell boys.

"Come on Brian. We want to get home," Johnny said.

Without speaking, Brian seated himself on the handlebar of Johnny's bike and the Sewells rode off yodelling.

It took some time to knock Andy's hat down from the tree. Then the boys took Brian's share of the money they were paid for the rabbits to the hotel. Brian's father looked at Andy and Eddie rather curiously.

Laura was preparing dinner when she saw Andy enter the house, but he did not speak to her. Hearing choking sounds from the sleep out, she hurried to the door of the boys' bedroom.

Andy was lying face down on his verandah bed, long drawn-out sobs shaking his slight body. Patty whimpered beside him and licked the hand clenched near her.

Laura stood still, filled with pity for her son, but helpless in this crisis. She had seen Brian riding home with the Sewells.

Andy stayed in the bathroom a little longer than usual, but he was quite composed when he sat down at the table.

"Brian will be going rabbiting with the Sewells," he explained. He turned to his father.

"Two of the sixth class boys want to sell their bikes and get new ones. May I buy one with my rabbit money? Eddie is going to buy one, too."

David thought of the new bicycle he was planning to buy Andy for his birthday, but decided it would be better for the boy to carry out his own plans.

The bikes enabled the boys to go further afield, sometimes for the whole day during winter. They grilled a rabbit for lunch when it was cold.

"What would you like for your birthday treat?" Laura asked in August. She was hoping that the boys at school were more friendly towards Andy by now.

"Suppose we have a picnic at the weir," Andy said as if he had already thought about it. "Eddie and I could look after the fire and cook mussels and crayfish. There's a deep pool where Dad could fish and you could do some sketching, Mum."

On a beautiful day early in September the Harpers called for Eddie and drove the 30 kilometres to the weir. David left the boys to their own devices and settled down to fish, while Laura became absorbed sketching the bend of the river where floods had eroded the banks from the giant trees leaving most of their roots above water level.

The appetising smell of grilled rabbit brought the party together for lunch. The boys had placed red hot coals in a deep hole near their fire and in it had baked the fish, plastered with clay and covered with more coals and sand. After mussels and crayfish, cooked in the hot ashes, and billy tea, they had the cake.

Laura wondered what Andy had wished for when he blew out the candles. They had given him a canvas waterbag and a haversack — strange presents for a nine-year-old.

Passing a small packet to Andy, Eddie said, "Happy Birthday, Andy."

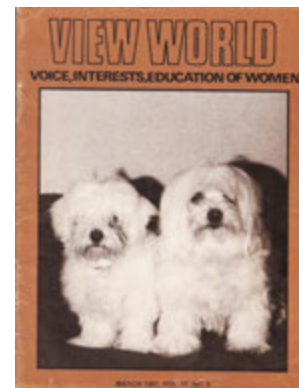
It was a pocket knife with three blades. Andy's knife had only one blade left and Eddie had noticed.

There were tears in Laura's eyes as she looked at the boys.

"It's a day to remember," she said. "I'm glad we came to this part of the country."

She put her hand over the sooty fingers of Eddie's left hand and pressed them hard, adding "Andy is very lucky to have you for his mate".

...



A Miracle

Marjorie Adams
Springwood VIEW Club

I pushed past the man in the first
seat, stumbled over a pair of crutches
lying on the floor and sat down
heavily in the vacant seat beside him.

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

Gwen O'Grady
Brisbane Water Evening VIEW Club

The Town Hall was already full and still more people were coming in — I was lucky to have got a seat. Melbourne on a Sunday was such a dull place that anything offering amusement was sure to attract an audience. But the subdued excitement in the hum of voices filling the hall was unusual.

The high stage was empty and the small table and two chairs looked poor props for the coming 'circus' as my friend Eileen had called it. "I saw it last week and it was really something — give you a good laugh."

Well, I had nothing to do today — it was too cold for the beach — so here I was.

So far there were no signs of anything unusual and I was getting bored. Then, abruptly, a deep hush settled over the hall and I looked towards the stage.

Without any announcement or fuss, two people had walked on and taken the chairs behind the table.

I was too far down the hall to see them in detail, but they both looked quite ordinary people without any of the circus ballyhoo I had been led to expect.

Perhaps five minutes went by in silence, then the woman got up and, walking to the front of the stage, began to speak.

She was tall and fair haired, elegant in a quiet way in a grey suit and white hat. Her voice was clear and unaffected and the few words she said could be heard by everyone.

"Allow the energy to flow through your whole body. Do not try to block it or control it in any way. Go with it. Move as it directs you."

It meant nothing to me and I was surprised when she returned to her seat. Was that all?

Another five minutes of silence and then a rustle went through the

audience as the man left his seat and came forward.

He looked so ordinary that, disappointed, I settled back in my seat. Just average height, in a dark business suit and blue striped tie, with thinning grey hair and a quiet, controlled face.

He stood there looking down at the upturned faces, then slowly raised his arms and held them wide open at shoulder height.

Nothing else. No words, no movement, no effort to sell himself.

Suddenly I felt my heart begin to beat rapidly and my hands clench, damp with perspiration. But I lost awareness of myself as I watched the people around me.

First one and then others began to move their arms and legs — even their necks twisted from side to side. The woman in front of me almost wrenched her face backwards.

But it was the man beside me who held my horrified attention. His legs began jerking spasmodically and his arms moving in their shoulder sockets in a circular motion.

His gaunt face was lined with years of suffering, his back was twisted and humped — the crutches must belong to him for I could see his legs were almost useless.

Hypnotised by the movements, I watched him heave himself up and stand swaying, a grotesque sight.

Then it happened. Suddenly, with a crack that could be heard through the hall, the twisted body sprang upright, the convulsive movements ceased and the man stood, his arms hanging at his sides, staring straight in front of him.

There was no expression on his face, no signs of wonder or joy — he neither called out nor spoke. Ignoring the staring faces around him, leaving the

crutches on the ground, he abruptly turned and, walking out of the hall, disappeared.

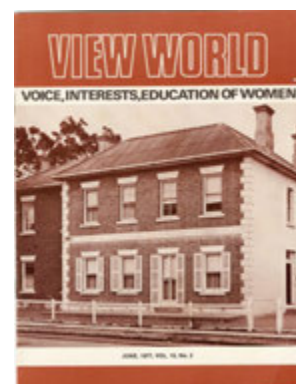
Bewildered, I stared after him. What had I expected? That he would have shouted "Praise God I'm saved" or some such religious sentiments? I wouldn't have been surprised even to see him dance and break his crutches. I must speak to him. Struggling out of my seat, I almost ran up the aisle, pushing past the staring people.

Had I seen a miracle? A cripple had been made whole before my very eyes.

Had it come about through some supernatural power — call it God if you like — or did the man on the platform have the power, latent in us all, to use a natural healing force.

But the man had disappeared, lost in the curious crowd, and even now, years later, I do not have the answer.

...



"For Christmas I want a bike"

"For Christmas I want a bike", Mum — not an ordinary bike, a red BMX I saw one on telly today. Can I have a BMX bike please Mum? Will Santa bring me one if I'm good? Please Mum Dad"

Diane and Terry exchanged sorrowful looks over the little boy's head. Christian, turning his big brown eyes from one parent to the other, caught the look. Innocently he asked, "What's the matter? Santa will find me here, won't he? Did you tell him where I was?"

"He knows, darling. Of course he'll bring you a BMX bike. Christmas is coming very soon. Hurry up and get well so you can ride the bike."

Diana's heart was breaking. Christmas was still six weeks away, but the doctors had given Christian just a few weeks more to live. How do you tell a six-year-old that he isn't going to see Christmas?

The effort of speaking had sapped all of Christian's energy. He lay back in his cot again, pale and listless. Diane ran her hand tenderly over his smooth, hairless scalp. She shuddered as she recalled how she and her friends had laughed at old Mr. Johnson — "Egg-head," — they had cheekily called him. "Baldness is a sign of virility," Terry had reckoned. But, in a six-year-old, it was a sign only of tragedy, of pain and suffering, of leukaemia.

Diane wept quietly as she remembered the beautiful black curls which used to fall in disarray over Christian's forehead when he came in tired and hungry after school. She gently massaged the shiny scalp until Christian fell into a fitful sleep.

With tears in their eyes, Diane and Terry stole away for a brief respite from their bedside vigil. As they knelt, in the hospital chapel, Diane prayed, "Please, God. I know there is no hope for Christian. But please, please let him see this Christmas. I would like to see some life in his eyes just once

more. He's only a baby."

It's not fair..." Diane broke down and sobbed.

Terry placed a comforting arm around her shoulders and together they knelt in the darkness in the chapel, praying and remembering...

Christian was awake and alert when they returned to the ward early the next morning. His eyes were shining. Shining? Diane gasped. There had been no life in those eyes for a long time. Terry squeezed Diane's hand and whispered, "Don't get your hopes up again. Remember, those remissions were only temporary. You know what the doctors said"

Christian demanded their attention. "Guess who I saw last night?" "Who, darling?"

He wriggled excitedly. "Santa!"

"Did you, dear? Did you have a nice dream?" "No, not a dream. Santa was here! I saw him! He came in when all the others were asleep. He smiled at me, too!"

"Must have been one of the male nurses," said Terry aside to Diane. Then to Christian, "What did he look like, Son? Did he have a long white beard and long white hair? You remember what he looks like. You sat on his knee in Grace Bros last year"

Diane suppressed a sob as she remembered what a healthy, happy-go-lucky normal little boy he had been then.

"No, Dad. His hair and beard were a sorta brown and all shining. And then he..."

Terry interrupted the excited chatter. "You wouldn't think a nurse would have long hair and a beard, would you, Diane? Do the doctors normally prowls the wards in the middle of the night?"

Christian jumped up and down in agitation, trying to regain their

attention.

"That was just a dream, Christian. But it was a nice one." Diane stroked his arm tenderly.

Christian looked earnestly into her eyes. "No, Mum. He was real.

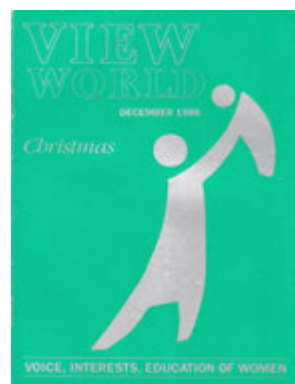
"He walked right up to me. He had that funny look on his face that you and Dad get. Then he patted me on the head and smiled. That's funny — I must've gone to sleep then." Christian moved restlessly.

"Can I ride the bike on Christmas day, please Dad? I'll ride it all around the back yard and then go over and show Justin..." Excitedly he rambled on and on.

"Just like a normal little boy," thought Diane. "He looks so well today." A faint hope stirred in her heart. Idly she ran her hand over the back of Christian's head. What was that? Startled, she lifted her hand and was transfixed by the sight of a short stubble of strong, healthy, black hair covering the back of his head.

Diane and Terry wept. "Thank you, God!"

...



AN IMAGINARY INTERVIEW

Joan Parker
Coffs City Evening VIEW Club
Equal 1st Prize VIEW Literary Awards

"About three years ago I had an extraordinary experience. I was working for the BBC as a historical researcher — costumes, houses, furnishings, speech patterns (the Beeb is paranoid about anachronisms) and I found that when I was researching a period I could briefly shift time and be in the period for a few minutes.

BBC was making Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, and *Sense and Sensibility* had been filmed. We knew a fair bit about Jane and what was revealed of her in her writing, but as usual everything had to be double-checked.

I decided to take myself to Austen country, the village of Steventon in Hampshire, and Bath — just to breathe the atmosphere. Steventon is no longer a village and the rectory is now a museum. I left the car on the outskirts of the town and wandered around, finally asking for the Jane Austen museum. I came to it, but as I walked up the path I had the curious feeling of being outside myself which always comes before the time shift. The door was closed but windows were open with curtains blowing in the breeze. Still with this odd sensation I knocked at the door, wondering why there was no visitor notice.

The door was opened by a young

woman in period dress who bobbed a curtsy and asked me what I wanted. I said I had come to see Miss Austen's home and she looked puzzled. "Was you invited, Sir?" she asked. I suddenly realised that in my black velvet slacks, long sleeved white blouse with Thatcher bow, she thought I was a man, and the time shift was complete.

I was there — in Austen time and territory. "No," I answered. "I am an admirer of Miss Austen's work." "Well, Miss Cassandra and Miss Jane are 'at home' this afternoon — have you your card?" I wondered how much confusion my BBC card would cause. The maid opened the door fully, beckoned me in, took my card — Gem (short for Gemma) Nankerris — and showed me into the sitting room. Suddenly panic! I knew things about Jane that she didn't know herself. What year was I in? Was it between 1813 and 1816, after *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* had been published, but before

Mansfield Park and *Emma*?

How much was I supposed to know if I was an admirer? I had to ignore *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, published after her death. I quickly decided that I had only read *Sense and Sensibility* and pretend ignorance of the others. Entering the sitting room I made a low bow and the maid gave my card to the one I assumed was Jane, saying "A gentleman who is admiring your work wishes to see you".

Jane invited me to sit and with a shy smile asked how I had come to know her location. I quickly invented a friend of the publisher of *Sense and Sensibility*, her first novel, which I had read with great admiration. "Not really my first — there is another one which a publisher has had for seven years and never been published. I send manuscripts to publishers and they refuse to even read them. It has taken me so long to write them — two of them when I was only young and

I have revised and rewritten them with new titles over 12 years. Now that *Sense and Sensibility* has been received so well, another one has just been published, which has been much admired by the Prince Regent". "May I know what is its title?" I asked. "*Pride and Prejudice*", Jane replied. "I started it about sixteen years ago as *First Impressions* but later rewrote it and changed the title and it is just now in the lists". Relief. I now knew where I was — 1813. "Is it like *Sense and Sensibility*?" I asked. "Oh no, it is about a different sort of people altogether", Jane replied. "A family with five daughters whose mother is frantic about their marriage prospects — although one thing is the same. They will be dispossessed of their home when the father dies because there is no son to inherit." "But," I said, "the Dashwoods were different. They left because of the son's wife, Mrs. John Dashwood." "Yes," said Jane seriously "This is always the way. Women

must marry, or become homeless or dependent. However," she smiled, "I have in mind a heroine who is rich, in charge of her father's house, who declares she has no wish to marry. She will have a married sister whose children she can have about her."

"Does she marry in the end?" I asked, knowing well that Emma did. "I don't know yet," said Jane.

"You will have to wait to find out if ever I write the book and it is published."

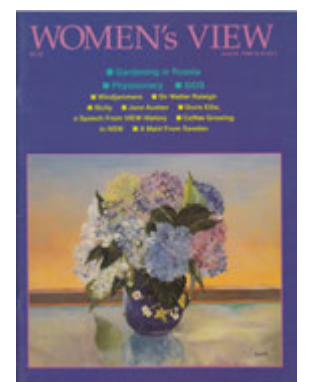
How dearly I would have loved to tell her that it would be published, also, after her death, the long neglected *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* which she probably hadn't thought about. Her name would be famous and loved by generations of women. She would become a feminist icon.

"Are you writing now?" I asked. "Yes, a story of a good sweet girl who has no home or loving family. She is living with rich relatives as not much better than a servant, but I think she will have a happy ending." "And what is this one to be called?" I asked. "Fanny, maybe, or the name of the great house she stays in. I haven't yet decided."

I stood up, bowed again and thanked the sisters profusely for their time and company, promising to obtain a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* immediately and look out for the next two books.

I was shown out the front door by the maid, and even as I walked down the path and looked back the windows were shut; there was a notice beside the front door. I was relieved to walk back through the town of Steventon and find my car in place. I had never had such a long "out of body" experience, and wondered idly what would happen to me if the reversing mechanism ever failed!

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BANJO — YOU GOT IT WRONG!

Lois Jones
Orange Day VIEW Club
The 1997 winning short story

"I've decided to buy a post office," my husband announced. "Rubbish — you can't just buy a post office!" "This one you can. It's at Booligal!"

So began the introduction to my short-lived but memorable time as postmistress of a tiny hamlet out on the Hay Plains, NSW. Officially approved as fit and proper persons to conduct a post office and mail run, we made plans for the adventure, while awestruck and concerned friends quoted the last few lines of a Banjo Paterson poem to no avail:

'Oh send us to our just reward
In Hay or Hell, but gracious Lord,
Deliver us from Booligal!'

Wistfully I waved goodbye to our first little home in a pretty cul-de-sac on Sydney's north shore and, like pioneers before us, set forth with a toddler, a baby and a black and white cat. No more cosy afternoons with other young mums, no swinging swings in shrubby parks and definitely no more leisurely dinner parties. But, then again, country living, clean air and all that space.

Very soon I learnt that days at Booligal Post Office began early with an extension bell that clanged like a fire alarm. The Silvester switchboard had woken from its sleep. With brown cords criss-crossed and alarmingly entangled I connected voices to each other. Funny little clocks attached to the board ticked and timed trunk calls while I chirped "Booligal", "Number please?" "Are you extending?"

In a corner of the office Silvester stood tall and straight, his once impeccable veneer chipped and dusty. On his front, like rows of grey eyelids, metal shutters dropped and revealed a number and away I'd go plugging in a frayed, pewter tipped cord while jerking a key in Morse Code fashion — long, short, long — to summon a party line.

"Hullo, 10 K." "Go ahead, please." This was fun!

In between changing nappies, reading nursery rhymes and concocting quick meals, I'd tidy the posters, phone books, blotters and rubber stamps and flick a duster over the counters. Certainly they bore cracks and ink stains but built of red-brown cedar and sweet-smelling of bee's wax, these were the original fixtures from the Post Office's beginnings in Cobb and Co days.

Sometimes, when the wind swept dry grass in rolling bundles along the road outside, I could see that horse-drawn carriage pulling to a halt and the mailman calling a greeting. Instead my husband was travelling his 200-odd mile postal delivery in a Holden utility loaded with canvas mail bags, bread, beer, gas cylinders, perhaps tractor parts and chooks in wire coops.

Across the road was the store bedecked with faded ice cream signs and sparsely stocked with tins of fruit and engine oil while a kerosene refrigerator gurgled and dripped on the cement floor.

Next door was the local hall freshly painted and shaded by peppercorn trees and on the corner "The Duke of Edinburgh" hotel. Royal blue and white, its windows home to sleepy spiders, this was the hub of the village. Forget the drought, the floods, fly-blown sheep and low cattle prices, through that narrow dark entrance and into an even darker saloon, a time of mateship and beer on tap could make the day worthwhile.

In Booligal people have names like Bindy, Bluey, Jacky, Johnny, Finny, Elvie and Garnie, not forgetting Sheriff in a broad hat and high-heeled boots, Hydraulic, handy at lifting things, and Sparks, an electrician of some repute. Everyone, absolutely everyone, within a 40-mile radius, knew everyone else. In fact most were related. Aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grandmas, grandpas were in abundance. Generation after generation they'd lived in the same area, even the same house.

During our stay in the early 1970s these houses, including the Post Office, had no town electricity or running water. Instead a chugging motor housed in a smelly shed generated 32-volt electricity and water was pumped up from the nearby Lachlan River. Essential to the electricity supply was a set of good batteries, also housed in the smelly shed, but to our disappointment on arrival we found only a chain of broken, dusty boxes which stored nothing but ants and lizards.

