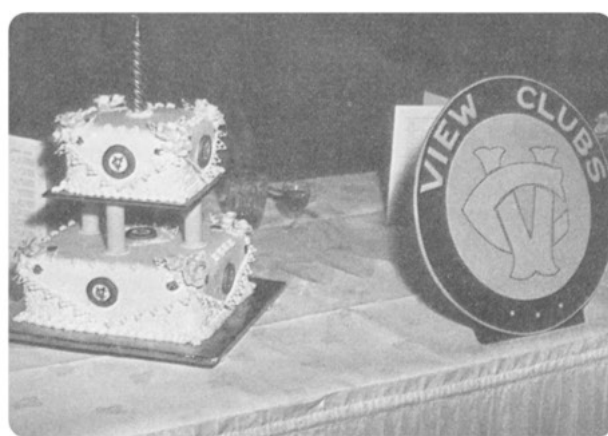


A Literary View



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".

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.

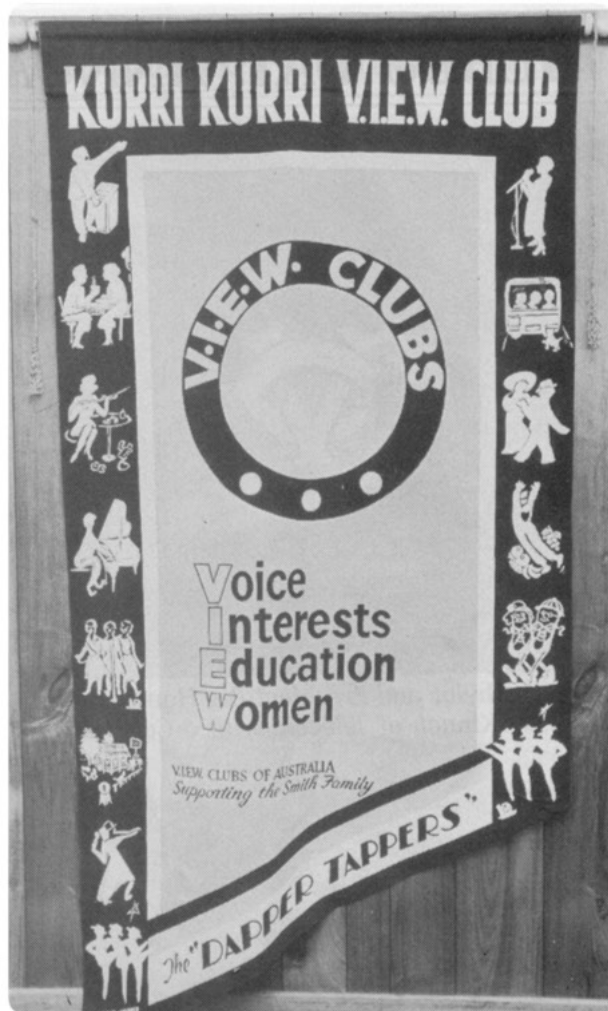
Over the next three decades the winning stories were published in the VIEW magazine. At times the magazine also published a range of other members' contributions. The authors chose familiar topics reflecting the world around them and the content of the stories cover a microcosm of the times.

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.

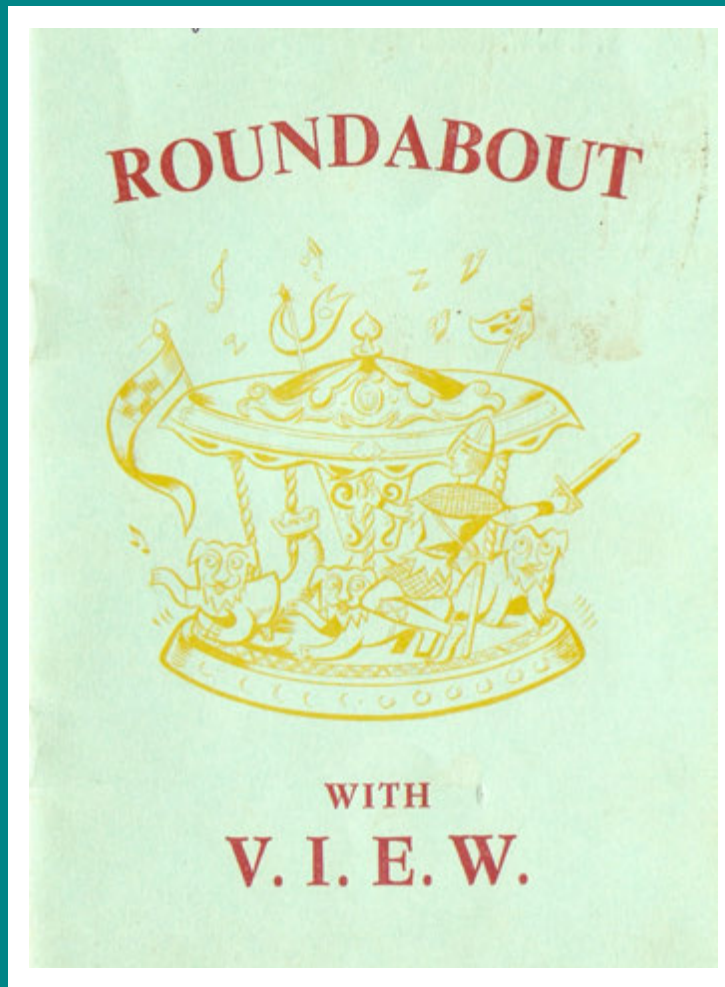
There are stories of love, adversity, hardship, inequality and most commonly friendship; friendship burgeoning through adversity. Many stories reflect the underlying values of these VIEW women and reflect the latent literary talent which merely needed an outlet to flourish.

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 fourth 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 VIEW WORLD 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

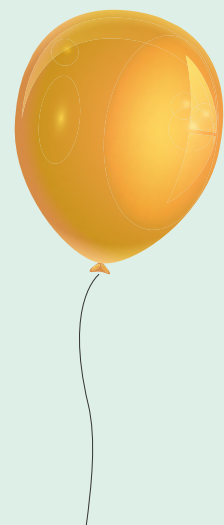
In September 1991 the Spring Edition became Women's View. It was larger in size and contained 40 pages.

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.

T H E
Birthday

There was a big decision to be made on this birthday. Should I let her go or ask her to wait a little longer?



**Mrs. A. Whitfield,
Roselands VIEW Club
3rd Prize Literary Competition**

Of course with her birthday coming closer and closer, we had discussed the situation. I, however, had never given a definite answer to her.

To my daughter gazing at me now with steadfast blue eyes this birthday was to be the turning point of her young life. She considered herself more or less grown up; but I, so much older and her mother, feared for her safety.

One did not, in my book, hurry one's loved child or children out into the world too soon. Time enough when, with far more maturity than my daughter had right now and with (so we all think) greener pastures beckoning—one realises the old saying so oddly very true: "Our children are only lent to us".

Then we must try to let them go graciously and smile to hide our maternal fears.

As we faced one another across the gay, red kitchen table, with its newly painted white legs, a kooka landed on the clothes hoist—gave a burst of throaty laughter and was away into the blue—his laughter lingering briefly. To my dying day I'll never hear a kookaburra laugh without seeing sun filtering through white curtains. That moment of time is etched on my mind. I'd read about detail being observed during tension and half believed it. I know now that it is true. The sun filtered through the leaves which patterned the kitchen curtains. How pretty it looked I'd never noticed the effect before.

My daughter spoke.

"Why can't I go Mum?"

How can one explain with wisdom and clarity to a young and lovely creature one's fears and dreads—when life for her holds no fear—yet? It's as always—youth against age. There's no answer is there? The eternal conflict that has always existed and will always exist between one generation and another.

From behind her back she slowly produced her smallest suitcase. She placed it gently on the table between us. With racing heart I made myself show no undue surprise. She'll never know how fiercely I fought for the right thing to say—the right thing to do.

Her mind is made up I thought—she is determined—even as I am—she takes after me.

I thought she could have just gone out the gate—but she had not—she'd consulted me, shown me respect and now stood there awaiting my final word.

Wisdom came to me—just as quickly as the flash of that kooka's flight a few moments ago—or was it a lifetime ago? I knew what I had to do if I loved her—even though I did not want to do it. I, as her mother had to be the one to teach her to stand on her own two feet—I had to let her go.

The question hit me again—if I loved her? I had but one answer—I adored her.

So without any more ado—but with an inward sigh—I seated myself at the little red kitchen table, now bathed in morning sunlight and wrote the brief but all important note my daughter had been waiting for.

She took it, her blue eyes shining, and picked up her suitcase. Then, with my arms around her shoulders, I walked to the front gate where I would wait until she returned.

I watched my five year old go her first message alone to the shop around the corner!!!



CONQUEST

CONQUEST BY DORIS NOBLE, PARKES CLUB.
HIGHLY COMMENDED, SHORT STORY COMPETITION.



GREG TOSSED HIS OVERNIGHT BAG ONTO THE FRONT SEAT OF THE CAR AND TURNED TO HIS WIFE.

"Are you sure you'll be alright? I feel badly about leaving you here alone. Sure the other wives stay by themselves when their husbands are away, but that's different."

Megan drew herself to her full height and thrust out her determined little chin. "We've been through all this before, please don't let's start over again. It's important for you to attend the wool sales and someone has to stay here to keep an eye on the place.

"Although I don't know much about farming, I do know sheep can't live long in this weather without water, especially when they're due to lamb next week. I can at least make sure the pumps keep working, you know how temperamental the main connection gets at times."

"Oh honey, you know what I mean," Greg said patiently.

"The other wives are used to the bush, but you've only been here a short while and get so jittery at times. I'm proud of you adapting yourself to country life the way you have after your upbringing in the city, but staying alone for so long is expecting too much." Greg's voice was edged with worry.

"For goodness sake, it's only for one night," Megan replied. "Now get going or you'll miss the plane I'm sure nothing so drastic will happen that I can't cope. Besides, I need this opportunity to prove to myself, and the rest of the community, that I can take care of my responsibility as well as the others.

"I've always felt that I'm a source of amusement with my lack of knowledge on farming matters and this will be my big chance to prove I can fend for myself. So please stop trying to deprive me of my rights." Megan sounded far braver than she felt. She alone knew the huge sacrifice she was making.

When they had married earlier in the year, Greg had taken a two-year lease on a remote property in the north-west. It was rugged country, but its tremendous grazing potential had attracted Greg who hoped, before the lease expired, to make enough money in the sheep industry for a substantial down-payment on a farm of his own.

It was a lonely life, the nearest neighbour being eight kilometres away. The days were long and demanding but Megan, eager to learn, worked at her husband's

side, determined to help him succeed.