The bath and shower were separate from the main building and the 'little house' a good 30 yards from the back door. A combustion stove, black and shiny, warmed the kitchen and the bath water.

There were days of frustration and lonely times, especially after I'd farewelled curious Sydney friends who'd come to witness our insanity, but always there was Silvester. With

children bedded and husband home from the mail run, the old switchboard buzzed while friendly voices chatted to me, to their friends and their stock and station agent. A feeling of acceptance and, in fact, importance kept us going.

"Tell David to hang on to my mail. I'll pick it up on the way to Hay." "Hi, how are you going? Would you like some oranges, spinach, side of lamb?" "We're having a tennis day. Can you come?"

It took a while, but gradually invitations and genuine friendships were forthcoming. Our young daughter, Belinda, welcomed other small children on mail days, so while parents discussed the weather and who was getting married, a little group sat on the lounge room floor entranced by the TV antics of those in 'Gilligan's Island'. Baby Murray was nursed and admired and somehow it didn't seem so very different from the life we'd left behind.

Summer months were unbelievable. The days long and hot, even into the night, which made sleeping difficult. The rock-hard ground cracked and split. Scorching winds blew across the plains and endless blue skies deterred farmers' hopes of rain.

In a wet season the river swells and the dusty roads become boggy red mud. It was Jacky, a knowledgeable local, who taught me to drive the ute over their glassy surface.

"Just put 'er in second and keep yer foot on the accelerator" was the confident advice. Like a skating crayfish the vehicle moved sideways. "I did it! I did it!" I yelled as the wheels finally found firm ground, the tyre treads blocked with wet Booligal clay.

In three years our lives were invaded by a plague of some sort.

One Easter when the rains came tiny frogs came too. They hopped happily

about the house but favoured the bath and the kitchen sink. I didn't mind them really and they greatly amused the children. The moths I loathed. Their powdery wings covered curtains and lights. Hundreds of them, large and grey, fluttered across the room and floor until their final resting place in the vacuum cleaner bag!

Another season the caterpillars arrived. Incredible varieties, fat, green, furry, smooth, chewing every tuft of saltbush before them. Then, like the hordes of cicadas that rose like helicopters into the air, they would simply disappear, their ravenous eating and destruction completed.

Snakes had a season too. Perched in the 'little house' one afternoon I saw my first snake slithering past. From that moment every twig or skinny branch lying on the ground appeared a potential danger.

Worse was to come —

THE MICE!

Through tiny knotholes and uneven floorboards they came, pink and grey with quivering snouts and revolting skinny tails. "Poor Mousey", young Belinda would croon, releasing the rodent from a trap. Off would limp the objectionable creature straight in the direction of the biscuit tin. At night, while mice slid on the linoleum under the bed, I lay in fear of them learning to climb the legs.

"That's it. No more!" I declared. "I've seen the out-back, kangaroos, emus, bright starry skies, but mice are the end!" I howled.

In January 1997 David and I were guests at a wedding — a little Booligal kid all grown up and handsome with his lovely bride — and there at our table were welcoming faces and familiar voices. I didn't realise it in 1972 but I grew up a bit in Booligal.

These people, their optimism, humour and strength, have become a part of me and rather than Banjo's plea for Divine deliverance all I can say is "Good on ya, Booligal!"

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BATTERY BILL

Milita Houlahan
Illawarra VIEW Club.

The 6.30am worker's train pulled into the station; its doors opened, spilling the passengers onto the platform like beans from a can.

Most of them were on their way to start the Day Shift at the Vickery Woollen Mill, about a kilometre's distance from the railway. All were acquainted with one another and a few were close mates.

The voice of Big Bill Conan could be heard above the train's noisy exit from the station, as he called "Come on you blokes, getta move on, or you'll all be had up for loiterin'!" "Ah, get lost, big-un!"

It was the Leprechaun who spoke; so-named not only for his diminutive size, but also because he was always turning up at someone's elbow, particularly at the bar of the local pub, only to suddenly disappear again when it became his turn to 'shout'! He was not too popular with the other fellows; they could not abide his miserly ways, or his constant and unwelcome intrusions into their private affairs.

"You were saying?" asked Bill, clenching a big fist and placing it gently but firmly on the little man's head, as if to hold him in place.

"I said, 'get lost'. Ya think ya the leader of the pack, don't ya? Big Bill! More like Big Boss, tellin' us what to do and when." Bill smiled, he was not easily offended.

"Tell ya what," he said, jovially, "when you can lead me all the way to the Mill, I'll bow out an' let ya take over."

This was a definite challenge, tossed in casual fashion to be sure, but a challenge none-the-less. The Leprechaun looked at the grinning faces around him and knew that he had but

one choice — to accept, or to lose face in front of the others.

"Righto, you're on!" he replied. "Just name the day and I'll show ya the cleanest pair of heels ya ever saw!"

"Agreed! We'll race from the station gates to the Mill. I'll even give ya a head start and still beat ya."

"I don't need no favours, I could beat ya runnin' backwards!"

The men cheered and a murmur of excitement ran through the group,

for they sensed some fun ahead. Big Bill, although a great hulk of a man, was strong, agile and very fit. He had been known to scale a twelve-metre tree with an agility which would do a chimpanzee proud!

The Leprechaun, on the other hand, was deceptive in appearance. He might appear to be thin and weedy, but they knew him to be tough and wiry, with plenty of stamina. It should be a good race, they reasoned; and, not without a few surprises.

So it was settled. The race was planned for the following week, to give each of the contestants time to get in a spot of training and plan their strategy.

Knowing his friend to be quite a practical joker, Alf, one of Bill's close mates, sidled up beside him.

"Think ya can beat 'im? Ya got some sorta plan in mind?"

Bill took his arm and moved ahead of the others. In conspiratorial fashion, they talked the rest of the way to the plant, every now and then All chuckling to himself in quiet amusement at the thought of the big race ahead.

A week later, when the workers' train once more pulled into the station, there was no need for Bill to hurry his mates along. They left the platform and filed through the ticket barrier with surprising alacrity, lining up outside the gates like toy soldiers on parade, waiting expectantly for the battle to begin.

Some of the men walked on ahead, to stand at strategic points along the route, ready to cheer the two contestants as they passed, all more than willing to urge them on.

The Leprechaun had disappeared into the waiting room, emerging a few minutes later divested of trousers and shirt and wearing a black singlet with running shorts.

"Blimey! That's what ya call getting' down to it, in earnest," remarked a voice from the side lines. "'E really means business!"

Bill left the small group of men surrounding him and came across to stand by the Leprechaun's side. He was still wearing his baggy work trousers and jacket, with several lengths of fine wire coiled around his waist; the two ends of the wire each disappearing into a side pocket.

"What's that ya got?" demanded the Leprechaun, suspiciously.

"'Taint nothin' to concern yaself with, mate. Just holdin' me trousers firm, that's all. Ain't all of us got runnin' gear like yours, ya know!"

Then, with a sly wink and a nod to Alf, added, "Let's get started, eh?"

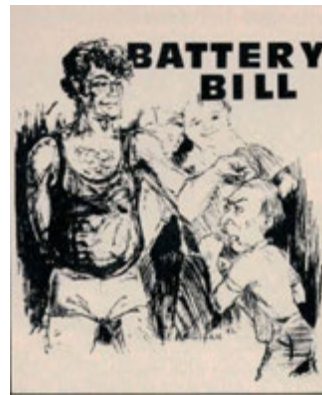
"Okay, you blokes, stand aside and give 'em room. They're off!"

Amidst the shouts and yells of encouragement from the others, the two started off down the road; the little man getting off to a quick start with Big Bill a little slower oil' the mark.

He gradually lengthened his stride, however, and as he drew alongside his rival, pushed his hands deep into his pockets and gave the wire ends a gentle tug, putting on a burst of energy and increasing his pace as he did so.

The Leprechaun looked puzzled but said nothing. He, too, increased his pace, until once more they were abreast.

Again, Bill plunged his hands into his pockets, this time glancing surreptitiously across at his opponent. Then, with a loud yell of "Charge!" he took off with renewed vigour.



"Hey!" the Leprechaun called after him. "What're ya doin'?"

Big Bill pretended not to hear and did not look back.

Several times along the way this happened. The onlookers noticed that each time the two drew level, Bill would suddenly forge ahead after making contact with the wires in his pockets.

They were almost at the Mill when he allowed the Leprechaun to draw alongside him for the last time. Then, with a final thrust of hands into pockets, he at once increased his pace dramatically until he had covered the last bit of distance between himself and the Mill gates.

Puffing with fury rather than lack of wind, his opponent stopped in front of him, jabbing his forefinger at the offending wire around Bill's middle.

"Ya flamin' cheat!" he cried, almost in a frenzy with his anger. "You had yourself wired up, chargin' yourself with batteries, didn't ya?"

"'Ang on a minute, mate. The only 'charge' I give meself was a dram of the best in me tea this mornin', and.....but the little man was in no mood to listen, and as the others gathered around them, he shouted, "There's a mate, for ya' nothin' but a flamin' cheat, that's what he is. It weren't a fair and square race at all!"

He was convinced that Bill had used batteries to spur himself on; declared it a 'No Race' and walked off in disgust.

Big Bill was left to face his workmates. They knew that he had perpetrated some sort of practical joke on the Leprechaun, but had to wait until his laughter subsided before they could get the story out of him.

Finally, pulling the wire ends from his pockets, he explained.

It's what you might call mind over matter. I knew I could beat him, but I wanted him to think that it woulda been his race if I hadn't had 'help', so I devised me little scheme. He was so sure I was up to something, he was all too easily fooled! Who but a Leprechaun would believe such an impossible trick?"

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BIRD IN FLIGHT

Margaret Dawson
Springwood VIEW Club

"Ben Sampson you are sentenced to seven years in Botany Bay!"

In the dock the pale-faced youth gripped the edge of the rail. His tall, spare frame seemed to shrink.

"Nay!" The word burst from him. Seven years! He couldn't believe it! Not for poaching, the crime of which he stood accused.

There was always food aplenty on Squire Masters' table — he wouldn't miss the rabbits, nor the pheasant. It was the pheasant that was the cause of Ben being in the dock. When the Game Keeper had caught him that warm summer evening, Ben had the pheasant hidden in his shirt. Wrapped in his kerchief had been two rabbits.

"Well me lad, we'll see what the Squire has to say about this! Pheasant eh! Rabbits not good enough for the likes o'you?"

He'd grasped the hapless Ben by the shoulder and marched him to the Squire's study. Ben wanted to explain that he hadn't intended to trap the pheasant, only the rabbits.

In all his 19 years Ben could not remember when he had not felt hungry. His father had died five years before, shot by the Squire who had mistaken the movement behind a tree. In the years since, Ben had tried to take his father's place. Without poaching his family would have felt the pangs of hunger more often than they did.

"Well, what do you have to say lad?" thundered Squire Masters when a trembling Ben stood before him. "What do you mean by poaching my pheasant?"

Stumbling over the words in his haste to explain, Ben stammered, "It were an accident, Master. T'was not your pheasant I were after, only rabbit!"

"So you think it's all right to steal my rabbits do you? It's not enough to let you have the cottage, even though your father is dead"

"But Master, I work hard for you, so does my brother." The unfairness of the attack made Ben bold. He must speak out.

Squire Masters, an apoplectic man who suffered from gout, had passed a sleepless night. "Silence," he thundered, "you will go before the magistrate."

Ben was charged with poaching then brought before the court in London. Miserably he had waited in the stinking prison, wondering what would become of his family and of his dear love, Mary Rose.

What of his plan to marry her one day? When he thought of her dark curls and brown eyes, her laughing saucy ways, he could have beaten the walls of the prison in despair. She was kitchen maid at Squire Masters' big house.

Whenever the opportunity arose Ben would contrive to be near the house. She would smile at him demurely, belying the sauciness in her eyes. In their rare moments of leisure they would walk hand in hand down country lanes. One day, Ben thought, he would marry his Mary Rose. When his family no longer needed him.

Now he looked wildly about the cramped court.

"Ben!" He heard his brother's voice. "Ben ..."

"Rob," he shouted wildly, "look after... He was being taken away. "Tell Mary Rose ..." his last words were lost as he passed from sight.

Rob stared after Ben's departed figure. He'd walked the 60 miles to London. His mother had been frantic with worry about Ben's fate. Wearily Rob turned away to face the long walk back to the village.

The hold of the ship was stinking with unwashed humanity. Ben was sickened to his soul by the depravity of some of the prisoners; the wolfish way they'd eat what little food they were given; the cruelty of the officers; and most of all the obscene darkness which hid, but did not shut out, the crude couplings of the men and women prisoners. When he thought of Mary Rose he angrily threw off the hand that any woman placed on his arm. When he thought of her sweetness and her merry smile he groaned aloud.

One thought only was in his mind — survival. One day he must travel these weary miles again and return to England, his family and his true love.

Day followed monotonous day until they ran endlessly into each other. All sense of time was lost. Months went by. By keeping to himself and ignoring (as far as he was able) his hunger and his miserable physical discomfort, Ben waited for the day they would reach Botany Bay.

One hazy morning he heard the cry "Land ahoy!" They were sailing into a beautiful bay. Ben, in spite of his headache could not help but see the beauty of this strange land.

There was only a small cluster of rough houses on the shore. Everywhere were tall green trees, so different from the oak and birch of the forests at home.

Once ashore the convicts, still in their chains, were led to a crude group of huts. "Get in there." Unceremoniously one of the guards thrust the prisoners into a hut.

"Something to eat?" whined one dirty prisoner. All he received was a blow from the butt of a gun held by the dirty bearded guard.

Two days passed. On the third morning a guard entered the hut. "Sampson, Burke, Jones." They were led out into the blinding sunlight. The blueness of the sky was dazzling after the dimness of the hut.

They found they had been assigned to a farmer in the Hawkesbury Valley.

Burke, a tough Cockney who knew well the alleys of London, swore, "Cripes, what do I know of farming? City ways is my ways."

Ben replied, "I knew farming in England, but in this country," he looked around at the dense bushland, "how can anyone farm and plant crops?"

Jones, a young Welshman who had spoken out too loudly and indiscriminately against conditions in his valley, looked about him and shrugged. "Looks like we shall have to make the best of it, don't it?"

Ben had vowed not to become involved with the other convicts but soon realised that to keep his sanity he must talk to others. Talking about their families brought them closer. England was so far from this strange land, so alien from all they had known.

Jones would say in his soft Welsh voice, "Aye, indeed it's the hills of Wales I long to see.

"Aye, it's the distance and that long journey home, but one day I'll return. I'll see my Mary Rose and my family again," Ben would answer.

Since none of the convicts could read or write, there was no way of communicating with those left behind, no word to break the endless monotony. There was nothing for them but work and the long waiting.

The years passed slowly. Proximity forged a friendship between the three men, enough to keep the loneliness at bay. Talking was the bond between them. Always in Ben's heart was the picture of Mary Rose, waiting for him when the seven long weary years were over.

Sometimes when they lay in their quarters, Burke would say teasingly to Ben "Maybe the wench has found another lad. What then?"

Ben would smile. "Not my lass. She'll be waiting for me. Would t'was a way to reach her quickly when my time is served"

"Aye, there is still the long journey on that accursed ship afore we reach England," Burke replied.

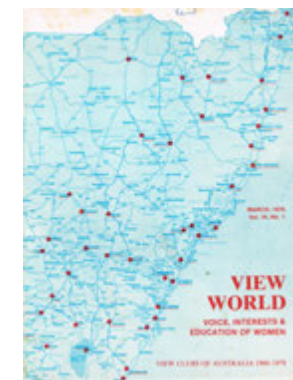
One sun-washed summer morning Ben was working, clearing the scrub for planting. He paused for a moment and gazed at the blue sky, watching the birds fly, envying their freedom.

Only another year and I shall be free, he thought. Ah, if only I could fly like a bird.

He looked again at a brightly hued bird in flight. He watched its graceful passage, its wheeling and dipping against the blue sky. Deep into his mind was born a thought, an incredible barely comprehended thought.

He gazed at the bird and whispered, "If only I could fly ..."

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Anida Watkins
Hornsby VIEW Club
Second Prize, Short Story Competition

"Upstairs, room with the green door."

Janet returned the man's friendly smile and eased her way through the crowd, gripped the bannisters and tackled the school stairs. Heat, from a day of record temperatures, spilled over into the night and people wilted like dish-mops.

Already, Janet's fresh dress clung to her middle-aged figure, perspiration dampened her hair and eyes; only her mouth felt dry. Humidity always reminded her of the elderly lady who complained It's not the heat, it's them presbyterians rolling down me back I can't abide."

Divorced from the crowd, Janet's footsteps echoed in the empty corridor, giving her an odd, dream-like feeling of being alone in the world searching for a green door she would never find.

Reality of the green door in front of her dispelled those illusions. She opened it and walked into a empty room, a whirring ceiling fan losing its uneven battle with the heat.

"Is this the creative writing class?" The voice belonged to an attractive woman, young fresh and vibrant. Nothing of a wilted dish-mop about her, thought Janet with a touch of envy.

"Hope so," she answered with a smile, "till you came I began to wonder."

New arrivals put their doubts in limbo as silent and self-conscious, each hugging close their dreams and reasons for attendance, people took their places. The teacher began preliminaries, the class relaxed and became individuals as they learned each other's names and writing experience. All were hopeful beginners.

During the first exercise, Janet's mind stopped dead. A surge of panic raced through her; sweating palms made

it difficult to hold her pen. A furtive glance showed everyone busy writing. She knew now how her daughter had felt when she suffered a mental black-out during an important exam.

"Stupid woman," Janet said to herself, "you definitely don't belong here. Your brain is too old, too unreliable. Admit your error, excuse yourself and go home where you belong"

HOME. Janet's thoughts drifted; her childhood had been in this district. She had walked the street below this classroom often.

A train rattled past the windows. For Janet, the years rolled backward. She became a small, fair-haired child, trudging along the road beside the-railway tracks, lugging a heavy gladstone bag and muttering to herself "It's not fair, it's not."

Half an hour ago Tommy had once more outwitted their mother and literally left Janie "holding the bag". They were reading on the back verandah when their mother called in a crisp, no-nonsense voice.

"Tommy, get ready. It's time to take Dad his lunch and I want him to have it hot, so don't waste time,"

"Aw, gee Mum," Tommy answered, "I'm studying for my exams next week. You and Dad want me to pass. Can't sis go?"

Tommy, sure his plan would be watertight, grinned at his sister, a taunting look on his mischievous, freckled face.

"Alright," came the harassed voice, "Janie, brush your hair and don't take all day about it"

Janie glared at Tommy. She knew he had a Western story tucked inside his geography book, but after a busy morning cooking the Sunday dinner Mum would be in no mood for argument. Besides, the children had an agreement not to tell tales on each other.

"I hate you," she hissed, "you can jolly well do the washing-up by yourself"

"O.K." conceded Tommy, "I can read and wash up at the same time, but I've got to give Jimmy his book back tomorrow and Deadwood Dick is getting ready to fight a gun duel with the Sherriff. If I don't find out who won I might die worrying about it and you wouldn't want to have that on your conscience, would you? Anyway, I'm doing you a favour. You'll get an ice cream out of it"

In spite of her anger, Janie laughed.