At night she would fall into bed, her whole body aching from the uncustomary exercise. She longed for deep, restful sleep but instead would lie awake for hours listening to the many fearful night noises, wondering if ever she would become used to them and listen without fear.

For weeks she had been overwhelmed with excitement at the prospect of a trip to the city with Greg for the annual wool sales. Unfortunately, on the eve of their departure, Tom, the farm-hand, became ill and was rushed to hospital for an appendix operation. This meant the trip would have to be cancelled, or she stay behind to manage the property.

Greg, of course, was ready to forgo his trip, but Megan, knowing how important it was to him, quickly dispersed any such notion. It had been a great strain, but somehow she was able to conceal any sign of her own anxiety and disappointment. She dreaded the long night ahead but was fiercely proud of her courage and her ability to hide her true emotions from Greg.

She was glad when he had gone. As she made her way back to the house, tears of disappointment coursed down her cheeks unchecked. Flopping down on the verandah beside Jed, the faithful old sheep dog, she cried until her tears were spent, while he licked her hands in comfort and lay his shaggy head on her lap.

Although it was still early, the heat was oppressive, adding to her despondency. She hoped the sudden humidity wasn't a sign of a brewing storm. Down by the creek the cicadas shrilled their high-pitched buzz and the monotonous cawing of crows could be heard in the distance.

"Come on Jed, let's go and check the pump and you can see how your friends the ewes are progressing." She patted his broad back.

Jed, eager to be on the move, bounded ahead and her spirits rose a little as they followed the narrow track through the scrub and saplings.

As they reached the crest of the rise, Megan noticed a flock of crows feasting on something in the long grass. Jed, running ahead, sent them scattering into the nearest tree-top where they perched peering down curiously, reluctant to leave their quarry.

Catching up with the dog, Megan gasped at the sight before her.

On the ground lay a ewe, her new born lamb nearby struggling to gain control over its weak legs. The ewe, moaning softly, was trying in vain to clamber to her feet obviously sensing her young was in danger.

Blood trickled freely from her two empty eye sockets and her milk-swollen udder was a mangled pulp.

Greg had told Megan of the evil crows' tactics, but now, face to face with it, her stomach lurched in horror.

"You poor, poor thing. Whatever am I to do with you?"

Picking up the still wet, sticky lamb, she placed it at the mother's nose. Tears filled her eyes as she watched the pathetic creature's joy at having her young close to her.

Megan knelt beside the sheep and rubbed the curved, soft nose. "I can't let you go through this agony. You'll die anyway, once the poison from those revolting beaks gets into the blood stream."

Her brow was taut with anguish as she continued thinking aloud. "How am I to kill you? They usually cut sheep's throats, but I couldn't do that. Your lamb hasn't been pecked, but if he doesn't get milk soon, he'll die also."

Rising unsteadily she commanded the dog: "Here Jed, sit down and keep the crows away."

Jed, always wanting to please, lay down in a nearby shade, head on paws, eyes bright and eager. He had been around long enough to know what was expected of him and Megan wished he could speak and tell her what to do.

The gun! That would be quick and painless.

Running back through the bush towards

home, she fought off waves of nausea. Hurrying into the house she got the gun and thrust a handful of bullets into her pocket. She had never fired a gun before, but had watched Greg often enough.

Retracing her steps, she tried not to think about what she had to do. The picture in her mind of the ewe, though in great agony, trying to protect her young brought a lump to her throat and tears smarted her eyes.

As she approached the animal, she spoke softly so as not to startle it. "Poor old girl, you loved your lamb so much, you would have been a wonderful mother. I'll take care of him for you."

Putting the barrel of the gun to the sheep's head, she pulled the trigger. A sharp crack shattered the silence and the woolly body lay still.

Megan's legs felt weak, her hands were clammy and shaking as she picked up the struggling lamb and trudged homeward.

Luckily Greg had bought a bottle and a teat on their last trip to town and had milked the cow that morning. Megan had laughed at the idea of bottle feeding an animal, but he had explained that ewes sometimes died giving birth and the lambs needed to be bottle fed for some time.

The lamb sucked readily enough and Megan smiled as she placed it in a box of straw. "You know Jed, I believe I feel the motherly instinct coming on." Her heart felt light as she watched the little animal settle down for a contented nap.

Megan kept fairly busy for the remainder of the day, but as the shadows grew longer

she felt more and more uneasy. Night was fast approaching and she thought with distaste of the long, weird hours ahead of her.

At dusk she wandered into the garden and turned on the hose; the fine spray made a pleasant patter on the broad leaves of the pumpkin vine. She wondered about Greg and pictured him chatting with the wool buyers and other farmers over pre-dinner drinks.

Deep in thought, it was with a shock that she suddenly became aware of an odd feeling which sent a chill up and down her spine.

Turning slowly she came face to face with a gnarled, shabby-looking man. His thin lips, drawn back in a sneer, revealed broken, yellow teeth. His sneaky, rat-like eyes slid over Megan's body and she felt the colour rush from her face and her lips go dry.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Her voice sounded strange to her own ears.

"My name doesn't matter and I want food among other things." The man smirked as he reached out a dirty, claw-like hand to touch her.

"Jed!" it was little more than a croak but Jed, curled up still guarding the lamb, heard it and bounded to Megan's side, his bristles raised, teeth bared. The man stepped back, muttering and cursing to himself.

Megan, gaining a little more courage, touched Jed on the head. "Guard him boy!" she commanded, then made a dash for the house. Her trembling hands loaded the gun and she reappeared, aiming it at the man's chest.

"Yes, I'm alone now. But within a few minutes my husband will be back with our farm-hand and my brother-in-law.

It's only fair to warn you that my husband's brother is a police officer and he's having his annual leave with us. He has a great dislike for vagrants and you will be in serious trouble if he finds you here."

"Okay, okay lady, I'm going." He turned and shuffled off down the road, Jed close behind growling his deep-throated growl. Megan watched, the gun still clutched in her hands, until both figures had disappeared into the darkness, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

When Jed arrived back some time later panting hard his long pink tongue hanging loosely from his mouth, Megan threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Oh Jed, whatever would I do without you? I

can't get over that chap believing my story about a policeman being here. Guess he must have tangled with the law some time or other."

Jed ate handsomely that night and Megan forced herself to nibble a dry biscuit. Both dog and lamb were brought into the house and Jed watched curiously as Megan closed and locked the doors and windows. He had never been allowed in the house before and couldn't understand his mistress's obvious insecurity. He was baffled by the unfamiliar atmosphere and was dubious about his lack of freedom.

Megan lay on the couch clutching the loaded gun and beckoned the dog to lie on the mat beside her. Turning on the radio, she listened listlessly to a rock and roll number.

The announcer's voice out in on her thoughts ... "We interrupt this programme to bring you a news flash. A man has escaped from Seaforth Jail and is believed to be hiding in rough country somewhere in the north-west. The man is said to be dangerous and all residents in that area are wa....."

Megan didn't listen to anymore. She turned off the radio and clutched the gun harder. The man who had terrified her earlier must have been the escapee! No wonder he had made such a hurried departure at the suggestion of a policeman. He probably wouldn't come back, but what if he did? Would Jed be more value outside the house? No, he might go off into the bush chasing rabbits and she would be left alone.

Questions and answers whirled in her head and she felt sick and dizzy. It was hot and sticky with the doors and windows closed and the night was still young. A fox howled in the distance and Jed moved uneasily. An owl hooted from somewhere near the barn and Megan shivered as the high-pitched eerie screech of the bush curlew reached her ears.

Suddenly there was a rustle in the grapevine near the window and a bumping and banging on the roof. She had heard it often in the dead of night and knew it was possums playing in the moonlight. Perhaps this time it wasn't the playful little creatures but some horrible animal-like monster, ready to tear her limb from limb!

Her hands felt clammy and cramped on the stock of the gun and her heart banged painfully against her ribs. She looked down at Jed. He hadn't moved but lay peacefully dozing, his head resting on her shoe. She knew he would be alert at the smell of danger so she tried to pull herself together and think more rationally.

The possums pranced about for what seemed like hours and she was grateful when, at last, she heard them slide down the verandah support and scurry off into the scrub in search of food.

Megan was beginning to relax a little when the lamb broke the stillness with a plaintive baa. Her body jolted so violently the gun crashed to the floor, hitting the sleeping dog on the head. He sprang up, yelping with pain and fright and adding to her confusion. It was some time before she controlled herself enough to prepare the hungry lamb's bottle.

Somehow she managed to suffer the rest of the long night and, as the horizon began to turn pink, she drifted into an exhausted sleep. The sun was high when she woke, bathed in a lather of perspiration. Her eyes felt heavy and her head ached.

Jed watched from the door-way, head cocked to one side and his tail wagging.

"Yes boy, it's time we got to work!" she said tiredly, dragging her weary body from its cramped position. She couldn't face breakfast; even the milk she warmed for the lamb nauseated her.

"At least you are a healthy little one," she sighed as the lamb gulped hungrily the milk she offered it. "We will have to get the cows in tonight Jed or our little friend here will starve."

The mention of cows brought a sparkle of devilment to the dog's eyes; he delighted in tormenting the unfortunate creatures each afternoon as they were brought to the yards for milking. It was comical to watch his antics as he snapped at their heels. Never did he bite, but the cows would become annoyed at the constant yapping and would turn on him sending him scampering to safety.

"Come on boy. We'd better attend to the fowls first, then we'll take a walk down to the water pump."

They hadn't reached the fowl house when, passing a clump of saffron thistle, she heard a rustling at her feet. Looking down she froze in horror. A huge brown snake was poised ready to strike. She was rooted to the spot, unable to utter a word or move a muscle.

A whirr of fur sped past her and she was aware of Jed throwing himself at the reptile, clenching it between his teeth and shaking it vigorously. Sometime during the confusion Jed gave a Sharp yelp and she realised with dismay that he had been bitten. When at last the battle was over, the dog dropped the withering snake to the ground and, whimpering, limped to a nearby shade.

Megan ran to his side and frantically searched through his thick hair for puncture marks. She prayed she would find them on a limb so she could cut the circulation to the heart.

Minutes passed before she finally found two distinct jets of blood on a front paw. Tying a hankie above the marks, she picked up the heavy body and ran to the house.

She lay the panting dog on the verandah. Already his eyes were glazed and froth bubbled from his open mouth. Gritting her teeth she made a deep gash between the puncture marks and wiped the gushing blood with disinfectant.

Jed whimpered slightly but managed a feeble wag of his tail to show there was no ill feeling. She brought water and sponged his parched mouth and tongue, but slowly the dog slipped into unconsciousness leaving Megan alone to sob out her grief and despair.