"You'll get your come-uppance one day," she predicted, and skipped away to brush her hair.

Happily for her, she did not know that the innocent prediction would come true in a Japanese prison camp, many years later.

Mother handed Janie a carefully packed gladstone bag. It held Dad's share of the Sunday dinner, the special meal everyone looked forward to all week. Things were really bad if you couldn't afford Sunday dinner.

"Be as quick as you can. Don't daydream along the way or chatter on to Dad. We'll be waiting for you and no one likes a cold dinner"

Mum gave Janie a quick peck. She loved her children, but hard work, always taking in a boarder or two to help stretch the budget during the grim. Depression years had left her constantly tired, short-tempered, with little time to relax and talk to her children.

Janie followed the usual route to the maintenance depot where Dad worked. The coming of electricity to the railways had brought men and equipment and a new vigour to the sleepy town. People referred to it as Railway Town, and the out-of-workers envied the railway men who still had jobs.

The streets were deserted. Tempting cooking smells competing with one another gave a tantalising reason - people were having, or about to have, Sunday dinner. Janie's mouth watered and she played a game, guessing what each family would be eating. As she turned into the road beside the railway track, Janie muttered

"Tommy's mean, it's not fair, it's not."

Her sudden resentment spoiled her game, but she had become conscious that she must pass the power sub-station. Janie trembled. She hated and feared this part of the journey. The large silver pylons carrying the electric wires with their white insulators seemed like an evil, roaring monster, waiting to wrap its coils about her in a deadly grip. She even had nightmares about it, but fearing Tommy's jeers and other people's laughter, never spoke about them. Dad, though, guessed her fears and always came to meet her, but today he would be expecting Tommy, so she must sidle her terrified way past without help.

Janie gave a sigh of relief when she reached the depot.

"Hello Janet love, what are you doing here?"

Dad always called Janie by her full name. She loved him for it. Janet sounded so much prettier than Janie.

"Oh, Tommy's busy studying for exams next week," she explained.

"Well he'd better be if he's going to pass."

Dad's terse voice told Janie he had doubts about Tommy's study.

"Hope your mother packed plenty," said Dad as he took the bag. "A young chap jumped off the rattler this morning and I don't think he's eaten for a while. Tell Mum I'll bring him home, give him a night in a decent bed. Here's a penny for an ice cream, but make sure you eat all your dinner or I'll get the big stick from your mother."

He laughed, and Janie laughed with him.

Mum's big stick, another name for her strict rules and her lenient punishment for breaking them, became a shared family joke.

"Hurry home, love, and tell that young scamp I'll check on how much study he did today!"

Janie kissed her Dad and turned homewards.

She knew everyone suffered because of a thing called "the Depression". People envied those with jobs; they were the "lucky ones".

Janie's school teacher had asked "Is your father working?"

"Yes," Janie had replied, "he works on the overhead wires. He works sometimes at night repairing them."

Janie thought her Dad very brave to work on those overhead wires which could kill if they were "live". Janie didn't understand how wires could have this power, and it resulted in her fear of the sub-station.

"Then you are a lucky family," said the teacher.

Janie puzzled over this too, because Mum said, "We may not be on the dole but there's never anything to spare, so take care of your clothes, they may have to do a long time. Tommy I don't want you sliding down the green hill!"

Tommy started to protest but Mum forestalled him.

"Don't tell me those green stains came from anything else, because they didn't."

For once Tommy subsided like a bursting soap bubble and Janie poked a face at him.

Mum had gained a victory.

They may have been a lucky family, but Mum and Dad shared their luck.

The depot had become a dropping off place for men who rode the "rattlers", as the goods trains were called.

They jumped off outside the town to avoid detection by "Limpy" the railway copper. He had suffered a shrapnel wound in his leg during the war, but there was nothing limp about the way he booted illegal travellers off the trains. The railway men on the side the "rattle riders" yelled. "Ware the cop!" to warn them of arrest or fines. They could never pay the fines because they were unemployed and used the trains to travel the country looking for work.

Dad brought home these "lame ducks", as Mum called them, for a meal and bed before they moved on. Only Mum knew how she managed the budget to include these guests, or provide clothing and shoes to replace worn out ones.

The men would sit in the kitchen yarning at night. Their adventures fascinated Janie and became a geography lesson for the children.

They tramped with the men carrying their "blueys," along lonely outback stretches that led to farms and stations.

"Henry Lawson said it all!" one man commented, "but you know I wouldn't have missed the experience, except a man's got his pride, he likes to work."

They panned for gold in once prosperous mining areas. They met the old eccentric who lived alone in the bush.

"Silly as a two-bob watch, believes the gold reef is still there. Maybe he's right, but it would take a fortune to get it out, and he's living off the smell of an oil rag, like most of us." The cheerful young man had a bitter twist to his smile. "Still even if the Depression ended tomorrow it wouldn't make any difference to him. He'll die out there."

Others took them to the coastal areas, mining and fishing towns. Janie travelled with them, vowing one day to see these places for herself.

Most men were headed for the city now, hoping for better luck, and despite grim experiences they shared a lot of laughter with the family.

When Mum considered the talk unsuitable for Janie's ears she hustled her off with "Past your bedtime young lady. Don't forget to clean your teeth

Janie's curiosity brought her back to the kitchen door, or she tormented Tommy with questions. Tommy often let his imagination run riot to satisfy Janie, revelling that he had escaped her fate. He could boast about being "grown up".

These men would be gone in the morning.

They were drifters, but drifters with a purpose.

They searched for work and security for their families Janie knew the effects of the Depression. She didn't understand it, but her sensitivity told her people were lonely and afraid, the way she felt passing the sub-station. She hoped one day men could stop drifting, stay home with wives and children and everyone would be happy again.

"Janet, we're waiting to hear your exercise."

The teacher's voice dragged Janet back from the past. She looked at her blank paper and flushed with guilt.

"I'm sorry," she apologised. "Somehow I couldn't get started."

The teacher gave her a sympathetic smile.

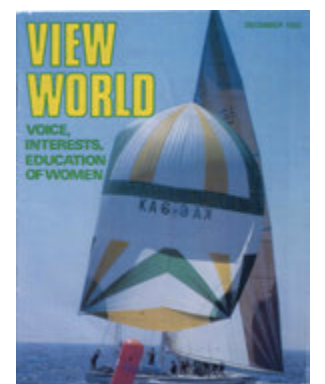
"That often happens. Don't let it throw you!"

Janet felt confidence flow through her. No, she wouldn't let that happen.

She had no need to search for story plots as men had once searched for work. In her memory existed authentic stories of real places with real and courageous people. Once she learned the art and method of transposing those memories to written stories she would be able to write any number. What had the teacher said? Writing is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.

Well, she had the conception of her stories, they only required the perspiration of hard labour to give them birth. Surrounded by memories of her beloved family and gallant people who battled through a world depression that granted favours to no one (rich and poor alike had suffered) and won, she would win her battle to write their story

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B L U E

Rayna Courtney
Lane Cove Evening VIEW Club

For many years our family existed without a dog. Then, when our eldest son Charles turned 16, he wanted a dog of his own and, after much persuasion, we finally agreed.

The next decision was what kind of a dog we would get. As Grandfather Courtney had owned and bred Australian blue cattle dogs with much success, we decided we too would have a cattle dog.

Answering an advertisement in the local paper, we found ourselves under the critical eye of Mrs "B". Harridan of all breeders, she most certainly wasn't going to let one of her puppies go to just anyone. But we passed the adoptive parents test and became the proud owners of a six-week old blue cattle dog.

Armed with rigid feeding instructions, plus a recipe for Puppy Dog Stew (if any reader would like a copy, please send stamped, self-addressed envelope), we arrived home with our little bundle of fluff.

Mrs "B" rang regularly for news of "Galwarrie River Blue" — Blue for short — and to impart further doggie instructions.

Although we are city folk, we have a farm at Windsor and, as any country dog will tell you, city slicker dogs don't know they are alive. Even though my husband vowed and declared "that dog isn't coming to work in the new truck", it wasn't long before Blue became a regular truck offsider.

Blue cattle dogs are often called blue heelers and our Blue showed a natural aptitude for rounding up the cattle. Unfortunately, owing to inexperience, he also tried rounding up the horses.

Now horses are much friskier than cows and Blue soon developed a sore throat. Although he wasn't complaining, just lying down inertly and not eating, we could see he wasn't well and took him to the vet. Not knowing that Blue was a town and country dog, the vet looked perplexed as he diagnosed the trouble as a twisted windpipe resulting from a kick in the neck.

We assured him that we weren't responsible and that Blue had indeed been in close contact with horses — too close in fact.

A straightening operation was performed and Blue made a remarkable recovery. He also learned a little lesson — though this was often forgotten.

During the years, we've owned numerous cats — every one named Puss. There was Ginger Puss (obvious reasons), Pussy from the mountains (my son found him there), Pussy from Bondi (ditto) and Dennis Puss (donated by Dennis) and Blue delighted in chasing them all, playfully, of course.

Such, too, was the case with the old goose at the farm. The chase would start at a brisk pace. Goosie flying as fast as his feathers could take him and Blue in hot pursuit. As Goosie slowed down, so would Blue until, eventually, he almost had to stop otherwise he would have caught Goosie (and, that would never do).

Harold, a friend of ours, operated a loader at the farm. One day he accidentally ran over Blue's beautiful bushy tail, completely skinning it. Thinking himself to be something of a surgeon, my husband decided to put it back on. Blue trustingly lay down while my husband tenderly pulled the sheath of the tail back on, binding it firmly with black sticky tape. Had this skin graft been successful, we surely would have been the only ones to own a dog with his tail upside down.

But it didn't take — Blue had his wagging pride snipped off for the small fee of \$29 Mrs "B" (the breeder) sent him a get well card.

Like most modern-day dogs, Blue has had a very spartan love life. One night he was missing and we thought we had lost him. How were we to know that the little lady dog down the street was accepting callers?

Gay dogs, young dogs, old dogs ... dogs of all varieties congregated there. Blue came home battered and worn, tattered and torn and was locked up promptly to recuperate. Later he was to become the proud father of a litter of blue-nosed Corgi pups.

With the coming of spring, the menfolk changed the work venue to Wiseman's Ferry. They had to cross the mighty Hawkesbury River by punt. Blue, a very weak swimmer, fell overboard. Amid cries of "dog overboard" and much confusion, the ferry master had to reverse the punt and my husband jumped in to the rescue.

Blue has had many exploits, too many to mention really, but the last and almost fatal exploit was when he leapt from the truck (which was travelling at about 40 mph). With tears in his eyes, Charles picked him up — an unconscious Blue dog with his eyes rolled back. Charles drove quickly to the nearest vet. "The kindest thing to do," said the vet, "would be to end it all."

As the vet was preparing the fatal needle, in walked a lady with a sick cat. Blue opened one of his weary eyes, then the chase was on — sick cat and sick dog running around the surgery. It proved there was life in the old dog yet.

Blue is still with us, a very old, very faithful and much loved cattle dog.

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FLIRTATION WITH FREEDOM



Winifred Potts' short stories in VIEW World over the years told tales, of outback and small town Australia peopled by dinkum Aussies – Beattie the pioneering battler whose symbol of survival was a red geranium, Syd the stuttering but acutely sensitive son of the town drunk were all VIEW World, Short Story Competition and Literary Award winners. She writes of the small town and country life she knows so well – the village "Comforts Fund Dance" with its sharp-eyed gossips, the volunteer fire brigade, the hospital ward – with deep sympathy and insight.

Winifred was born in Dulwich Hill, Sydney where she trained as a nurse and later moved to the Mudgee area following her marriage.

Early married life meant almost total isolation, with no power or phone and daughters educated almost entirely by correspondence. Later, with her family grown up and gone, Winifred joined VIEW like so many others, and found mental stimulation and new friendships.

In the 1980's Winifred published 18 of her stories in a compilation "Cry Loud" and donated \$1 from the sale of each book to The Smith Family.

Miriam Medaris

Cronulla VIEW Club

First prize, Short Story Competition

It was her sixtieth birthday, three months since her mother died, and nobody to wish her 'Many Happies!' Nor was there a present, a card, even a telegram. Genevieve Rogan stared in the mirror. Despite the two-bedroom unit being too large for one person, drained of energy and motivation, she felt unable to organise a move into a smaller dwelling.

A love-hate relationship had made the pair pathetically dependent on each other. Although suddenly free, all she saw in her reflection was someone anonymous and afraid. What was freedom? Sheltered all those years in dutiful servitude she had never known it! Wherever she looked there was Eleanor... in doorways, the old armchair, and lastly bedridden, continually complaining.

Genevieve had considered seeking a flat-mate (however it did not occur that she mightn't be happy with anyone except her mother), for example, someone younger, from a new breed about which she understood nothing! The few pleasures she had known were mainly bush picnics with Eleanor, or shopping in the village in their noisy old car, where she seldom stayed chatting for fear of unpleasant allusions to selfishness when she returned.

Slow, ponderous, an only child, her education had not extended beyond 'intermediate' standard of her generation.

Taken from an upper-crust private school at fifteen on the death of Wilton her father to keep house and look after Eleanor, "Gen", as they called her had frittered away the best part of her life pandering to a scheming malingerer.

Paranoid, self-seeking, Eleanor suffered a mild cardiac condition she magnified to command attention and sought no company her own

age. Consequently when Gen met and became infatuated with a car salesman, Graham Moffatt, her mother lost no time staving off the spectre of a convalescent or nursing home, terrified the man would take Gen from her! However, confident that implicit trust eliminated suspicion of manipulation when Graham's sudden disappearance left Gen shocked and desolate, Eleanor sympathised, "There, child - don't fret! Men are unreliable and fickle!" Shallow, mercenary, certainly little persuasion had been necessary. Eleanor Hogan dazzled him with science and shut his mouth with a convenient bribe. Comfortably off, she then set about engineering a move from their antiquated home in suburbia to a waterside 'high-rise', ridiculously out-of-kilter with their life-style or expectations!

Except for her father, successful master builder, and a pomposity who showed little interest in her, Gen scarcely knew any men until Graham showed up selling them a car, Eleanor having intimidated other likely prospects!

Soundly convincing Wilton their daughter had no head for business, she made sure what money he had went to her. Eccentric, a miser who mistrusted banks, she had sewn the larger part of his bequest into the seat of his old armchair - a twenty-five thousand dollar nest-egg on her decease to sustain Gen for life! However, three months ago, aged eighty-six, she died suddenly in her sleep - intestate. Senile, doddering, she hadn't made a will...worse, told anyone where the money was hidden!

Grieving and deserted, smother-love had moulded Gen into a timid, bumbling mouse. Nights were torment with a ghost and the sea! She MUST seek companionship... let her mother's room. Summoning courage, she advertised in a daily newspaper, but

the few replies she received were from single mothers with young babies or geriatrics with noisy pets that might upset Athaldo, her black neutered 'Tom' — vocal, affectionate, the only living thing that loved her! Maybe she was asking too much, forty dollars a week, with a recession and increasing unemployment! Still, The Bay was a 'class' area.

She had almost abandoned hope when a call from a young West Australian altered matters. Twenty-six years old, she claimed she was a physiotherapist in a City teaching hospital, in Sydney for experience. Single, without ties or pets, she could provide references, seemed pleasant, intelligent, and was available for interview... so Gen invited her along that evening.

Prim, unobtrusively in mourning, she fidgeted until her caller knocked, then answering, stood transfixed gazing at Roberta Brinsmead, who, more like sixteen than twenty-six, both delighted and unsettled her! Could she handle living with a 'Miss Universe'? Inviting her in then to sit down, they faced each other.

Tall, shapely, with a toothpaste smile, Miss Brinsmead exuded a minxish quality. Softly spoken, with amber eyes, a mane of dark hair fell almost past her knees. However, behind the superstar image lurked a chilling imperiousness, a hint of challenge someone more discerning than Genevieve might have sensed. Roberta Brinsmead had already decided for both parties! Here, now, was the time and place...

"Aside from your work, tell me about your interests," smiled Genevieve.

"Well... mainly people! TV, dancing, movies — the great outdoors! You name it! Oh...and music..."

"Good! What kind?"

"Rock!! Disco... what else? 'Middle-of-the-road' bores me, and I can't stand dreary Opera or heavy classical!"

"Afraid I prefer something less boisterous," laughed Gen, "oratorio... or Gilbert and Sullivan!"

"How soul-deadening! D'you get about much, Miss Rogan, or entertain?!"

"Oh dear, no... I've not long lost my mother..."

"I see! Is that why you wear black? I thought 'mourning' went west with old Queen Vic! Would you object to friends visiting ME?"

"No, indeed! I'd love some company! As long as they don't get tipsy, or gentlemen stay too late at night in your bedsit, of course..."

Roberta grimaced. "You're kidding come on....that's a bit heavy for 1984 isn't it? Sounds like a hostel for Girl Guides! People like to live, not go mouldy!"

She was wondering how old this taxidermist's masterpiece was, with those unblinking, expressionless eyes, when Gen suggested, "Well, shall we look at the room, then?"

"Sure! That's what I'm here for!"

Ushering the girl into it, Gen watched her examine everything minutely.

"It's cramped, grey and old-hat," Roberta criticised. "Is your first name by any chance Mildred or Enid?"

"No. Why? It's Genevieve..."

"Mine's Roberta, but everyone calls me Robbie."

"As you wish," assented Gen. "I'd better make it clear... my mother was a chronic invalid for many years. You may find it dull here."

"You've never married?" fished Robbie. "I seldom had the time or opportunity..."

"Hmm. Well, what are your amusements? I don't see any TV, stereo or video..."

"TV's for kiddies, isn't it... I enjoyed Whist with Mother... Monopoly, Scrabble, needle-work, reading... the cinema..."

She hadn't seen a movie for ten years, and under Eleanor's vigilant censure, was restricted to Dickens and the Bible, whilst secretly devouring romantic paperbacks!

"What about theatre, ballet, shows at the Opera House, surely."

"I've never been to the Opera House, but once saw it from the Manly ferry, it's hideous! I collect rare antique pieces..."

She's a rare antique piece, thought Robbie! Hasn't a clue about values. This superb view! Windows closed, blinds drawn... crikey! Anyway, for forty dollars a week in THE BAY, I'd shack up with King Kong!

"I'll take it," she meandered condescendingly, "on one condition! That we re-decorate..." It reminded her of a funeral parlour... "I'll move in tomorrow evening."

Okay?"

"Very well. Where are you staying at present?"

"With friends, I'll bring my T.V, sound system, tapes — all that jazz, and I have a car! But first, don't you wish to read my references?"

Gen had forgotten about this employer-protection formality! Robbie handed her two...one from Perth General Hospital, the other

from a doctor at Kambalda. After a cursory perusal she returned the glowing eulogies, at the same time failing to notice both hand-written signatures bore striking similarity!

"I'll grab some indoor plants and brighten up the place," announced Miss Universe hustling outside to the lift. "See you!"

To Genevieve the encounter resembled whirlwind ejection from a time warp! Without business experience she had neglected to extract at least two weeks' rental in advance.

A month later she had collected NO rental, and although perplexed, was too inept to mention it. She scarcely saw Robbie at all, who often didn't arrive home until the small hours. Once or twice she had heard a man's voice in the bedsit, but with habitual shrinking from unpleasantness at all costs, never investigated. Nor did Robbie seek her company, keeping the room locked, whilst disturbing her rest nightly and at weekends entertaining a zany mob with high decibel disco until the neighbours complained.

One Friday afternoon after work she arrived home with a huge travel bag.

"Going somewhere for the weekend?" enquired Gen.

"No! Just some greenery for the sunroom like I promised..."

However, when she opened the bag, Gen was most disappointed. Unfamiliar to her, the plants' uninteresting foliage merely formed clusters of seven saw-edged leaves. No flowers! However, a week or so later they were thriving, secluded, high upon the glassed-in sun balcony - a suitable hothouse!

"What did you say they're called?" asked Gen.

"I didn't," said Robbie, announcing she had invited Doctor Lance Michaelson to dinner at the unit next evening. A resident intern at St Lothian's, delightedly he had accepted. She'd been bragging to Gen about her Cordon Bleu type cooking.

"How you can eat 'Flophouse' hash beats me" she chided, "learn to cook, chum! Corned beef, Devon, stews, pongy haddock, nutriment sizzled out of everything - Good Grief -antediluvian yuk! Have you NO imagination??"

I'm sick of swallowing Alka-Seltzer!"

"Mother always considered me a very good cook!" lied Gen offendedly. Her mother never considered her very good at anything. Nor had she the foggiest notion she was expected to tootle off somewhere the following evening instead of hanging around the unit.

Shooed from the kitchen all Saturday morning whilst Robbie banged about creating masterpieces, she knocked on the door.

"YES??" called Robbie, not budging to open it.

"D'you mind if I make a snack? It's lunchtime," shouted Gen from outside.

"Th' door's not locked!"

Opening it, the kitchen looked as if a typhoon had hit it. There didn't appear to be a pot or pan not in use! Oblivious of Robbie's bored silence, Gen made tea and a sandwich. Her maddening habit of staring fixedly like a stunned mullet was getting to Robbie.

"What time's tea, Robbie?"

"GENEVIEVE... Tea's for peasants! Dinner's at eight. It's Lance's birthday, so for Heaven's sake let me get on with it..."

"A party?! Why didn't you tell me? Will my little grey frock do?"

"Do WHAT??!" bawled Robbie, close to apoplexy. "Listen...this is a celebration a deux!"

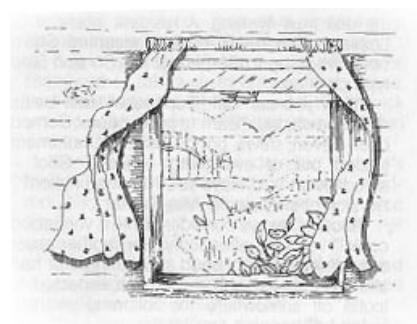
So don't tell me you haven't arranged to spend the night with a friend or someone..."

"Friend?? B-but I don't know anyone..."

"Then you'd better FIND someone, hadn't you?!"

"Robbie! P-please... this is my place!" complained Gen, thinking, Oh dear, she'll leave me now..."

"It's also mine. After all I'm paying for it!"



"Since when? You haven't paid anything yet!" came the shock retort.

"Then what did y'do with my cheque??!"

"WHAT cheque???"

"Hang on..." murmured Robbie absently. She was learning. Don't sell anyone short. Even mice. Picking up the 'phone, she dialled, someone answered, then after speaking in hushed tones for a few minutes, hung up.

"Look," she said, "I've arranged with Rowie Stanthorp to take you to a restaurant, movie, then a motel for the night! It's on ME! She'll pick you up at six, so be ready with your nightshirt and toothbrush..."

Gen's anger rose. She detested Robbie's friend Rowena Stanthorp, who was loud-mouthed, vulgar, and a bully. How dare these women ridicule, patronise and push her around!

"Look, Robbie, the fridge's full of meat and veges bought yesterday! I refuse to waste food or be pitched out to suit YOU!"

"OKAY... okay! Don't get steamed up! The stuff'll keep in the freezer..."

"That's hardly the point..."

"Well, how about I bung my telly in your room for the evening instead?" acquiesced Robbie, realising this wasn't going to be the ball she'd imagined! Cool it. Keep a low profile. Bloody stupid old cow..."

Close to tears, Gen collected her keys and made for the basement garage. Although aware one should never drive whilst emotionally upset, she started up the Volkswagen, then went to a village cinema matinee until five o'clock.

Fed up driving around the waterfront to kill time, she was home again by six-thirty, and hearing voices on the balcony, one of them a man's, stepped into the kitchen where unfamiliar culinary aromas permeated the air.

No epicure, she recoiled staring at a dish of smoked oysters. "Ugh!" she breathed, when suddenly Dr. Michaelson boomed, "GENEVIEVE! How are you?" They'd met once before when he had escorted Robbie home after a show. Startled, she swung round guiltily. Intimidated by authority or status, once again she was drifting into miserable ineptitude and apology, for which she loathed herself.

"Oh... er - g-good, thanks! Excuse me..."

"WHY? For God's sake?!"

Robbie stood in the doorway.

"I've set a place for you, honey," she cooed, all sweetness and light. "We weren't sure if you were coming home or not..."

Honey??! Hypocrisy or double-dealing disgusted Genevieve.

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry..."

"Come 'n join us in a snort," suggested Lance.

"Er — no thanks I'm rather tired..."

"Mademoiselle! I insist! It's my birthday!"

Grinning good-humouredly he produced a bottle of bubbly, popped the cork, whilst Robbie, collecting goblets on a tray, quickly slipped a 'Mogodon' into one of them.

"Terrific view you have!" commented Lance, keeping Gen's attention occupied.

"Happy birthday, Lance!" shouted Robbie.

- "Yes... 'Many Happies'" murmured Gen.

"Cheers, folks!" called Lance. Raising their glasses they drank — after which Gen, persuaded to a repeat, suddenly felt drowsy and excused herself.

At ten-thirty on Sunday morning she surfaced to the familiar screech of gulls squabbling over fish in the Bay. Hung-over, unaware of the 'Moggie' in her booze, she fumbled for her slippers and wrap, then yawning prodigiously, tottered to the bathroom and immediately was sick. Later, after cleaning her dentures and downing some Eno's, she tapped Robbie's door, but there was no reply. Must be still asleep, she thought, ashamed having made a fool of herself the night before. Two glasses

of wine then oblivion! She pictured their amused contempt.

An hour later there was neither sight nor sound of Robbie, so Gen knocked again and receiving no answer, opened the door. The room, now all frilly canary instead of sombre grey, was empty, the bed unslept in. Drawers, cupboards, shelves and wardrobe were bare save for a few forlorn coat hangers; in the waste basket lay a disposable hypodermic syringe.

Whatever was that doing there, wondered Gen!

It slowly dawned that her flatmate had shot through! Shocked, she 'phoned St. Lothian's Hospital and learned that nobody there ever heard of either Roberta Brinsmead or (Doctor?) Michaelson! She must have the wrong hospital. Gazing about her, she wondered why her Dad's old armchair was tipped over, bottom torn away, springs poking through the fraying hessian! Did this young woman and her boyfriend have to tear the place apart as well as cheat her for the rent? Later she 'phoned a description of them to the local Police.

The following Tuesday evening a loud knock on the door startled her. She seldom, if ever, had visitors, particularly at night, long ago neighbours near and far having concluded she was dotty.

Opening the door, she saw three Police officers, two in plain clothes, and a uniformed Constable leading a ferocious-looking Alsatian. Terrified of dogs, she almost closed the door when one of the men spoke.

"Good evening! Miss Genevieve Rogan?!"

"Yes... th-the d-dog! Is it savage?"

"Not unless provoked! May we come in and have a word with you?"

"Er - I was just going to bed! Were you looking for someone?"

"Yes, Miss Rogan. You. We've reason to believe you're cultivating Indian hemp on the premises..."

"Pardon? Must be some mistake. Wrong address! What's Indian hemp?"

The men looked at each other, then again at her, keeping the door barely ajar.

"We have a search warrant," advised the Senior, displaying the evidence, whilst the younger officer smilingly requested, "Will you please stand aside?" at the same time gently but firmly edging the door open with his shoulder until they entered and let loose the German Shepherd who trotted smartly to the flourishing balcony crop!

Masterminded, bewildered, she could think of nothing to say. "Miss Rogan, will you please accompany us to the Station..." ordered the Senior.

"Police Station?? Whatever for?!"

"Routine. We'd like to ask you some questions. Does anyone else live in here?"

"No! And I consider it none of your business and an intrusion of civil liberty!" she declared. Anxious, flustered, pain was gnawing in her left temple. "Look... I know there's some mistake," she insisted.

"Miss Rogan, there's NO mistake! You'll have less to fear if you tell us the truth," warned the Senior, showing her a handful of 'grass' gathered from her balcony. "Come on now. Be sensible. Where did you get this stuff? Surely you realise the penalty..."

"PENALTY??" she echoed, seeming to have no knees.

"Okay! Come along," he said, escorting

her downstairs to the blue-beaconed Police car, watched by a group of curious people in the garden.

Later, at the Police Station, she was shown photographs of two persons with criminal records. One, Lucy Ann Dewar, alias Roberta (Robbie) Brinsmead -junkie, prostitute, wanted in Perth on drug-peddling charges. The other, Niall Shamus O’Riordan, alias Doctor Lance Michaelson, jail escapee, embezzler, heroin addict, wanted in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

“Miss Rogan,” spoke another detective behind a desk, “last week you phoned us with a description fitting these people. Wasn’t Mrs Dewar living with you? Do you realise it makes you an accessory..”

Everything began spinning, her head exploding as she keeled over in the arms of a Police woman standing nearby. The young woman, alarmed, said, “Call a doctor! Quickly....”

Twelve months later, Genevieve Rogan, a near-vegetable, hospitalised in a Rehabilitation Centre, was attempting the pitiful battle to walk, talk, and live again. Survivor of a crippling stroke, her short-lived freedom almost paralleled that of Lucy Dewar and Niall O’Riordan, both heavily fined, and long-term guests of the Government!

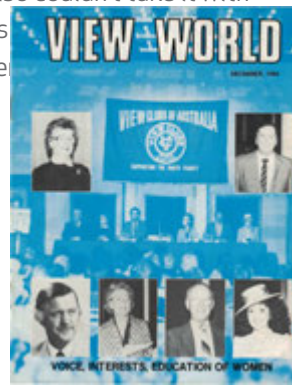
Prior to their clandestine flit following “Lance’s” birthday dinner and Gen’s shrewdly contrived freak out, Robbie, also stupidly drunk, pretty soon crumpled. During her catnap to sleep it off, the birthday boy, prowling about the unit, stumbled against Wilton’s old armchair knocking it on to its side. Despite a liberal intake of alcohol, he noticed something poking through a tear in the bottom and pulled out several twenty-dollar bills.

Ripping away the crumbling hessian amid flying dust, money floated out all over the carpet! Grabbing his roomy briefcase, frantically he worked, then, having crammed the lot in, locked the

case and swiftly shook Robbie into action!

Later, afraid to front a bank carrying such a sum, they stashed away their ill-gotten fortune in the private safe of an “old friend”. Locked in the briefcase, “Lance” had retained the key in case their “friends” curiosity got the better of him! Delicately balancing chances of decrepitude on release against present temptations of their mysterious haul, might not circumstances once again justify risking flirtation with freedom? Useless to them where the money was, they also couldn’t take it with them. It was the two question?!

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GREAT AUNT JANE

How well I remember Great Aunt Jane's sparkling blue eyes, her clear, girlish complexion, her neatly coiled white hair and her black frocks their plainness relieved by a touch of lace at her throat.

My earliest recollections of her are when I was about three, sitting on a sheepskin rug before a roaring fire listening with open-mouthed fascination to the many tales of her youth. As she reminisced, she usually mended her husband's underwear, so darned and redarned she called them his maps. (Indeed, the intricate patterns made by constant darning closely resembled maps.)

Great Aunt Jane (actually my great great aunt) had a reputation for eccentricity and always could be relied on to perform the most ordinary deeds in a most extraordinary way. For instance, while still a schoolgirl she developed a taste for smoked dried meat. Instead of simply asking for some, she made numerous excuses to pass the hanging meat and to filch small pieces with her pocketknife.



“Leo”
Oatley VIEW Club

THE DEAR DEPARTED

Mary Parr
Toukley VIEW Club.

Once, she fancied a boiled egg snack. There was no reason why she could not have cooked one normally, but being different she popped it into the copper with some clothes she was boiling. Naturally the result was disastrous - she had forgotten that egg shells are porous and the egg tasted of strong, yellow soap.

Her early married life in America during the pioneering days was not uneventful.

Once, when her husband was away on business she cut her hand badly while chopping wood. As the cut bled profusely, she bound the wound with cobwebs and, lantern in hand, set out to walk to the nearest homestead some miles away. When she eventually reached the homestead and her hand was unwrapped, she found that in her haste she had wrapped the spider in as well. Heaven knows why she was not bitten perhaps the poor creature was too tightly bound.

Another time she was alarmed to see a large party of Spaniards riding towards the house. The only non-Spaniard for miles and unable to understand the language and excitable gestures, she decided to serve them coffee, bread and cakes. Discovering she was out of coffee, she did what surely no one else would think of doing - made black toast, scraped it and made coffee from the charred scrapings. With expressions of pained surprise, the visitors politely drank the concoction. I would give much to know what reports they made about the peculiar "gringo."

Great aunt Jane spent part of her life in the Australian outback and one day she was taking a pot of soup to a sick friend when she noticed a man, hat down over his eyes, slumped on the hotel verandah. Thinking he was a dejected down and out, she pressed him to accept the soup. Imagine her feeling when she learned that far from being down and out, the stranger

was Ben Hall the bushranger! He is reported to have said he was planning to hold up the next coach but "owing to the kindness of a female", had decided against it.

The old lady would never allow needle and thread to be used on Sunday and I can remember slinking off to church feeling very humiliated because the button had come off one of my Sunday shoes and I was not allowed to sew it back on.

Disillusioned by the selfishness of men, she once told me that she considered forming a "No Man Brigade" and laughed heartily when I presented her with a number of cardboard badges I had made with N.M.B printed unevenly on them.

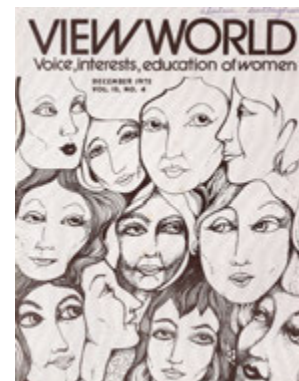
If the cat occupied her favourite chair, he would be flicked off unceremoniously with the corner of her large apron. Then, feeling penitent, she would attempt to lure him back with, of all things, a Sao biscuit. To her, Saos were the panacea for most ills and misfortunes. After I had been punished for misdemeanours, Great Aunt Jane would creep in with sympathy and a Sao

Although I lived with her for almost nine years, I never once remember her being impatient or angry with me. She had no children and enjoyed nothing more than a willing ear for her talks of the good old days.

Having worked and saved hard all her life, she was suspicious of anyone claiming relationship in case they had designs on her savings. One afternoon a young man called saying he believed he might be a nephew. Great Aunt Jane was not taking any chances and when asked, "Wasn't your husband's father Dr P?" he was told "Good Lord, no. my husband's father died over a hundred years ago." (Her husband was then about 80.) The startled young man made a polite but hurried departure and was never heard of again.

Life with her was never dull, but I did not realise until years later how kind she was to me, a lonely only child. I often wish I had learned more from her about the fascinating early days of the colony. But unlike today, children were seldom permitted, much less encouraged, to ask questions.

•••



They sat by my bedside quietly waiting for the end. I was ready to go. I had lived a long life full of sunshine and shadow and would be glad to shed my cumbersome old body and float away into freedom. Joyously I looked forward to being reunited with my husband; together we would go adventuring again.

My children were all married and scattered and for some time I had felt that they thought I was holding on to life too long. My passing would ease them of their responsibility towards their mother.

The nurse entered the room and I heard her say "It won't be long now". I grinned to myself — it really was funny seeing them sitting there so solemnly.

Margaret was my eldest and had been a good girl, more thoughtful than the rest. She turned to her husband and I saw tears on her cheeks. I wanted to say "Don't cry darling, I want to go", but speech was beyond me. I felt the stirring of my spirit and suddenly I floated above them feeling marvellously happy.

Margaret jumped up and ran to the door calling for the nurse. I came down lightly and kissed both John and Margaret, then flitted away to farewell the rest of my family.

Barbara, my second girl, lived in an outer suburb and as I floated in, the telephone rang. She answered it and the smile left her face. A long drawn out breath came from her lips and she said "That means the funeral will be on Tuesday." Settling back on the lounge, she turned to her husband: "You'll have to take the day off."

"Yes, I'll arrange it," Eric replied.

"Pity Mother couldn't wait until Wednesday. I've been picked to play in the championship triples."

"Then they'll have to arrange a substitute."

"I've waited ages for this opportunity."

"Damn and blast your bowls," Eric erupted. "That's all you live for. Can't you feel sorry for your mother? I don't believe you even liked her. Well, I did, I thought she was a great old girl."

Eric got to his feet and Barbara asked "Where are you going?"

"Out," he replied as he left the room.

Well, I thought, Barbara always was selfish, she's a taker not a giver. I love her but I tried not to see her faults. I bet she cries more at the funeral than anyone else, though. Poor Eric, she's not always kind to him, although she says she loves him. I wish I had spent more time with him now I know what he thought of me.

At that moment a voice said: "You have only three days to say your goodbyes. There is nothing more you can do here."

I wished myself to be with Ken, our elder son and immediately I was at his home. It was Sunday so it made it easy for me to kiss each one good-bye.

Ken was the most understanding of my family. We could communicate even without words. His grey eyes would often meet mine and knowing how quarrels, even petty ones, upset me, he would quietly set about making the family forget their grievances and restore peace among them. If I needed help Ken was the one I could always call on; he never failed me.

His wife, Robyn, was a dear girl and her family of three was a credit to her. Ken looked (and I felt sure was) very happy in his marriage. I would miss my little chats with him and I would miss the love I knew he felt for me. It seemed that they had heard of my death and Robyn was trying to comfort Ken. There was a good family relationship in this house and I knew it would continue.

Again, I wished, this time to be at Rod's home. Rod, our youngest, was his father's mate and different to the others. He was very ambitious and had worked hard to get on in the world.

Money meant more to Rod than it did to any of the others, yet his disposition was a happy one. It was he who had played tricks on the others when they were all young. He was a big man and full of big ideas. He had a charming manner and lots of girls had broken their hearts over him. If disaster struck, he always managed to overcome it.

Rod had married a glamour girl, a well-known model. She was one of his own ilk and the marriage appeared to run smoothly, although I often felt they went through their rough spots. I also felt they thought of their visits to me as a duty, which prevented me enjoying them as much as when the others called.

They had no children and I think Rod would have liked a family as he always enjoyed family life before his marriage. He was looking rather sad when I floated in (such a lovely way to travel) and I recalled how deeply he had felt his father's death. As I kissed him, he turned to his wife and said, "This will mean the end of our family."