For hours she sat at the dog's side watching the ever fluctuating respiration. By mid-afternoon she noticed the heaving chest had settled into a regular, relaxed rise and fall. Could there be a glimmer of hope?

As if in answer to her question, the dog moved slightly and whimpered softly. He opened his eyes, they were dull and listless, but his dry pink tongue licked her hand and he lifted his head long enough to lap some cool water:

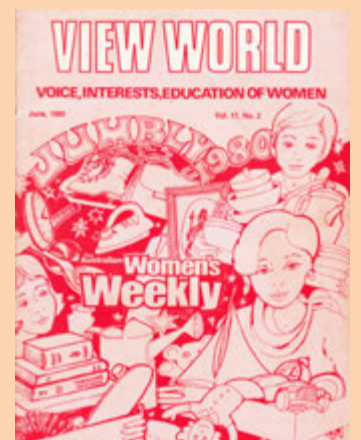
Megan felt like bursting with joy at the miraculous recovery. She was so elated she hardly heard Greg pull up in a cloud of dust and run up the path behind her. Grabbing her shoulders, he spun her around, his face lined with worry.

"Thank goodness you are alright. I nearly went crazy when I heard the news this morning that a prisoner was loose in this area."

Megan snuggled into his arms and let the fears of the past 36 hours drift away.

"Everything is alright now you're home. Jed was bitten by a snake but is getting over it. Oh Greg, it was terrible. He was bitten trying to save me. If he'd died I think I would have died too.

"I'll tell you everything later but right now I feel too tired. Let's make a cup of tea and you can tell me about your trip."



CRASH AND RECOVERY

June Wyn
Mudgee Day Club.

George was late! Consequently he was upset. Never in the 12 years he had been in the business had George been late. He had run in a most undignified manner to catch the ferry, clutching his hat in one hand and briefcase in the other. Breathlessly he staggered to his usual seat only to find it occupied by a long-haired youth who grinned at him and went on chewing gum.

Eventually finding a seat between two mini-skirted teenagers and abandoning any hope of reading his paper, George allowed his mind to review the events that had shattered his world from 6.30pm the previous night.

He had arrived home at 6.29pm precisely, the exact time he had arrived home every working day since entering his father's accountancy business at the age of 20. His father's death a year ago had not altered the even tenor of his life with his mother.

Until last night it had never occurred to him that it could, or would, alter. His mother would continue with her guild work and flower arranging and he would continue with his beloved garden and horticultural society. Life was pleasant, smooth and comfortable, as his father had always decreed it should be

The house in darkness had been his first surprise. When he had let himself in there had been no welcoming odour of food, no warmth, no sign of Mother. Numb with shock — such a thing had never before happened — his mind was beginning to conjure up accidents and police when the front door opened and shut with a resounding slam. Nobody had ever slammed doors in their home!

That was when George's world began to crash around him.

It was his mother. He knew her voice, but not her physical appearance. He shuddered at the memory of the leopard skin

coat that had dazzled him first. He stood dumbfounded. Slowly the tinted hair, red finger-nails and ridiculous shoes had penetrated his shocked mind. Mother, who had always been the refined 'mother image', neat and unobtrusive in her navy and white, brown and beige! Come to think of it George had to admit she did look 10 years younger and quite glamorous!

The initial shock over, he had remonstrated, gently at first. But as she had seemed deaf to his reasoning and only interested in admiring herself in the wall mirror, he had actually raised his voice. At this Mother had swung around with hands on hips and, as she put it, told him a "thing or two".

All these years he had never guessed what lay behind her gentle manner, her calm reserve. She had almost shouted at him. "Thirty one ears of suiting someone else!

As good and kind as your father was everything — even me, 20 years his junior — had to be moulded to his pattern." George had been amazed to hear himself called an "echo of his father".

Mother was going on a Central Safari and would live in a unit when she returned. She intended to go anywhere it suited her. He, George, could do as he liked with the house but if he took her advice he'd "get out and get himself a wife and her some grandchildren".

George was deeply shocked. Never had he envisaged such a thing. When he had mentioned their permanent holiday bookings — two weeks in a guest house on the mountains and two weeks at their usual guest house at the seaside — she had laughed outright, quite loudly, and told him to get out and see a bit of life, as she intended to.

He knew they had shaped their lives to his father's wishes, gently, but overbearingly insisted upon. Even when George's future was being considered, Father had decided he should enter the accountancy firm and later take over its management. At George's tentative suggestion that he would enjoy a horticultural course, Father had patted him on the shoulder and said he could have that for a hobby. So George's garden had been his love and his escape and his life was peacefully settled — until 6.30pm the previous night.

George pondered — what now?

He was glad and eager to reach the safe haven of the office where he knew nothing would be changed. Gratefully he sank into the chair behind his desk and proceeded to work on the papers that the very reliable Miss Mulholland had already prepared for him.

Lucky to have her, George mused. She had come to the firm the same day he had started — she must have been about 15 then. Several times lately he had paused at her desk to admire the blooms she sometimes brought in. Once or twice there had been one on his desk and they had had a most enjoyable chat, until business recalled him to his duty. A surprisingly intelligent woman about horticulture, she wore sensible clothes too, like his mother. Correction! Like his mother used to wear!

There was a gentle tap on the door and he called "come in" without raising his head.

"Good morning Miss Mulholland," he murmured. A hand slid an envelope towards him. A hand with tapering scarlet fingernails! His head jerked up.