"So what," she replied.

"Mum held us together," Rod said. "You are an only child but I enjoyed our family gatherings. I know you didn't like them — you made that plain enough — but I did. I look up to Ken, and the girls are not so bad. We were all taught to love one another and we had lots of good times."

Good on you Ron, I thought as I prepared to fly again — this time to visit my old friend Sarah. She was sitting drinking tea when I joined her and I thought of the innumerable cups of tea we had enjoyed together. There was a visitor with her and Sarah was telling her friend of our long friendship.

"I'm going to miss Elizabeth — she was the last of our old crowd. I wish my time would come; you can live too long and there is nothing you can do about it. I can't get around much these days and I'm sick of knitting and sewing. My family doesn't come up very often and now I'll only have the neighbours for company. Elizabeth could always make me laugh."

I knew then that Sarah would not be long before joining us — wherever we might be.

I went to where my husband had been cremated but I could not find him. I knew he would join me, but where or when I was not sure. I wondered if I would be able to see my own cremation. I hoped no one would be too sad — a little sad perhaps, but only a little as I didn't want a gloomy funeral. I guessed Ken and Margaret would see to that.

I'd rather them recall some of the funny things I did in my time, such as riding a camel when in my 70s, taking a trip and nearly marrying a millionaire,

or donning old trousers and digging for opals.

I hoped my grandchildren would remember me taking them for walks around Margaret's property, how we played hidings, or raced one another along the rough tracks. I hoped they would recall the pleasure it gave me when they played the organ, piano, violin, and guitar. They were all musical and I enjoyed their playing no end.

Going to my home I looked at my husband's chair but it was still empty. Here in this house we, or rather he, endured a long illness. But the love between us never flagged and I seldom passed his chair that he did not kiss my hand or give me a tender smile.

Dear, dear John, you never really left my heart and I always felt as though you were near me. What more could I ask?

I looked at the garden, now neglected as I had been too ill myself to tend it properly. However, the snowdrops had not forgotten to bloom and the daffodils were beginning to unfold. The sunny patio was deserted, but it wouldn't be too long before someone would enjoy the warmth of the sun, as we had. I hoped whoever it was would be as happy as we were.

The letterbox was empty and I remembered how often I was disappointed when the family forgot to write; the thrill I felt when they shared their joys with me; the letters from my grandchildren at boarding schools. The happy memories far outweighed the sad ones.

I looked at the drive and remembered my grandchildren coming down in their

cars, with their husbands and wives, to help celebrate my birthday or Mothers' Day. How my heart swelled with love as I let them into the house in the wee hours of the morning after a long, tiring drive to be with me. Inside the house were photographs of these happy occasions and I loved each and every one of them — my daughters in their wedding frocks, baby snaps, even some of my great grandchild. I had been very content when I reached that moment in time.

Resting on the lounge, I heard the dog from next door, my good and trusted friend, come to the door as if he knew I was there. He whined softly before going home.

I went to the beach where John and I used to swim and fish. I recalled the time of a dreadful electrical storm when I was afraid. My darling had taken me in his arms and taught me to see the beauty of the lightning and I was no longer afraid.

I felt another presence beside me, then a hand enclosed mine and I heard his dear voice say, "I am here Pet." I turned to see my darling John, looking just as he did when we first married. He smiled, "You, too, look like the girl I married. Now we can be together for the rest of time."

"Let's go home," I said. "I can't go until Tuesday, then we can go together."

We were alone in our old house with no one to disturb us and John had many things to tell me. Time passed quickly and soon it was time for my funeral. We joined our family in the chapel and heard the many kind words the minister said about me.

Barbara was crying, as I knew she would, while Margaret was dignified in her grief. The two boys were pale and there were slight traces of redness around their eyes. John and I watched them all and I felt love flowing from us to them.

After the ceremony they went to the old home where our solicitor, read my will. There were no surprises moneywise and they began to discuss the disposal of the house and furniture. We, John and I, were the ones to be surprised here. Some only wanted a small keepsake, while others had their eyes on the big items. Some I knew would take good care of the furniture I had cherished since our wedding, while others thought some of it terribly old fashioned.

"We can go now," John said and I gave him my hand. Suddenly we heard glorious music and there were lights in profusion to show us the way. My heart was singing and I could see the happiness on John's face.

"Come Pet," he said and together we floated upwards, ever upwards to what looked like a wonderful city. The music became louder and sweeter and I knew I had entered my new home.

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THE INHERITANCE

Edith Bugden
Castle Hill VIEW Club
First Prize, Short Story Competition

My parents named me Clementine but my sister, having a penchant for short names, called me Clemie so reluctantly they acquiesced. We lived in a gracious house with rows of pine trees in front through which we could see the valley below. As we sat around the table at night mother told wonderful stories both true and mythical.

One stormy evening she talked about a mountain named Willumba after a tribe of aborigines who once lived on its slopes. Our youthful eyes glowed in wonderment as she told us of the Dream Time when they believed their mountain reached away up into the clouds and burnt with fire at sunset. On the banks of a stream at the foot of the mountain, men of the tribe used flint implements preparing food from fish they speared and animals hunted in surrounding forests.

After listening to her stories my dreams were often filled with fanciful places inventive of my imagination. One night I dreamed I was sitting beside a little cottage casting pebbles into a swift flowing stream. As each one hit the water a fish popped up and a bird swooped down from the gum trees to snatch it. Men standing along the bank shouted to scare the birds, then I awoke.

Each morning returning to the world of reality I trudged down a path to the school in the valley. In gingham frock, black boots and stockings I set forth with my satchel slung over my shoulder. With straw hat askew upon unruly hair I often arrived at the last stroke of the bell to hurriedly join the line of pupils marching into class.

After school three times a week I rode my pony along a bush track to a neighbours' house for piano lessons, after which my teacher's son rode home with me and, both possessing a spirit of adventure, we chose roundabout ways. On my twelfth birthday, dismounting near a water hole, we surprised a flock of white cockatoos perched in the tall trees and, shrieking wildly, they flew off at our approach.

That day as we laughed together I first received a shy boyish kiss on my blushing cheek. Upon arrival home we learnt I had been awarded a scholarship sponsored by a wealthy man and he expressed a wish that I further my studies in the city when I turned sixteen. As a reward for my work my father gave me a Steinway grand piano and hopes were high in my youthful mind for a brilliant musical career.

The Prize

Robin Pickford
Wellington VIEW Club
1st Prize Short Story Contest

Miss Leighton's elderly, invalided mother died in late January, as the summer slowly waned, and the children dragged, lamenting, back to school.

Thirsting for adventure, after school one day I diverted from my usual way home and found an overgrown track leading out from a clump of bushes and, as I went along, in the distance I saw a cottage like the one in my dream. As I drew nearer the pendulous plants in the unkept garden appeared to be waving unwelcome visitors away, but with breathless curiosity I pressed on. Peering through the smudgy window panes from the creaky verandah I saw a room littered with rubbish, the ceiling blackened by smoke and the wall paper faded and torn. As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom within, dimly I could see a rusty bedstead, above which hung a ragged coat and a large felt hat. On a rickety table near a chair, covered with cobwebs, lay some music manuscript and a faded photograph of a man which awakened vague memories in my mind. Puzzled I turned away and re-joined the path that led to my home on the hill intending to enquire about the cottage.

That evening when I asked mother and she said she would tell me later, I instinctively knew there was some mystery surrounding it.

Now, almost sixteen my school days were over, the satchel hung up, cotton dresses replaced with silk ones, black stockings discarded and my hair tied back with pretty ribbon.

On the eve of my birthday mother came into my room assuming an expression of confidentiality and, as she settled into my pink plush chair, I knew my questions about the cottage would be answered. She began — “Clemie my dear, as you will be leaving tomorrow to further your musical knowledge the time has come to talk about your future, also acquaint you with facts concerning the past.

My brother was a famous composer of music and a man of great wealth who was very fond of you as a child and recognised you latent musical ability.

You were seven years old when he became eccentric, and, leaving his city home, decided to live in the cottage in the valley being part of his extensive property. It was a pretty place in which a widow and her crippled son had lived for years but he asked them to leave, later bringing further discredit to our family by living a debased life. He ceased to write music, neglected the cottage and one day his lifeless body was found with a note asking forgiveness of the family for the disgrace he had brought on our name.

It was after his death we were told by his lawyer that he was the wealthy man who sponsored your scholarship



also that you were to inherit his musical manuscript library and large sections of his estate, part of which included the cottage. There were two conditions attached. Firstly, you were to be told of your inheritance on the eve of your sixteenth birthday, secondly until you were ready to occupy the cottage for at least part of every year, it was to remain as he left it.”

Mother, having concluded, arose, kissed me and wisely left me to my thoughts. Now, knowing the secrets she had concealed for years and the truth about the cottage of my dream, which in reality was now my very own,

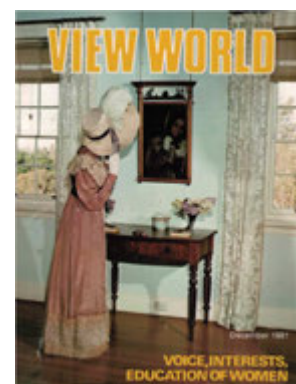
tears of understanding and gratitude filled my eyes.

The following day I departed to fulfil the request made by the sponsor of my scholarship.....

As I lifted my fingers from the key board following the closing passage of a Sonata composed by my Uncle and listened to the deafening applause, in fancy I returned to girlhood. The ovation continued and I knew then I had attained the successful career I had hoped for so many years ago.

I married the man, who as a shy boy, kissed me as we watched the cockatoos near the water hole and between my concert tours we live in the cottage which I inherited. It now stands, gleaming white amid green lawns and flower beds, the inside walls adorned with pretty rose patterned paper and white lace curtains at the shining windows. The furniture is colourful but the faded photograph of my benefactor will always remain there. The overgrown track that led to it is now a pleasant shaded walkway and the gay flowers in the garden nod their heads in welcome to passers-by from the school house in the valley

...



Sympathy from the townsfolk was given spontaneously and generously, for Miss Leighton had tended to her mother uncomplainingly for nearly 12 years. It was considered by most that the old lady's death was a merciful release, both for her daughter and herself.

“Now she can start to live her own life.” the town commented. “She deserves it, poor soul.”

But for Miss Leighton, 37 years old, and accustomed to living her life according to the needs of her mother's ailing body, things were not quite so simple. Unable to conceive of a life devoid of ministering to someone, she was pathetically, hopelessly lost.

The Rector, kindly soul, was troubled by his inability to console Miss Leighton, until suddenly, with some gentle prompting from his practical wife, he had a brainwave. And one which solved two of his problems at once!

“I wonder, Miss Leighton,” the Rector asked in his hesitating way, “if you would do me a great favour – now that you have more time on your hands, in a manner of speaking – —of teaching one of our Sunday School classes? We would be most grateful.....”

And so it happened that Miss Leighton, a gallant, slender figure in a soft blue frock, with nervously trembling lips and the candid,

trusting eyes of a child, was assigned to initiate a class of 10 seven and eight-year-old youngsters into the mysteries of religion.

Her fellow teachers, most of whom she knew slightly, were eager to help on the first Sunday, and gave her a detailed account of each child's background, nature and aptitude. This only confused the new recruit.

“You have a pretty good class, on the whole.” she was told..... only one troublesome child.”

“Troublesome?” Miss Leighton's blue eyes were startled and a little apprehensive.

"Oh, yes – that young Danny Wiley – he's a real devil! You'll have to watch him, and be firm from the beginning. Of course, that family – what could you expect, with his background her informant's word trailed off as she drifted towards her own class.

Feeling decidedly more nervous than any of her pupils, Miss Leighton essayed a bright smile as she glanced from face to face. Ten pairs of eyes met hers, some solemn, some speculative, and some frankly bored.

"I think," the new teacher began in a slightly too shrill voice, "that we shall begin with each of you telling the class your names and ages – and birthdays, too. You may start," she told the child sitting on her left hand.

Shrugging to conceal his self-consciousness, the boy mumbled his name, age and date of birth. Miss

Leighton fumbled in her bag for pen and notebook to record this information. As the list grew she hoped she would be able to remember which face went with which name – Mary, Tim, Steven, Cheryl, Mark suddenly she heard the name she had been listening for – Danny Wiley.

She raised her head, expecting, she wasn't quite sure what, but certainly not this unbelievably tiny lad, brown silky hair framing a pointed, elfin face, dominated by enormous, appealing brown eyes.

Incredulity was her first reaction. This couldn't be the troublemaker about whom she had been warned!

But suddenly there was uproar from the other children. Danny had announced, somewhat defiantly, that he was seven—and the boys and girls objected in no uncertain terms.

"He's not seven — he's eight!"

"Yah, you dumb thing — don't even know how old y'are!"

"Yeah, ask anyone, he's real dumb — don't even know his own age!"

"Children!" Miss Leighton at last managed to make herself heard.

"I have never," she told the class in shocked tones, "heard such unkind things. What a way to behave – and at Sunday School too. I don't wish to hear any of you being so – so -- nasty again."

"But, Miss, he is too eight!" The children were self-righteously eager to prove their point.

"That's enough! I want to hear no more!" Miss Leighton raised her hand commandingly, then smiled at Danny, who had been following the exchange with alert, big brown eyes. "And when is your birthday, dear?"

The small boy scowled. "It's, it's well, I think it's in January "It is not, Miss, it is not in January!"

"What a dumb cluck. Doesn't even know his own birthday!" The children were again vociferous in their disapproval.

"Quiet, please!" Miss Leighton tried vainly to quell the rising voices.

"All right, Danny, it doesn't matter. You ask your mothe – "Too late she remembered that Danny's mother had abandoned the family some years before, and had run off with another man.

"I'll ask somebody," she concluded lamely.

"And now, children, we're going to have a story. S-S-S-h, quiet, please" -- as all the youngsters demanded at once to know, "what story? Which one is it?"

"We're going to start at the beginning of the Bible," Miss Leighton announced firmly, "and learn about Adam and Eve. And then we are going to draw a picture" – here she was forced to pitch her voice louder to drown the excited comments.

"Now, does anyone know who Adam was?"

The class settled down amicably enough, and the lesson proceeded smoothly until a bell was rung to indicate the conclusion of the hour. Books were slammed shut, chairs kicked back noisily. "Can we go now, Miss?" chorused 10 collective voices, and Miss Leighton found herself alone so suddenly she was startled.

During the week that followed, Miss Leighton's thoughts were never far from the tiny child who had somehow earned himself the reputation of a "trouble-maker" The lonely woman found herself strangely drawn to Danny.

Casual questions asked of the tradespeople when she was shopping elicited quite a lot of the family history. It was a common enough story. The father, a lazy, loud-mouthed drunkard, had finally proven too much for his long-suffering wife. She, however, had left without seeming regard for the welfare of the child.

Danny was clothed and fed adequately enough by his grandmother, but allowed to roam the streets before and after school. The Wiley clan was quite a prolific one, and he was never short of company, in the form of cousins of widely varying ages.

Unfortunately, they were a wild, uncontrollable lot, always in trouble for petty thieving, vandalism and like offences.

At school, Danny, although bright enough otherwise, seemed to lack the ability to learn, and here, too, he was constantly in strife. It was really a wonder that he attended Sunday School at all, but perhaps, Miss Leighton reflected, the old grandmother sent him along in the hope that he might aspire to a better kind of life.

Whatever the reason he came, Miss Leighton resolved to help Danny all she could, and perhaps bring a little love into his arid existence.

With this in mind, she could hardly wait for the next Sunday to come.

Danny edged into the class circle with the same odd defiance she had noticed the previous week. Miss Leighton patted the seat beside her and smiled invitingly, "Come and sit near me, Danny."

Enormous brown eyes looked startled, incredulous for a moment, then Danny slid onto the seat and directed a triumphant smirk at the other children.

"Today we are going to read some more of the Bible, continuing from where we left off last week," the teacher announced. "You remember, how Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and – "Yes, Danny, what is it?" For the youngster was plucking at her sleeve, and repeating urgently, "Miss. Miss. Danny pointed to his nose and cheekbone. Both areas of his face were grazed and abraded.

"Did'ja see me face, Miss? See here?"

"Yes, dear, you've hurt yourself," Miss

Leighton was sympathetic. "Did you have a fall?"

"Bah!" Danny shook his head scornfully. "That's where me cousin bashed me. He's always bashin' me." He looked proudly at the class.

"Yes, well that's dreadful." Miss Leighton was at a loss for a moment. "Now let's continue with our story — So God was angry with them and he sent them out of the Garden of Eden. Yes, what is it now, Danny?" for the boy was interrupting again. "Miss. Miss.Miss..."

Assured of the class's attention, Danny announced pipingly, "Last week-end, me uncle and two of me cousins went out shootin' and they got a kangaroo—one with a joey in its pouch!"

"What did they do with the joey?" Mary asked, her eyes shining.

"Aw, belted it over the head!" crowed Danny. His sly grin disclosed his obvious enjoyment of the children's disgust.

"Now, Danny that will do!" Miss Leighton remonstrated. Her carefully prepared lesson was disintegrating rapidly, and all her sympathy for

Danny could not prevent a feeling of revulsion for the callous way he spoke of the baby kangaroo's death. "But it will take a while to teach him a kinder view of life," she told herself.

"That's enough interruptions for one morning," she spoke firmly. "I'm going to read to you now."

"Miss Leighton, can I do some reading?" Mark broke in. Please, can I – please?"

"Yes," the rest of the class chorused. "Can we read too, Miss?"

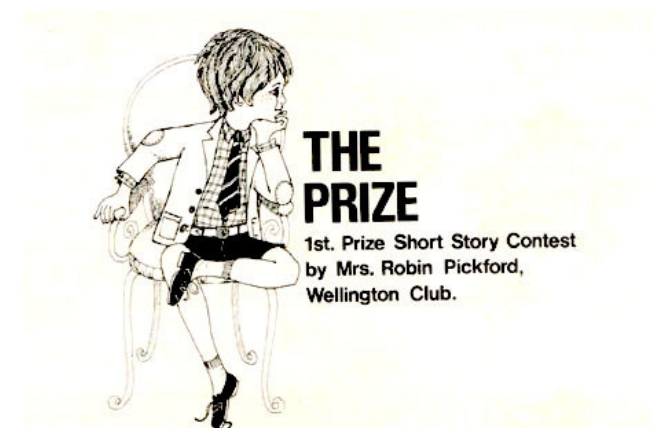
Miss Leighton hesitated. "They're very big words, in the Bible," she warned.

"Doesn't matter, you can help us," Mary shouted. "Can I start? Where's the place?"

Miss Leighton sighed. "I suppose you can." She showed him where to read and he commenced, reading in a jerky monotone, and stumbling frequently.

"Thank you, Mark," Miss Leighton said quickly as he paused for breath. "I think I'll continue now" – but protests arose from the rest of the children, who also wished to participate.

"Very well, you may read next, Cheryl," Miss Leighton resigned herself to having her lesson ruined.



As Cheryl concluded, a forest of hands waved imploringly. The teacher noticed Danny, his eyes begging, his hand plucking at her sleeve again.

"Would you like to read, Danny?" she asked on impulse. "Ohh yes, I want to read, I do! I do!" he chanted delightedly. The other children made sounds of derision. "He can't read, Miss."

"He don't know how! He's too dumb—he can't read!"

"Danny shall have his turn, too." Miss Leighton was firm. "Don't be so unkind, children. Be quiet while Danny reads."

With a triumphant smirk, Danny snatched the Book from her hands.

"Where, Miss? Where do I read?"

"Start here, Danny – it begins, 'So He ...' Miss Leighton pointed to where Danny was to read.

"So He" he began obediently, then stopped. "What's the next word, Miss?"

"Drove" she told him.

"Drove," said Danny, and stopped again.

With dismay, Miss Leighton realised that the children were right.

Danny was unable to read. She doggedly prompted him with every word, until they had completed a paragraph.

It was soon gratifyingly evident to Miss Leighton that the small boy appreciated her affection and concern for him.

In the street, he would approach her ingratiatingly, huge eyes aglow as he tucked his thin, birds-claw of a hand into hers. In class, he considered the seat next to herself to be his — the fact that winter was drawing in, and the seat nearest the teacher was also the seat nearest the heater, never crossed Miss Leighton's mind.

In spite of this, she could not help noticing that the Sundays on which Danny was absent, because of illness or other reasons, were far more placid and more enjoyable. But to label Danny "trouble-maker" because of this was unfair, she convinced herself. Danny merely needed reassuring that someone believed in and cared for him.

Winter melted into spring. The days fled by at an ever-increasing rate and, incredibly quickly, it was summer again.

The Rector called the Sunday School teachers together to discuss plans for the Annual Prize Giving and break-up party for the children.

"Every child gets a prize, of course," the Rector explained to Miss Leighton. "But as well, each teacher awards one special prize to the child in the class who, in her opinion, most deserves it—for performance, behaviour and effort."

In the days that followed, Miss Leighton found herself in a dilemma. It was true Danny could never compete with the other children as regards performance and behaviour. This much was clear. But effort.....He really did try, Miss Leighton argued with herself. And if he had proof that someone noticed and appreciated this, what a difference might it not make to his whole life? For hours she debated with herself.

Finally, all problems resolved, Miss Leighton went out to choose a prize for Danny. After searching in the bookstore for what seemed hours, she found it. It was perfect – a charmingly illustrated easy-to-read selection of Bible stories, entitled "Stories Told to the Scamps".

She could hardly wait for the prize-giving. It was to be in the form of a very brief service, followed by the presentation of the prizes. Afternoon tea would be served. Of course, all the

children would invite their parents, godparents, relatives and friends. It was really a gay affair. Miss Leighton wondered whom Danny would bring. She hoped someone would accompany him.

The little hall was crowded on that Sunday afternoon. Proud mothers and rather self-conscious fathers sat squeezed against beaming grandparents. Infants crawled among the chairs and down the aisles, toddlers wandered happily about. It was an enjoyable occasion.

The Rector gave a mercifully short address, then, prompted and assisted by the Superintendent, began to distribute the prizes.

Miss Leighton had noticed Danny, accompanied by numerous tousle-headed cousins, and all appearing rather bored. She sat forward tensely as her class began to receive their prizes.

The Rector looked mildly surprised as he read the last name, but his smile was kindly as he announced "..... and a special prize for effort goes to Danny Wiley..... congratulations, Danny."

Danny's initial expression of incredulity quickly gave way to a pleased smirk. He swaggered up the aisle and snatched his book from the Rector, ignoring the proffered handshake. The cousins emitted ironic cheers as he re-joined them.

The half-hour that followed was a hectic one for Miss Leighton. She filled and re-filled the children's mugs with sweet, sticky cordial. At length, sated and replete, the youngsters drifted outside the hall to play, leaving the table bare but for the littered crusts and scraps. The teachers heaved a collective sigh of relief.

One of the women took Miss Leighton's arm. "Come and have a cuppa. We surely deserve it, after that invasion."

Miss Leighton hesitated. "Yes, I will, in a minute. There's something I want to do first," she murmured, moving in the direction of the door.

Outside, various games were in progress. Danny and his group did not appear to be participating, but stood apart from the others, mocking them derisively. They eyed Miss Leighton warily as she approached them.

"Did you enjoy the party, Danny?" she asked. She couldn't resist adding, "And how do you like your prizes?"

She waited, anticipating his delight and gratitude.

Danny licked a smear of cream from his cheek and looked at her consideringly. For him, this year was past, gone. Holidays, a whole six weeks of them stretched endlessly ahead. Miss Leighton was of no further use to him, and, more important, he knew that the only companions he would have during the

holidays was the group surrounding him now.

"What — this ole book? It's no good, why didn't yah gimme a book with comics in it? Who wants to read this stuff? He flung the despised book to the ground and turned with a grin to his cousins, "Come on – let's get outa here. Let's go down to the baths for a swim!"

Whooping and laughing, they ran through the gate and along the road.

Miss Leighton gazed after them for quite a while. At last, she slowly turned and made her way back to the hall.

"Stories Told to Scamps" lay forlornly in the dust its bright cover torn, its pages fluttering in the light summer breeze.

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TURNING

Bettina Cummins

POINT

Berowra Evening VIEW Club



I look back with no glow of pleasure to my early days spent in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. My sister Jeannie dominated the cold terrace house where we lived. She froze my personality so that I never thawed out. She went her own way ignoring our easy-going father and work-worried mother.

Jeannie was big, bouncing and exuberant. Though she was only two years older than I she was twice as large, twice as noisy and possessed a venomous tongue.

At night when I should have slept, I plotted how to prevent my identity from being drowned in hers.

"When I'm bigger I'll get even," I would mutter, half asleep.

But one Saturday afternoon I achieved my wish through an occurrence beyond my powers of contrivance. .

I was thirteen at the time. Mum was on her way to visit Gran and Dad was going to the football. Jeannie and I were sitting on the lounge dressed in our best brown jumpers and skirts, plus matching berets and gloves.

When our parents were safely on the bus Jeannie leapt up from the lounge, stretching out her long arms.

"What'll we do this arvo, Liz?"

"We're supposed to go to the flicks."

"Let's go for a walk and get lost," answered Jeannie, disregarding my suggestion. "We're dressed for the flicks," I howled. "There's a good show at the Roxy."

"Squealing kids and eskimo pies - no thank you. Come on!"

She hauled me to my feet, opened the front door, pushing me out into the misty afternoon. Dampness clung to us as we walked. Suddenly, as if by accident, we found ourselves outside Leo's Palais de Dance in St. Kilda. The door was open, though there was a sign propped against it reading 'Closed for Renovations.'

Jeannie and I peeped inside. A middle-aged couple were dancing in the centre of the hall with that absorbed look of good ballroom dancers, while in the corner a group of children were fooling around, performing a parody of a dance. Beside one wall a gramophone stood on a chair and through the scratches the crooner's voice was barely audible:—

"I'm young and healthy and you've got charms —"
Jeannie grabbed me around the waist and we slid across the floor;

"It would really be a sin not to have you in my arms."

Jeannie was singing softly, eyes closed, swaying gently.

Suddenly she hurled me from her into the open arms of Tony, the "chucker-out" at Leo's. "Gee, you're stiff," she hissed. "Won't you ever learn!"

"You getta outta here, you kids!" Tony was shaking me. The whites of his eyes were close to my face. "You no see notice? We closed to public."

"Who they then?" Jeannie was mimicking Tony's high-pitched voice as she pointed to the dancers.

"Family." Tony put one large hand on each of our backs; shoved us out the door, closing it with a bang.

"Did you get a whiff of that cheap hair oil?" sneered Jeannie, half dancing, half sliding along the arcade.

"Where have all the fellas gone?" she mused, peering into the vacant amusement parlour.

"To the footy, like Dad," I replied. "Or to the flicks, like we should be."

"You shut up and march," snarled Jeannie. So I tagged along behind Jeannie until my feet hurt. I begged to be allowed to sit for a few minutes in a little park at the end of Tennyson Road. The dampness from the park seat seeped through my brown serge skirt; the right side of my face was stiffening up with cold so that I could hardly open my mouth.

"Darn the mist," grumbled Jeannie. "Why can't it rain or fine up?" We got up, making for the telephone box at the end of the road.

"Hurry up!" called out Jeannie, jiggling impatiently.

It was warm and stuffy in the telephone booth. Jeannie opened the phone book and picked out a Toorak number. This was one of her favourite games. Always they lived in Toorak, her victims; usually they were female. Jeannie was giggling before she finished dialling.

"Hello, hello . . . the woman's voice was hopeful, but when no one answered she became puzzled, then irritated. Three times Jeannie dialled that number.

"That put the wind up her," Jeannie smiled at me.

"Let's try some more." Twenty times she must have gone through the cycle. Some of her callers hung up impatiently; some lingered hopefully; the language used by one of them was a disgrace to a lady living in a select suburb.

This was the point of the game, to see how quickly a veneer of refinement could be peeled off. Jeannie could have gone on forever, she was having so much fun. But when she started blowing raspberries down the phone, I pulled at the sleeve of her jumper.

"Jeannie, let's go home. It's getting dark. There's a man outside waiting to use the box."

"O.K., O.K." Jeannie's eyes were glistening. "Fun, wasn't it?" She pulled her beret down so that it tilted over one eye, favouring the waiting male with a come-hither glance. I held the door open for him, but he made no attempt to enter the booth, but just stood; tall, thin, unnaturally still.

"I'm cold, I'm tired, I'm hungry," I waited; as we set off along the straight, deserted street.

"Kid sisters," answered Jeannie with contempt, lengthening her stride so that I had to run to keep up.

"Jeannie," I panted, "he's following us ~ that man from the telephone box."

"Phooey!" snapped Jeannie, glancing around quickly. "You're right!" She started to sprint. I ran too and the man increased his speed.

"Stitch in my side," I gasped as we stopped for a breather. The stranger stood still; but when we walked slowly so did he. The distance between us never varied.

"What does he want," whispered Jeannie, "why doesn't he go, or speak, or something?"

"Please, somebody, come!" But no one answered my call. The long street went on forever, unlit houses their

gardens full of sombre shrubs, faced the footpath, where the tall plane trees still wore enough autumnal leaves to block out large areas of illumination from the overhead street lamps.

I looked behind. The man was inching forward. When he stepped into the light I saw his face — not old, not young, but yellow and lined with evil. Jeannie saw him too. She made a sound between a gasp and a sob.

“Got to get help!” I tried the front gate of the nearest house but my fingers were too cold and clumsy to open the latch.

“There’s no one in there,” screamed my big sister. I tried to hold on to her, but she was a shaking lump of jelly, eluding my outstretched grasp.

I shut my eyes to block out the vile thing that was approaching. I opened them as the misty rain cleared; nearby I noticed a light winking over a gateway. I grabbed Jeannie by the hand. I ran, dragging her along somehow. It took all my strength but

the thing behind us was running too. Hurling myself through the open gate, I somehow forced Jeannie and myself along the pathway. Then we were in the haven of a bright lobby. We had outwitted our pursuer.

“Where are we?” gasped Jeannie.

“Remember, Jeannie - it’s that private hospital where Mum came when she had the kidney trouble.”

“Is it?” Jeannie sat heavily on a chair. She looked crumpled, all her bounce had gone.

There was no one on duty at the reception desk. I swung onto the bell, holding my finger there until a young nurse came along.

“There’s a man out in the street,” I was still puffing, “he scared the life out of us.”

“I’ll fetch Sister,” said the little nurse.

Sister was cool, efficient, unflappable. She walked briskly down the long pathway. She looked up and down the street. “There is someone standing

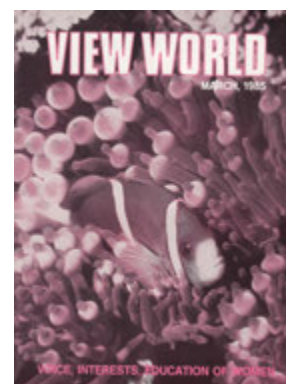
out there. Wait here awhile.” She came back with a solid wards man who offered to walk with us as far as the railway bridge. The Evil One was still standing in the street; he followed very slowly, slinking off to the left at the first side street.

At the railway bridge we mumbled “good-bye and thank you” to the wards man. We were too subdued to say more. I longed for the security of home, Dad stoking up the fire with mallee roots, dinner on the table; though I knew we would be scolded for being late.

Jeannie took my hand. Her face was white and there were tears running down her cheeks. Suddenly she had shrunk. A voice inside me was singing: “She’s only a big blancmange; she’s only a big blancmange.”

It was a turning point in my life. I was never again overawed by Jeannie.

...



THERE WAS A REASON

Winifred Potts
Mudgee VIEW Club
1st Prize Short Story Competition

“Blindness made his life one long night, but lying awake in the hospital ward he sensed the beginning of another day. The sooty, gaseous odour told him boilers were being stoked, distant voices and clattering of pans heralded the day staff.

He craved the fresh crisp air from his beloved hills as it used to blow through the open door of his hut. Pervading all around him, mingling with and subduing the odour of soot, was the overpowering smell of disinfectant, cold, hard, unrelenting.

Days ago he had decided even this was preferable to the hollow-sounding, airless dormitory where the jarring sounds of sleeping men and the stench of age and urine had almost suffocated him. A few weeks of that and no desire to live had brought him to the hospital.

Annie came to him often now as he dozed. Soon he would join that long ago girl wife.

Lids closed on sightless eyes, he savoured this interlude of peace and mental conversation before the cyclonic roar of the new day reached a crescendo then slowly died away leaving him dazed and dozing, awaiting Annie's visit.

Clearly he recalled the events that had brought him here, hundreds of miles from all he knew and loved, to await an appointment with death.

Why had he ever been born? There seemed no reason or purpose for him to have lived at all.

The years of back breaking shearing, blades flashing and clicking from early morning until the light failed, stabled like animals at night. At first he hoped to get a “place” of his own but after Annie died he'd just slogged on to support ailing and ageing parents. There was no old age pension then.

Suddenly they were gone and he was old with failing sight. Now there was 10 shillings a week pension. Past wanting much, he had managed.

When his sight had failed completely, old mates had called, made sure he was all-right, got his bit of tucker once a fortnight, had a yarn. Then he had scalded himself. Andy dropping by had found him ill, the ambulance had come and then he was in the Town Hospital.

When his burns healed the doctor had mentioned an ‘old men’s home in the city’.

“You would be cared for — safer and more sensible.”

He had tried to talk his way out but his tongue was slow. They — the doctor, the policeman and the matron — were all so certain that they knew what was best for him.

So, like the stock which were sent hundreds of miles in nervous terror on jolting trains to meet their death,

he too, was to go hundreds of miles to await his death.

The palms of his wasted hands were wet with sweat as he relived those terrible days of waiting, hoping they wouldn't be able to get him into an ‘old men’s home’.

It had been pleasant at the hospital: old mates had called; he'd talked to some of the nurses about their grandfathers. He had almost lulled himself into thinking this would go on until he died when, one morning, the matron announced briskly, “You're off on the train tonight. A nurse going to the city will accompany you.”

A lump rose in his throat at the memory. He could barely breathe, tears stung his sightless eyes. Nobody had asked how he felt about it. THEY knew what was best for him.

Numb, bewildered, incapable of any thought or feeling, he had been swept along on a tide of efficiency, dressed, jollied and conveyed to the railway station. Stiff with fear, deafened by unfamiliar noises, dazed, he had been half-lifted into a box compartment.

Among the roar of mingled noise and strange voices, he'd heard a voice he knew — Andy's. “Couldn't let yer go without saying goodbye, mate. Here's a coupla pies, she's a long trip.”

Men don't cry, but he'd heard tears in Andy's voice — his own eyes had stung as the paper bag was pushed into his hands. Clutching the bag, as a drowning man clutches a straw, he'd opened his mouth to reply, but the surge of bodies, the uproar of young male voices, the clatter of military boots, the thudding of hurled kit bags had sent him reeling to a seat.

Crouched back, silent and shaking as far into the corner as he could force him-self, he'd heard the door slam, the whistle blow, the grind of wheels and had whispered, “So long, Andy.”

A brash young voice had said, “We made it! We're off!”

Off to what? He'd been unable to even conjecture as he'd felt once more the physical pain of heart break.

The nurse was close beside him because the roar and laughter of the men settling down had pressed her to his side. He sensed her apprehension. The fullness of their manhood not yet attained, these boys were off to fight the second war to end all wars. He remembered thinking, “For what reason were any of us born?”

Terrible inner panic had seized him, so many tales of soldiers on leave. Blind, old and helpless in a box carriage with a slip of a girl and three different male voices. He had huddled closer in his corner seat, numb with fear of the present as well as the future.

Eventually the soldiers had settled, had spoken respectfully to the girl. She'd explained why she was there with him. One boy had sat closer to talk to him but, so long out of touch with youth he could only reply “yes” or “no”, the words would barely pass the lump in his throat.

They had arranged a great coat as a pillow and another as a blanket, saying “have a sleep, Pop.” How could he sleep? His brain was like a fire and the hard seat made every bone in his body ache.

He'd wanted the toilet and had lain in agony until he could stand it no longer and had struggled to rise. One of the boys had guessed his need and between them they had guided and helped him in the lurching train. How ridiculous to have sent a girl alone on such a journey with a blind old man! Whatever would they have done without these boys? Worse, what if the boys had been ‘bad lots’?

Too choked to express his true gratitude, he'd muttered “Just a nuisance. Dunno why I was ever born”. A laughing young voice replied, “There's a reason for everything, except in the Army.”

After hours of grinding torture the train had stopped and robust young feet had stamped out for cups of tea, returning with one for him and the girl. He'd tried to drink the tea but couldn't swallow a mouthful of the proffered sandwich or Andy's now cold pie. So young, these boys, so kind. If Annie's baby had lived he might have had such a son.

More hours of grinding and jolting, the boys had discussed with the girl where to change trains. The slowing wheels ground to a halt. They'd helped him raise his creaking body. Stupefied by all the noisy congestion, he'd been lifted from the carriage.

All he could remember now was the awful sensation of swinging in nothingness, cold sweat all over his body, the tight band in his chest which had relaxed as his feet touched solid ground. A cheerful voice, “There, Pop. We didn't let you go under the train.” A chorus of “Good luck, Pop.”

His whispered thanks were drowned by the train's departing noises. It was they who would need the luck, not him. His days and luck had almost run out.

Stiff, cold, numb with mental and physical fatigue, somehow, they'd reached their destination. “Just breaking daylight,” she'd said. Her

voice again, irritable now, “Someone was supposed to meet us.” She'd left him in the first rays of the sun while she looked outside the station, but the cold was in his brain and bones now.

How much longer? he'd thought. She'll be glad to be rid of me and he hadn't the strength to blame her.

They'd walked outside where the sun was a wee bit warmer against the wall. He'd heard the clip clop of horses' hooves and a glimmer of life had stirred in his frozen mind. The sound had stopped beside them, a disgruntled male voice had greeted them, “This the old codger for the home?”

He was asked his name and gave it, then guided and pushed into the cart — no doubt the home's contribution to the war effort and the petrol shortage. He'd felt an uplifting of his spirits as the morning air moved over his face and consolation in the confidence he'd felt at being behind a horse again.