George's office world joined his home life with a crash!

Before him stood Miss Mulholland — it had to be Miss Mulholland! George's mind boggled. He rose to his feet and stared. Gone were the sensible glasses, her eyes large and mysterious behind red winged frames. Gone, the tightly drawn hair in a bun, it hung loose in waves to her shoulders. And she actually wore a red dress!

He reasoned he must be "unhinged", the result of Mother's behaviour last night.

Too much nervous upset.

Her cool voice penetrated his muddled brain. "My resignation, Mr George." The staff still called him Mr George as they had done to distinguish between father and son when his father was alive.

George sank back into the chair, what was happening to him? Shaken and still unable to believe his eyes and ears, he managed to ask, "Why?"

Miss Mulholland, now a beautiful stranger to him, related her reason. "As you know, my parents are both dead." Yes, George remembered sending a wreath and murmuring a few words of sympathy and feeling thankful when she had returned to work.

"My duty is finished," Miss Mulholland continued. "I intend to start a new life after I've had a holiday, a trip through the Centre."

George couldn't believe it was happening. First his mother and now this new Miss

Mulholland! He staggered to his feet and somehow found himself facing her. The perfume of roses almost over-powered him. He feared the fluttering around his heart was due to the emotional upset last

night, but he knew it wasn't.

"You can't do it," he managed to say. "What about when you get back?"

"Indeed, I can and am," she replied. "I've never had a bit of fun nor been anywhere."

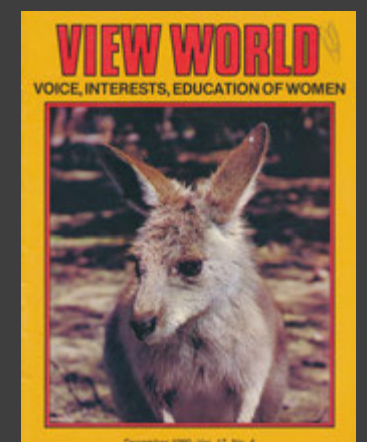
A tear spilled from under her glasses and somehow George found himself removing them and dabbing her eyes. Then it was so natural to hold her closer, the perfume of roses became quite heady.

Her muffled voice came from the vicinity of his chest. "The house is sold and when I return from my holiday I intend to grow flowers on the block I've bought"

The chair was close and more comfortable than standing. George found it all came so easily and he wished he'd thought of kissing her before. A most satisfying experience. His world was upside down but as they planned the flower growing venture, it became easier and easier to say "we".

Slowly everything in his world righted itself and George knew that Mother would get her grandchildren.

They had to return to a work-a-day world. George would ring Mother and tell her he was bringing Miss Mulholland, his fiancée, home for dinner. Unbeknown to George, Mother would ring Miss Mulholland and cancel their luncheon appointment. No need for their regular lunches now!





VIEW World September 1981

Edith Budgen
Castle Hill VIEW Club

A PLACE FOR THE SUN

The golden rays of dawn spread over the snow-capped mountains surrounding the ancient town of Cuzco high in the Andes Mountains of Peru. Footsteps of poncho-clad figures sounded through the narrow cobbled streets as the activities of the day began.

Early morning light beamed through the high window of a house and fell across the simple bed of Jaro. The lad stirred, his folded eyelids slowly opening. With slender brown fingers he gently patted his straight black hair. A true descendant of his American Indian ancestor, the Inca Roca, he was short of stature and golden skinned.

Jaro recalled his father telling him how at some remote period, the first Inca and his brothers had crossed from Siberia into Alaska and later traversed the eastern cordillera of the Andes Mountains of South America.

Family legend told how they carried a wedge of gold, symbol of a sun ray. The Sun God had instructed them to establish an empire wherever the wedge of gold sunk into the earth. The day came when they reached the navel of the earth, the Cuzco itself, and laying the wedge of gold on the earth, at once it sunk out of sight. So the empire of the Incas was founded there and the Lord High Inca was considered to be the sun's earthly representative.

Palaces, temples and fortresses were built by the Incas in and around Cuzco and dedicated to the Sun God. The huge blocks of stone used were shaped and polished by stone balls repeatedly dropped on them. The massive stones were balanced so accurately that when frequent earthquakes shook the walls they jumped up and fell back into place without collapsing.

Jaro listened with wonder as his father told him of temples and palaces hung with richly embroidered cloth and gold ornaments. One of the marvels of Cuzco was a garden of maize plants, the leaves of which were of rippling silver and the cobs of pure gold.

The sun was now streaming through Jaro's window as his thoughts drifted to his friend Saya whose mother's ancestors had married into noble Spanish families in the 16th century. Saya now lived in Cuzco in a grand house built by the Spaniards on the foundations of a previous Inca building. A vision of the highly polished stones of the foundations laid so many, many years ago floated before Jaro's eyes.

His mother's shrill voice disturbed his thoughts. "Jaro. Jaro. ...get up at once and commence your work for today."

As he dressed he heard the chickens clucking on the flat roof above his room, waiting anxiously for him to scatter the grain for their morning feed. He had a busy day ahead. His father had sold a llama and he was to go to the highland plateau above

Cuzco and bring the animal down.

Jaro was sorry that Gu Gu had been sold as, of all the animals in their herd, she was his favourite. Until now she had been hired out to a woman who lived in an adobe house in a village above the town. She wove cloth and made ponchos for a street stall in Cuzco and Gu Gu was used to transport the goods to the stall.