The degradation of admittance, being treated as an entry in a ledger, devoid of any feeling, had passed over his tired mind and body, heard but unable to hurt — he was past all hurt now. Later he'd been glad he was blind because he could only sense the ugliness all around and smell the awful decay of human souls.

He'd gone through the motions of existing — eating, bathing, sitting on verandahs, going to bed — suffering regimentation aided by some hand often as feeble as his own. More lonely here than ever he'd been in his hut in the bush, his mates too old and poor to come to see him.

Eventually his wracking cough and chest pains had brought him to someone's notice and gladly he'd found himself in a hospital bed.

His reverie was broken by voices, the doctor's and the sister's. The doctor, “How are you Old Timer?” “He won't

try, Dr Smith," that was the sister.

The doctor's voice was young, he smelt clean as he bent over and used his stethoscope. Straightening, he said, "You must buck up. It's my last visit to you. I go into the Army tomorrow. Try to eat for sister."

The groping, gnarled fingers found the doctor's hand resting on the bed. The young man bent to hear the whispered words, "No sense in it. They send me hundreds of miles to die — just like the cattle and sheep." Exhausted, he sank back on the pillows.

That night Annie came, closer than usual, and gladly he slipped away with her.

The war was over!

Dr Smith did everything that normal young men do when released from the tensions of war. Naturally his parents disapproved of the company he kept, his loud sports coats and slacks. They considered a navy serge 'three piece' more suitable for a doctor. They abhorred the terrible music that emanated from the cumbersome suitcase he called a portable wireless and which he carried everywhere.

He had many love affairs until he met Beryl, whom he saw as a cross between Ruby Keeler and Marlene Dietrich. She was in reality a dainty, sensible young woman. His parents were a trifle worried about Beryl. She smoked! When the babies began to arrive, she abandoned that luxury.

They lived in a cramped flat while he did Post Graduate study and locum work. When baby number three arrived, they decided to move. Their finances dictated a small country practise, preferably with a big house for the children.

They didn't have to look far or long. Older doctors, tired of the overwork they had borne during the war years, were waiting for younger men to take

over their burden. So, Dr Smith and family settled into their new life in a country town.

Time passed, the adjusting to a different life had been pleasant. On his way to the hospital Dr Smith passed the trucking yards where the sight of terrified, hollow-gutted beasts being sent to the city for slaughter always reminded him of something. But he could not remember what it was that eluded, yet worried, him. Unable to find the cause, he had decided that it was just the stupidity of the System.

The Hospital Board accused him of cluttering the hospital with too many long-term geriatric patients who should have been sent to 'Homes'. Despite their outspoken criticism, he was always loathe to suggest a 'Home' because always that indefinable 'something' rose to torment him.

The policeman had accompanied the old bushman into Dr Smith's surgery. After examining the old man, the doctor said, "We'll have to send you to a home mate. You can't manage alone any longer."

The stricken old face and shaking hands were too much for the doctor; he busied himself with papers on the desk. "Just like the cattle and sheep, send me hundreds of miles to die."

The words, uttered in a quavering voice, froze him, as from the depths of his memory the same words surfaced and shook him. Without conscious thought Dr Smith replied, "We'll put you in a hospital for a while to build you up."

As if given new life the wrinkled face lost its anxious expression, the old back straightened and with renewed spring in his step the old man left the surgery.

That night Dr Smith told Beryl of his half-formulated idea for keeping these aged folk in the atmosphere they understood, among people

they knew. Why not a 'Home for the Aged' here? Where to start? Beryl suggested the mayor — he'd know all about committees, etc.

The mayor received the doctor's invitation and wondered why. He'd not had much to do with the doctor, except when he'd had the 'flu and then he'd been too sick to care whether the doctor had a bedside manner or not. Joan said he was OK. They'd marched on Anzac Days but the doctor always seemed to be called away. Anyway, he'd have to go.

It took two beers to get them past army units and where they'd served in the war before, diffidently, as if ashamed of his own softness and the fear of being labelled sentimentalist, Dr Smith poured out in short embarrassed burst his idea for an aged people's home right here.

He finished by quoting the old man's words, "Just like cattle and sheep, send me hundreds of miles to die."

The mayor lay back in the armchair, drawing hard on his pipe, as he listened to the disjointed suggestion. When the doctor finished and sat back waiting to be called a fool, the mayor spoke.

"Going back from final leave during the war, Bluie (he didn't make it home) Joe and I met this nurse in the train taking an old bloke to a home in Sydney. Gawd, it was awful, poor old bugger. Upset me a bit at the time. Hadn't thought of it until now.

"Come to think of it, Bluie mentioned it once. Things were getting pretty tough — I must've been moaning because he said 'I'd rather cop it here than end up like that poor old bastard in the train'. Struth, the old chap was blind and terrified.

"Yes, I'm with you doctor. A public meeting, see the Member of Parliament...we'll get it off the ground quick smart."

So, the great project was launched.

The locals rallied to the call. They hadn't realised, until it was brought to their notice, the inhumanity of 'banishing' their aged citizens to a strange new world when they were least able to adapt to it. The radical idea of a local home had never been envisaged, but war had shown them that all good things need not, and should not, be concentrated in cities.

As an election was approaching, the MP decided he would overlook his preference for the home to be built in a larger town where his impassioned public-spirited speeches would have swayed more voters. He threw his weight behind the project, thankful at least that it would be in his electorate.

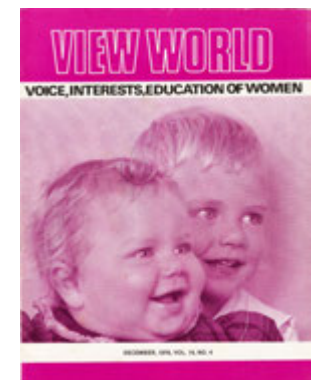
Opening day was a triumphant gala, even the weather co-operated. The milling throng of would be celebrities, selfless toilers and triumphant towns-

people had slowly dwindled.

Over the darkening hills the setting sun thrust her last, long, flickering fingers, caressing the gateway where the doctor and mayor had paused to look back at a dream made real. No need for words, held in a timeless capsule by some unknown, unseen quantity, they knew this given moment in life would never be repeated.

A seeking, straying breeze stirred the smoke from the mayor's pipe, breathed across the doctor's brow lifting that indefinable load.

•••



DON'T LET ME GO

Lillian Archer
Tumut VIEW Club

Mirror, mirror on the wall, I am the fairest of them all"

This is the kind of house one would expect to be haunted. It's old and bears the imprint of generation after generation of our family. Yet it isn't a frightening house. I'm not afraid of my own ghost posturing before the big mirror on the wall, prompted by vanity and the urge to aggravate my mother.

Time is interchangeable. The log fire still burns brightly. But on the marble mantelpiece the past has caught up with the present, with photographs of a wedding group, the bride and the two naked little ones kicking their way through their baby years.

"Where are those ratty kids," I wondered. "Oh, never mind. It's their business, not mine — up to a point"

I watched my mother sewing a patch on the backside of a tiny pair of jeans.

"Why not machine it, if you must patch it?"

"Oh, I like a bit of hand sewing"

This she had said many times before and in spite of my mood of quiet reflection, I wanted to shatter the everlasting sameness of it.

"I know you like hand sewing. But that's about all I do know. You've never told me, for instance, the full story of your family — of Nanna, or even of you and Dad. Doesn't my present behaviour merit any good marks?"

"What was she like - Nanna - apart from being your elder sister and the belle of every ball she ever went to?"

She held up the tiny pair of jeans, flipped and folded them and patted them flat. Putting them aside, she studied me with her cold, blue eyes before saying, in the flat voice that had never changed, "She was a bitch."

Her verbal emancipation stunned me. "Mu-um," I said quietly, aware now of two pairs of loitering ears near the door, "You shouldn't say things like that."

"Why not? You do."

"Did," I said. "Did."

Taking up my own duties as a mother, I shouted: "Rabbits! Rabbits! Will anybody buy my rabbits?"

My two small daughters pushed one another into the room and stood before me, hands at each side of their heads, simulating two large ears.

"Off you go, now," I told them. "But remember: T for toothbrush, T for toilet and T for tumble — into bed."

They belted up those beautiful cedar stairs, yelling "Night Mum. Night Gran."

"It's early," Gran said.

"It won't be by the time they're in bed," I told her, and sweeping from my mind the noise they were making, I returned to the past.

"Don't you think you should tell me everything, now?" I asked.

"There's time enough yet," she said, buttoning her mouth.

I drew in my breath and let it out again,

slowly. Sometimes I still had a mind to provoke her into a barney that would generate enough sparklers and Catherine-wheels to light up the whole town. Like I did the night I wanted to leave home forever, the night I made a terrible fool of myself, and a worse one of Bill.

A student then, I was home for the vacation. It had been boarding school for me, as soon as I could be sent, then university. And with each home coming, there was the hope that this time my mother and father would be real people, my people.

He, my father, was tall and as craggy as the lonely peaks of the land he came from. I'd been baiting my mother for some time before I'd noticed him. His face, always grim, revealed nothing. When I looked at him, he did what he always did. He looked through me, as if at someone standing behind me. My mother was sewing.

"Patching. Always patching," I said. "Those patches will outlast the clothes you patch. Why don't you throw things away, like everyone else does?"

"That faded blue dress, too. Did someone tell you always to wear blue, because it's the colour of your eyes? And the colour men like?"

My sarcasm was strained. My disappointment was burning me. Soon I'd begin to wave my arms and bring into play the pillowcase I held by one screwed-up corner.

I'd tried to tell them about Bill and me, about the ball, but they'd made no comment. I didn't tell them I'd been searching in the back bedroom where no one ever went. But I had to go on talking.

"We've been practising," I said. "The waltz — the real thing — the polka, the lancers. And you needn't tell me that people in the old days were so different. They were swingers, too.

Hook your fingers over the boy's fingers and you're off your feet before you know it."

My father had moved to the fireplace and stood with his back to us.

"You didn't say it was an old-time ball," my mother said.

"How do you know whether I did or not?" I asked, scenting the usual opposition. "You never listen to anything I say. You could have got it from the newspaper, but you're not even interested in that. What are you staying alive for?"

She stood up and took one step towards me. "You're not going," she said. "You'll stay home."

"Oh, stop treating me like a puling baby," I shouted. "You think I'm going to stay home with you? While the others have fun? You two? Oh no thank you. I'm not dead!"

My father put his arms on the mantelpiece and dropped his head to them.

"You're not going, do you hear me?" she said. "I won't have you jaunting around with undesirable people. There was a time when dancing was considered sinful. It's still sinful!"

"Oh, don't give me that carping limitarian shit! I'm going! And if I had anywhere else to live I wouldn't stay here."

"James!" she said, but my father didn't move.

I started for the door, but came back. The tremor in my voice surprised even me. "Tell me," I pleaded. "What is it that keeps us apart?"

"There's a barrier between you and me," I looked at my mother. "It was there even when I was little. You soaped my mouth, remember? For that same word. I got it from the scruffy little boy next door — from Bill. It was there then, the hatred. It's

there now."

I looked longingly towards my father. "Do you hate me too?" I asked. He turned to look at me, but it still wasn't at me he was looking.

"And what's more," I said rounding again on my other, "there's a barrier between you and him!"

My voice was breaking. "But no matter what either of you say, I'm going to the ball. I'm going now, to Nell's to dress."

I couldn't then say that I'd found something in the back bedroom to wear and was taking it with me. It was the loveliest dress I'd ever seen. In it, I surely would be the fairest of them all.

Hours later, when I'd come home, my mother was still sitting there, sewing. Perhaps they'd had supper, but there she was, and from what my father told me later, much later, I knew something of what had passed between them.

She hadn't been conscious of what I was wearing when I went out. She'd continued sewing, preferring not to notice my father's approach as he crossed the room and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Jeanie," he said, "have you no compassion? No understanding? She's young yet."

It was then the oddness of my "get-up" hit her. "What was that she had on?" she asked. "Where did she get it?"

Part of my find had been draped around me as an Indian lady would drape her sari.

"It was that old tablecloth, the first we ever had. She had no right and what else did she have in that pillowcase?"

"Does it matter? If it pleases her?"

"It doesn't please me. And if she took the dress, too, it will please me even less."

My father's eyes hardened. "The

dress? Then you lied to me. You didn't burn it. You kept it. Why?"

"As a reminder, perhaps. If I needed it."

"You..."

"Bitch? She called me that. Nanna did. She had a tongue to get round words of the worst kind. Like the little spitfire who's gone to the ball. I'm going to see what she's taken."

She started up from her chair, but strong hands put her down. "You'll not do that, Jeanie," my father said. And Jeanie knew better than to defy that distant cousin who'd come close enough to fall in love with and marry her.

I came into the room, limping with a hurt ankle and arms feeling as though they'd been torn from their sockets. I was in no mood to be questioned or censured. I did my own questioning.

"Why did you wait up?" I asked. "Did you think I'd come by ambulance — which I nearly did? Or in charge of the police?"

With as much drama as even I am capable of, she said, "That dress! Take it off!"

"Okay," I said. "If that's what you want. It didn't do me much good."

I dragged at the hooks and eyes of the bodice and let the dress fall to the ground. I stepped out of it and stooped to pick it up. Then I saw the painting on the mantelpiece. Going to the fireplace, I looked up at a portrait of myself in the dress I was holding. There were the burnished curls, the creamy skin, the tilted nose and hazel eyes.

I felt weak and I was already in a state of shock. "Who is it?" I asked, then guessed. "It's Nanna. This dress was hers."

"Yes." Was there a note of jubilation in my mother's usually non-committal voice?

"She wore it to her last ball."

I bundled the dress up, threw it on the fire and dragged myself up the stairs.

Lying there in the dark, I hoped the physical pain would oust from my mind the thought that I'd probably lost Bill. I'd cursed him, flayed him with my tongue before everyone, blaming him for my fall, forgetting the love and admiration in his eyes when he'd called for me at Nell's.

"That dress," he'd said. "It's fantastic. Someone should paint your portrait in it."

Someone had; but it was Nanna's portrait.

I was fading into sleep, but the music kept breaking in, the fun of the dances that took us back into the past, the grand swinging rhythm of the lancers.

The room had been hot and, lucky for me, fairly crowded. Almost as soon as we began to swing, I was off my feet. Bill's hands were moist and I felt his fingers slipping. I screamed "Don't let me go! Don't let me go!" He couldn't hold me and I screamed again: "You're doing it on purpose. You want to be rid of me."

I crashed heavily into another group and fell to the floor. Someone picked me up, but it wasn't Bill. And someone said something important, but I couldn't remember it.

It was a long time before Bill came back into my orbit again, but when my father died, we were married and came to live with my mother. We were not welcomed, but it was the family home.

Time moved on and eventually my mother took to her bed, refusing to leave it. But she had softened enough then to tell me why she had never been able to like me.

She still found it difficult and, at first, simply said "He was mine, but she

took him". I couldn't see much point in that, but apparently it was Jeanie, the quiet, unobtrusive one who caught the eye of the cousin who had come to live with them. It was Nanna, however, who shone with the light of a hundred candles and my father had been dazzled by her.

Moving in discomfort in her bed, she studied my face dimly. "You're so like your mother," she said. "It's a pity."

"Oh no," I protested. "My eyes are not..." I stumbled, uncertain of myself, "not blue."

"Neither were hers," she said with something of the old bitterness.

It was then I remembered what the woman at the ball had said: "Like mother, like daughter". I should have guessed, but how stupid can the smart ones be?

"How did she die?" I asked.

The blue eyes were closed and the answer came slowly.

"She was at the ball, dancing with your father — the lancers."

"Yes, go on," I said, but how clearly I could picture it.

"She lost her grip and screamed out: 'Don't let me go'. She accused him of doing it on purpose, of wanting to be rid of her. With good reason."

There was a long silence. "She crashed against the wall. Concussion — weeks and weeks. She didn't recover."

And that, I suppose, was when I came in. But it isn't my ghost that walks this house, it's Nanna's.

I continued to stand by her bed, watching the mask of life withdraw from her tired face, leaving it to become once more the face of the gentle, blue-eyed girl my father had loved. My tears began to gather.

I went to Bill who was with our

sleeping daughters. We stood one each side of the enormous bed, looking down on the burnished curls, the creamy skin.

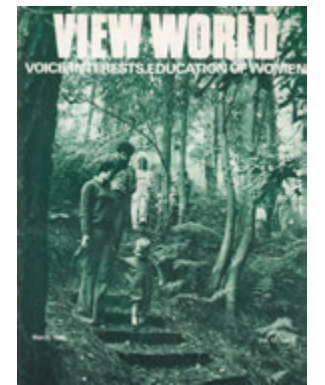
"Bill," I said, "get me the carving knife."

I didn't need to see his face as he asked: "What for?"

"Well I can't cut out all their genes but I'd like to relieve them of my contribution. Even so, think of the long line of odd bods strung out behind them, waiting to close in. But there is your share to leaven the whole, thank goodness."

I stretched my hand to him. "Come," I said, "we must leave them now. My... my mother isn't with us anymore."

...



Mrs M.G. Pickford
Wellington VIEW Club

THE EXASPERA-TING CAT



3rd Prize Short Story
Competition

The cat is sitting, as he mostly does, on the low occasional table in the centre of the living-room. Like some exquisite ornament, he remains motionless for hours, seated in an elegant curve with his emerald eyes half-closed.

Now that it's all over, I can regard her with equanimity, even admiration, again. But I still get a queer, uneasy feeling sometimes when I see him draped around Jennifer's neck like a fur stole, and in spite of the fact that she's assured me there will be no further occurrence of — how shall I describe it?

The supernatural sounds too far-fetched altogether, yet it's the only way I can describe those things which happened here, only a short time ago—in spite of the fact that she's promised, and I know Jennifer always keeps her promises, I can't help worrying, because, after all, the cat was involved, too, and he hasn't promised — not to me — at any rate.

I shudder to think what might happen if he should decide to commence again,

But let me tell you about it.

Jennifer had only just turned three when our tabby cat had a litter of kittens: not that that was anything unusual—she produces kittens regularly, each November. And at first, there didn't appear to be anything unusual about this lot either, unless you count the colour.

Three of the little creatures were an ordinary tabby, but the fourth was a pearly-grey colour, almost luminous. It was certainly pretty, and no one was surprised when Jennifer, standing with the others around the cat-crèche, placed a tiny finger unerringly on the squirming grey kitten and announced distinctly, "Dis one is mine."

And so it seemed. While all the children played with the kittens

periodically, Jennifer played exclusively with the grey one, which she christened Smokey.

In due course, we began the annual hunt for new homes for the kittens. Although we could have found Smokey a home a dozen times over, because of his striking beauty, in deference to Jennifer's great attachment to him we kept refusing these offers. Long after the other kittens were gone, Smokey remained with us — or rather with Jennifer.

Looking back, I don't think that Smokey possessed his weird powers from the moment he was born; they just sort of gradually developed as he grew. He was almost fully-grown before it dawned on me that there was anything odd about him.

His emerald-green eyes always distinguished him from other cats, whose eyes are more yellow. And there's no doubt that Jennifer treated him more like a baby than a cat. Indeed, this proved quite embarrassing for me at times.