Gu Gu's life would end but she would provide food; her hide would make the flat shoes worn by the people of Cuzco; her bones would be used to make the handles of the farm implements. Jaro knew the llamas had always been carefully watched over as they provided wool which was spun by the women and girls and woven into garments. Of even greater importance was the fine excellent wool that came from the alpaca. They grazed in higher altitudes up in the snow regions and Jaro hoped one day to own a herd of these valuable animals.

Gathering the maize cake his mother had prepared for his lunch and taking a staff to assist him in the steep climb, he set off on the journey to get Gu Gu. As he reached the outskirts of the town the church bell rang and he knew that Father Guipiro would be waiting at the door to welcome people attending Mass.

Jaro loved the church, built by Incas under the direction of the Jesuit priests who came with the Spanish conquerors. The fine carved pulpit was world famous and notable wood carvers came to view it. The fabulous silver altar in the side chapel was dearly prized, too, as it was the work of master silversmiths of that day.

He remembered with delight the day he had helped his father clean the silver altar. How important it made him to see an armed guard standing watch at the open iron-grilled gate as they polished the valuable vessels on the altar.

As Jaro climbed he thought of Father Guipiro who had once taken him to visit the city of Lima. He recalled leaving Cuzco when the stars were still twinkling in the black velvety sky. Then the flight over the snow-capped mountains which were turned pink by the delicate rays of the sun as dawn came.

Yes, he would always remember the trip to Lima and still loved to hear tales of the golden treasure said to be cast into the Pacific Ocean not far from that city. He hoped that, one day, when he became the wealthy owner of a large alpaca herd, he would have a house there. Then he would be able to entertain his friend Saya in the style of the Spanish nobles who once had lived in the grand houses in the city.

While Father Guipiro was busy having new vestments made, Jaro went to the Plaza de Armas where he watched the gaily dressed guards at the palace. Crossing to the cathedral, he viewed the mummified remains of Pizarro, the Spanish founder of Lima.

But now, reaching the plateau above Cuzco, he selected Gu Gu from the herd, fastened a rope around her neck and proceeded to lead her down over the rocky path into the town.

The day wore on and finally the sun sank behind the snow-capped mountains. As the moon cast its pale light over the town, weary workers returned from the fields.

As his tired body relaxed, Jaro thought of Myna, his childhood sweetheart. A vision of her beautiful face framed by two black plaits floated before his eyes. Her tiny gold earrings glittered in the sunlight, her braided skirts and gay shawl seemed so near to him. Tomorrow he would see her.

The day was cloudless as the train waited in Cuzco station to convey its passengers to Machu Picchu, the famous lost city of the Inca Empire. Myna's father was a guide and he spoke the language of some of the strangely dressed people who had come to see this world-famous site. They came from North America, Europe and a huge island across the Pacific Ocean called Australia. Jaro and Myna felt very strange among these excited people and kept close to each other.

Soon everyone was seated and the train commenced the zig-zag journey over the mountains and down into the Valley of the Inca. It moved slowly up the valley beside high mountain peaks receding into the distance. Snow on the peaks, warmed by the sun now high in the azure blue sky, swiftly melted and, flowing downwards, joined the turbulent valley river. The river, the headwater of the mighty Amazon nearly 1,000 kilometres away, spreads out to flow through the steamy Amazonian jungles and forests of Ecuador.

Myna's father told the passengers of the wonderful organisation and system of communication that existed among the Incas when their empire was at its peak in the 14th century. They constructed roads over the mountains, built fortresses and cities among which the Sun Temple and the Palaces at Cuzco were famous.

The fortress city of Machu Picchu was concealed by thick jungle for many years before it was discovered by Dr Bingham in 1911. Extensive excavations were carried out and the site became known world-wide as the Lost City of the Incas.

The city had been built on a ridge in an

inaccessible part of the Andes and was an important link in the communications system. Runners carried goods and messages between villages, cities and fortresses by relay.

Reports were made to the Sapa Inca who was the focal centre of the empire. He was, in fact, the State and the magical Sun Lord who was responsible for the growth and the fertility of his land. He received reports on the progress of the crops, llama herds, houses, marriages and the general welfare of the empire.

The information was recorded on a group of knotted cords called a quipu. The colour of the cord indicated the subject of the record and the position of the knots counted as numbers in a decimal system. The records on each quipu were checked by the Sapa Incas personal accountant.

Myna's heart swelled with pride as she listened to her father telling all these things to the people of so many faraway lands.

Buses were waiting at Machu Picchu station to convey the passengers up the mountains over the perilous, rough, winding road to the side of the Lost City.

Myna held Jaro's hand firmly as they stood at the entrance of the city and looked out on a breath-taking view of deep excavations with a back-drop of higher mountains peaks shrouded in mist.

Small two-storey houses with steep-sloping roofs covered with heavy thatching stood on ridges cut into the mountain sides at various levels. The high polish of the stones in other remaining buildings indicated palaces where important personages once lived.

Terraces edged by stone walls were constructed right down any accessible mountain slope. Agriculture was highly organised in this ancient city, its people practising strict soil conservation. Indeed, the soil was often carried by the people in baskets to fill the terraces. The crops were irrigated by mountain streams diverted into a system of stone-lined ditches. Many of these agricultural terraces still exist in other parts of Peru.