I remember, blushing, the time she took him to the corner shop-dressed in doll's clothes and tucked into the doll's pram. He was such a tame creature that he never moved an inch from where Jennifer placed him, only this particular time, a huge Alsatian dog poked his nose into the pram, and Smokey fled for his life.

Of course, I was the one who had to search the streets, asking every-one I met, "Have you seen a grey kitten, dressed in a pink candy-striped coat, and a floral skirt?" I felt such a fool!

However, this was in the normal period, before Jennifer and Smokey started to communicate.

The first inkling I received that anything abnormal was happening was when I missed Jennifer one Monday morning. I remember the day because I had been washing, and

hadn't had time to keep a check on her whereabouts.

When the others are at school, she's usually very good, and plays happily with her cat, in the yard. But I hadn't seen her for a while this day, so I called in an effort to locate her. Imagine my horror when she answered me from way up in the top branches of the silky oak tree—which is pretty high!

"Jennifer, how on earth did you get up there?" I gasped. "Don't move! You'll fall and break your neck! Now just sit still and hold on tightly! I'll get someone to get you down — the fire brigade? the police? —"

Jennifer's laughing voice interrupted my panic-stricken instructions.

"You didn't know I could climb trees like this, did you, Mummy? You've never seen me do it before, have you? You know who taught me to climb, Mummy? Smokey did. Smokey can climb berry well! You watch me get down now, Mummy — don't be frightened. Smokey can go first to show me where to put my feet."

It was too late for me to say anything, as she had already started to descend, and with that blessed cat preceding her. I was so scared I couldn't utter a sound. I watched her tiny figure spring sure-footedly from branch to branch, way up above me, and I was just frozen with dread. When, finally, she was close enough that I could reach up and grab her, I was trembling all over like a leaf.

"Don't you ever do that again," I told her shakily. "You could kill yourself, climbing up a big tree like that. Promise me you'll never do it again."

"Oh, Mummy," Jennifer said indulgently. "I won't hurt myself. Smokey showed me how to do it. He wouldn't let me fall."

"That silly cat couldn't catch you! Now you promise me that you won't get up again."

Jennifer heaved a sigh and made an expressive face at Smokey, who was daintily washing himself nearby.

“Oh, Mummy—you won’t ever let me do fun things. All right, then,” she added hastily, seeing my face. “I promise. But I wouldn’t hurt myself, anyway.”

She wandered back to the verandah, grabbing the cat and slinging him around her neck as she went. Smokey adjusted himself to the new position instantly, letting himself hang loosely, like a fur stole.

Well, I kept an anxious eye on the pair for a few days after that, but they made no attempt to climb anything else. Jennifer seemed to be talking and laughing with her cat a lot, but that didn’t bother me. I was only glad that she had something to play with, while the others were at school.

Occasionally I heard her exclaim, “go on — TING one, Smokey. Oh, you’re clever! Now. TING it away again.” Peals of delighted laughter rang out, and I smiled, listening with amused tolerance to the game of make-believe.

TING-ing, as any mother whose children watch those television shows which star witches and genies will know, is the method by which these same witches and genies produce, banish or move any objects or people they so desire. They wiggle their noses, or nod their heads, and—well, TING is the way my children describe what happens, and I can’t think of a better word to use.

One morning not very long after the tree-climbing occurrence, I popped outside for one of my periodic checks on Jennifer’s whereabouts, and found her happily riding a gleaming brand-new tricycle.

“Jennifer, where did you get that bike?” I asked, naturally enough.

My little girl beamed. “Smokey TING-ed it for me, Mummy. Look, isn’t it pretty?”

“But where did you get it?” I repeated. There aren’t many small children living near us, and I couldn’t think of one who owned a bike like this one.

“I told you—Smokey TING-ed it for me,” Jennifer’s huge blue eyes shone. “Smokey’s a magic cat, Mummy. He can TING anything.” I decided to humour her.

“All right, then. Show me how he does it. Get him to TING the bike away so I can see.”

“But I’m not finished playing with it yet!” Jennifer’s reluctance to part with her new toy struggled with her desire to show off her pet’s accomplishment. “Oh, all right then. TING it away, Smokey,” she instructed, and while I watched indulgently, the cat’s shimmering green eyes closed in a slow, deliberate wink.

I glanced to where the tricycle had stood — and that’s when I was really shocked! I shut my eyes, took a deep breath, and looked again. There was no doubt about it — the tricycle had gone!

“Where is it?” I cried. “Where did it go?”

“Smokey TING-ed it away, Mummy, like you said to.” Jennifer was really enjoying this.

“It’s not possible” I told myself calmly. “You imagined it, that’s all. Sit down quietly, and let’s work it out.”

I sat down somewhat abruptly on a bathroom chair, and tried to smile at my child. “That’s very clever, Jennifer. “I’ve never seen a cat do magic before. Would he do some more for me?”

“If I tell him to,” answered Jennifer seriously. “He’ll only do it for me, ‘cause he’s my cat.”

“Well, ask him to TING me a diamond

ring,” I suggested, determined to prove this thing a delusion once and for all.

“Smokey, TING Mummy a diamond ring, Jennifer coaxed her pet, and for the second time the cat slowly blinked.

I looked at my hand — and then I blinked, too! Because there, sparkling on my finger, was the hugest, most glamorous diamond ring I’ve ever seen in my whole life! For a very long moment, I was absolutely speechless. Jennifer gurgled into my ear, “Do you like it, Mummy? Is it like you wanted?”

“It’s beautiful,” I managed to croak. “But this means it’s really true! He is a magic cat! Oh, my holy sainted aunt, what are we going to do?”

I tried to think logically and reasonably, but the fact that this was such an impossible situation kept undermining all my plans, one thing was certain—this would have to be kept quiet, or else . . . I saw, in my mind’s eye, hordes of reporters from newspapers and television, all descending on our house, and I shuddered.

“Oh, Jennifer,” I said, trying to sound casual, “Don’t you think it would be fun if we kept this a secret for a little while—just you and me — and Smokey” I added hastily, glancing apologetically at the cat.

“A secret?” Jennifer repeated dubiously. But she couldn’t resist the thought of having one — what child can?

“Yes, all right,” she decided, eyes sparkling again. “Just us three.”

“And we won’t tell a soul,” I tried to impress upon her.

“Very well. But I can still play with my things what Smokey TINGS for me?”

This was a sticky one. If I refused, she might well turn temperamental, and not co-operate. I thought fast, and

decided, “Yes, you can play with them — but only when you’re by yourself. Make sure that Smokey TINGS them away before the other children see them.” I had a brief mental picture of this happening, and quailed.

“Promise, Jennifer. Everything has to be TING-ed away before Daddy and the other children get home.”

“I promise,” Jennifer said sadly. Then she looked at me, challengingly. “What about your ring? Are you going to keep it?”

“Gracious! I almost forget it!” I eyed the beautiful thing longingly for a moment, then bravely ordered. “O.K. TING it away.”

Well, as anyone can imagine, I was as nervous as a kitten and jumpy as the proverbial cat on hot bricks for the next couple of days, waiting for Jennifer to forget her promise and show off her pet’s accomplishments to the others. After all, she’s only four, and I knew it wasn’t fair to expect too much of her.

But all was quiet until the morning she and Smokey wandered across the road to play in Miss Trevanion’s garden.

This house had only recently changed hands. The lady who owned it previously had been a bright, energetic widow in her early fifties, who loved and understood children and animals. She had given Jennifer a standing invitation to visit her garden whenever she liked, and from the time she could crawl, Jennifer had played nearly as much over there as she had in her own yard.

But Miss Trevanion, the new owner, was a different cup of tea — very meticulous and fussy; she detested children and completely banned them from visiting. Of course, poor Jennifer couldn’t get used to the new state of affairs, and still wandered over periodically.

I was tidying the linen cupboard — a job I detest, and put off for as long as possible — surrounded by a ghastly mess, when the doorbell rang. Miss Trevanion, flushed and obviously annoyed, held a tearful Jennifer firmly with one hand, and with the other clutched Smokey rather savagely by the scruff of the neck.

“Mrs. Wynter,” she began heatedly before I could say a word, “I would be grateful if you would endeavour to exercise some control over your child and your animal”—her eyes flickered scornfully from one to the other—and take appropriate steps to see that they do not trespass in my grounds again.

“I found the child wilfully picking my flowers”—sure enough, Jennifer held a small bunch of wilted violets — “and this cat” — Miss Trevanion’s voice trembled with indignation — “was stalking my goldfish round the pond!”

“I’m sorry if they annoyed you,” I began placatingly. “Jennifer is only four, and finds it difficult to understand that she’s not welcome, because . . . Miss Trevanion halted my explanations with an imperiously upraised hand.

“I want to hear no excuses or apologies,” she said. “Kindly see that they do not offend again.”

She stalked down the path, her back erect and forbidding, and I felt not unlike a chastened child myself.

Jennifer, her small face mutinous, stroked her outraged pet. “Old pig!” she declared vehemently. “We didn’t hurt her old flowers or fish!”

She flung the violets from her hand violently, and retired to the back yard to commiserate with Smokey — or so I thought.

Three days later, during which peace reigned, although I did not feel noticeably relaxed, my husband commented casually at breakfast,

“Hey, I was just talking to the milk-man, and do you know what? That old girl across the road has disappeared!”

I froze, in the act of pouring tea. “She’s what”? I managed to croak.

“Disappeared,” repeated my husband cheerfully, through a mouthful of toast. “Apparently, her sister came to visit her yesterday afternoon — she usually does on Fridays — and found no sign of her. No note, nothing missing in the way of luggage — she’d just vanished! The milk hadn’t been taken in for three days either, or the papers. Anyway, the sister’s so upset she’s called in the police to investigate!”

Amid the flurry of questions and conjectures contributed by the rest of the family, Jennifer’s silence and mine went unnoticed.

As soon as I’d packed the traveller’s off to school and work, I hurried out to confront Jennifer and Smokey with my ghastly suspicions.

They were obviously expecting me and the cat was draped protectively around the little girl’s neck.

“Jennifer,” I began without preamble. “Where is Miss Trevanion?”

“I don’t know,” she answered defiantly. Reflecting that this could well be the truth, I pressed on. “You told Smokey to TING her away didn’t you?”

Jennifer’s lower lip protruded stubbornly. “She’s a mean old fmg, and she’s always nasty to us, so we don’t want her, anyway.”

My suspicions confirmed, I knelt beside the guilty pair.

“Listen to me, Jennifer,” I began after some thought. “I know Miss Trevanion hasn’t been very nice to you, and I don’t like her much myself. But you can’t just make her disappear”

“Why not?” Jennifer demanded.

“Because you can’t,” I said firmly. “The police will find out what happened, and they’ll have to take Smokey away from you, so you can’t tell him to TING people away any more. That’s what will happen — UNLESS you do exactly as I tell you . . .

It was rather contemptible, threatening the child with the loss of her pet — indeed, it was the lowest form of blackmail, but I hope you’ll agree with me that I had no other choice.

Miss Trevanion made an abrupt return to the house across the street — she was found wandering in a very dazed condition around the goldfish pond! She’s spending a week or so in hospital, at the moment, receiving treatment for her attack of amnesia; I believe the theory is that she must have suffered a fall and hit her head.

Anyway, she’s never had such a fuss made of her in her life before, and she’s enjoying it immensely. So things could have turned out much worse.

As for Smokey’s magical powers — well, I think I told you earlier that Jennifer has promised me faithfully never to use them again, for anything. I’m inclined to be optimistic, because the threat of losing Smokey convinced her of the seriousness of the affair.

But just in case, although I don’t feel for a moment that there is any need to worry — I think it’s as well to be prepared for all contingencies.

That’s why I’m writing all this down; I know mothers and daughters, no matter how compatible, do have disagreements occasionally, and I’ll be happier if this is in a safe place where it will be found, if ever I disappear.

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A MOST DESERVING CASE

He lay in the hospital bed trussed up, a victim on a torture rack, mentally cursing the stupidity that had brought him back to “the old home town” seeking some sort of companionship from the past. Unable to move, he was forced to either close his eyes or watch, through the gap in the curtains screening the bed opposite, the loving scenes enacted at the old man’s bedside.

Gawd! Over forty years since he’d even thought of it and here he was unable to escape and forced to remember. The minute he’d sighted the striking red headed woman she’d seemed vaguely familiar, someone he’d seen somewhere before. She was in her early forties, a woman you’d look twice at anywhere. Even after he heard the old man’s name it was fully fifteen minutes before a bell rang in his brain. It had continued to clang ever since.

Always there was one of the family at the bedside, either one of the three dark haired sons or the red headed daughter. She seemed to be the old man’s favourite. He’d cling to her, his twisted face alight. When they weren’t cossetting over their father they were fussing over their mother. Still pretty in a soft gentle way, she must have been twenty years younger than the

old man. Their closeness tortured the watcher, even leaving one another called for embraces that made him wince. Talk of grandchildren too, it was more than flesh and blood could stand! Tears of self-pity squeezed from between his clamped eye lids and trickled down his cheeks.

Doreen’s death had brought him back. They’d been all set to go on a cruise when she’d taken sick and within two weeks she was dead. At first he’d been rushed with sympathy and help, but as time went by he’d been avoided and eased out of the social circle of carefree friends. Odd man out at the barbecues and club parties, unable to return hospitality in a house with no woman. Doreen had been a forelady in the factory where he worked, they’d met during the war when he’d been on leave.

With eyes closed, ears buried in the pillows, the past unbidden, reared up its ugly head. She’d been a mighty flash sort, Doreen, blonde hair all piled up. They’d had their own little clique of friends too, all like themselves, no kids, every mod con. No encumbrances to complicate their leisure time. It was when he’d come home to the empty house with five weeks holiday ahead and saw the cobwebs gluing the plastic fern to the glass topped dining

room table and the wax fruit on the buffet sagging in the heat, he’d felt the need to see someone of his own.

Having thrown a few things in the big blue and silver car (Gawd! he’d have to flog that soon, he couldn’t meet the payments on one pay packet), he’d headed for the old home town and the remnants of his family. He’d look his brother George up. He hadn’t heard of him in years. Some of the girls might still be around; Alice and Jess were dead. Vaguely he recalled the letters about this. There was still young Clem, who’d called on them once with three kids, but Doreen had made it clear that their home was not open to family invasion. Muck everything up, kids.

Well, what had he found? George, an old man living in an ancient house with grandchildren crawling all over him and a fat wife clucking around. After the first handshake and surprise, they couldn’t find much to talk about, except the grandchildren. Clem was a wiry middle-aged farmer with no time to waste at pubs and clubs.

He’d got a cold beer there. Clem’s three kids were men, who’d treated him with the pitying respect they’d give any freak. His sisters had married and gone, but he did learn they all kept in touch, had holidays together.



Nobody had offered to put him up. He wouldn't have stayed if they had. Farm talk and kids, he'd been through with that over forty years ago. To drown the dejected loneliness he'd gone to the pub, got drunk, wobbled out in front of a car and landed here.

Shutting out the figures and hushed voices behind the screen he drifted back forty-five years in memory. He'd been about eighteen, working on "The Station" and gone to the shed at the back of the homestead for something, when Lucy, the kitchen girl had come with a bucket for potatoes. She'd spoken to him in the half gloom, found a rotten potato and laughing, had let him have it. They'd started chasing, laughing, then, somehow had ended up wrestling in a heap of bags. He'd fancied her in a boyish sort of way and had danced with her at woolshed dances. But that day he'd gone berserk, cajoling, fighting, then forcing her into exhausted submission.

Dazed, exhausted, he'd staggered to his feet. Weeping and dishevelled, she'd fled. He'd got to the shed door in time to see Lucy's flying body flash past "Old Jim Carson" who had just reined in his horse. He shivered at the memory of the curt, short question, "What goes on?". His own injured reply, "She hit me with a rotten spud". Turning, he'd fled out the back door of the shed. "Old Carson", he realised now, was in his early thirties then, but to an eighteen year old that was really old.

For all his dodging her, Lucy had cornered him once and said something about, "I'm having a baby. You'll have to marry me". He remembered how terrified he'd been that Mum would find out and deal with him. For a while he'd worried, but it was all so unreal, only married people got babies, not him at eighteen. He knew now the Boss would have kept her on and for a few bob a week and a lifetime of servitude she'd have a home. She'd have had no other home because all



the domestic staff came from city orphanages, he'd known that.

It must have been a few months after the shed episode that the "Old Boss" died and he, Snowy Blake and Chas. Malloy were in the private cemetery digging the grave with Jim Carson lending a neighbourly hand. Strange, he thought, how he could remember names and scenes yet couldn't recall what Lucy's face was like, just little and dark. There'd been a bit of light hearted horse-play among the weathered head stones. He recalled the heat and the granite-hard earth and "old" Jim's tolerance of their young rot. Leaning on a headstone, awaiting his turn to go down the hole and use the pick, he'd seen the girl approaching, basket in one hand, billy-can in the other. Their afternoon tea, welcome it was too, boys get hungry.

She'd halted a few yards from the open grave, under a tree. He'd tried not to look at her but even from the corner of his eye he could see she was getting plump, full sort of, up the top. They sat down, "old" Jim on a log. Lucy poured the tea and offered food around then returned to the shade to wait. He'd sat with his back to the girl but "old" Jim Carson had looked across the open grave facing both of them. Suddenly, quietly, he'd remarked, "Tom, you ought to get married". He remembered almost choking and his surly reply, "Get married yourself".

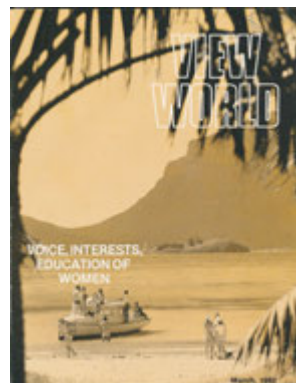
"Old" Jim had taken the pipe slowly from his mouth, studied it, then looking straight at Lucy, said, "I just might do that. Would you marry me, Lucy?" He felt again the awful stillness of that moment, the only sound the rustling of the leaves, the movement of a bird. Everyone seemed struck dumb. Involuntarily he'd turned to look at the girl, head hung, hands clenched, then the awful stillness broken by her clear voice, "Yes, thank you, Mr. Carson".

He'd got a learner's pen with a shearing team and gone out west and when war broke out he'd enlisted. Life had been full and busy in the sheds, then the war, He'd never thought of Lucy or Carson again. He'd been in the army when dad died. He'd sent mum a few quid on and off until he met Doreen. When mum died he and Doreen had been on a holiday on the Gold Coast and didn't know until it was all over. They'd always sent her Christmas and Mother's Day presents. Doreen had seen to that, nice perfume and stuff.

Curse the idea that had ever brought him back to the "old home town", to lay here helpless, alone and be forced to watch his mother's double, his daughter, loving and doting on "old" Jim Carson. No, he didn't deserve this, he'd be damned if he did!

The Sister's voice roused him. "Meet Mr. Blunt, visiting for the R.S.L." Turning to Mr. Blunt she proffered the information, "Mr. Ryan is a returned serviceman, all alone, a most deserving case."

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Logos 1960's-1970's



Logos 1980's