The sun shone brightly and the light mountain air made breathing difficult as the visitors climbed the steep stone steps at the foot of the sacred mountain peak of Huaynapicchu. The rock, crowned by the Sun Throne erected to the Sun God, ensured that the sun would never cease to shine on the fortress city of Machu Picchu.

Nearby stood the temple of the Sun Maidens. These maidens, selected from the tribe for their noble birth and their

beauty, were dedicated to the services of the sun and his earthly representative, the Lord Sapa Inca. They dressed in white and spent their days weaving beautiful textiles from the wools of the llama and alpaca. After the fall of the Inca empire, the Lord Incas and the Royal Maidens spent their last days in Machu Picchu.

Time came for the visitors to join the buses and travel back down the mountain to the station where the train waited to take them back to Cuzco.

The golden sun, now sinking, shed magical rays across the throne of the Sun God. Jaro and Myna stood at the base of the throne in wrapt contemplation.

On the throne sat the Lord High Inca, his hands outstretched to greet them. His embroidered tunic, golden girdle, high headdress, sandals, knee and ankle bands were fringed with gold which glittered in the sun.

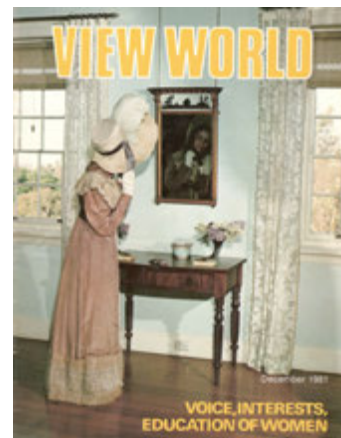
Around the throne were the Royal Maidens of the Sun, dressed in white, their hands busy spinning. As the whirl of their hand spindles ceased, the sun dipped behind the deep blue mountains and the vision faded.

In a nearby village Myna's aunt was preparing the evening meal. Jaro loved to eat the white, marble-sized potatoes and the bean and llama stew she made. He also enjoyed the laughter as the family told their days adventures and he listened with delight to the plaintive wail of the pipe flute played by Myna's uncle.

Tomorrow the sun would rise and once more flood the Sun Throne with its life-giving rays. The eagles would soar from mountain peak to mountain peak. The streams would continue to bubble over the stony beds in the deep valleys. Jaro and Myna would be back in Cuzco with their memories.

Someday Jaro hoped to tell his own children tales of the once-powerful Inca empire, as his father had told him. But now, he could hear his mothers voice "Jaro, Jaro," she called. "The hens are waiting for their grain."

Rising, donning a bright red poncho, leather sandals and a straw hat, he set about his work as true Peruvian sons have done for centuries before him.



According to Agge

Winifred Potts. Mudgee Day VIEW Club.

Tall, thin, self-effacing he crept into the small public hall, already occupied by about forty people, mostly women, a sprinkling of men. He sank into the closest vacant chair or half a chair, the woman in the floral nylon had overflowed her plastic, stackable chair.

Mentally cringing he wondered why he had come. He knew why he had come, the doctor had said, "You must get among people, mix, make human contacts". So here he was, Clarrie Albright, whose only human contact for years had been an invalid mother, his work as a packer where he was merely a number on a pay packet. Fellow workers couldn't find much in him to interest them, always he'd had to hurry home to mother and the latest doctor's report. Retirement! At least at work he'd seen people.

A voice at the end of the hall boomed forth, "it's our Annual General Meeting, members please pay your dues. All new members welcome, come up to the treasurer who'll fix you up." Raising his eyes he could see the voice belonged to a tall woman standing behind the table, all his mind could register was teeth, beads and badges, the latter rising, falling and swaying with every movement of ample bosom.

Seated near the woman was a man, whose shining bald head gave him the courage to rise and walk down the aisle. Red to the tip of his ears he imagined that forty pairs of eyes were watching his every move. Trying to extract two dollars from his wallet as he walked was disastrous, the wallet fell, scattering its contents. Stopping, groping, his hands tangled with someone's knitting wool, trying to apologise and disentangle himself at the same time caused an outburst of friendly laughter, to him it was an example of his utter uselessness. Shaken, almost incoherent he reached the Treasurer. The smooth lined face beneath the balding head gave him some small measure of comfort. Clarrie mumbled his name and with fumbling, sweating hands produced his membership fee. The face under the bald head beamed at him, "Welcome Clarrie, you are now a member of the Combined Pensioners Association."

He tottered back to his seat, careful to avoid any further mishaps with wool, but

as he sank into his seat and what he hoped was oblivion, he found himself sitting on the knee of the lady in floral nylon, she had overflowed even more when he had vacated his seat. Flushing, stuttering apologies he half crouched while she removed her excess bulk. Seated at last, her laughing voice made him turn as etiquette demanded, he saw not the size or the faded hair but the brightest pair of twinkling blue eyes behind the bi-focals. Of course, Clarrie didn't realise it, but looking into those blue eyes, he had made his deepest human contact since he was eighteen and had kissed the only girl he'd ever kissed, before Mother's illnesses ruled his life.

The meeting continued, Minutes read and seconded, Treasurer's report read and seconded, etc. etc., all meaningless to Clarrie who had only attended Union meetings in the factory yard when all in favour raised their hands, all against had next turn at hand raising. The President

handed over to the Social Secretary, a bus trip was suggested, those intending to go "raise their hand". Clarrie didn't want to go, it would disturb his routine, but the laughing voice beside him said, "Y-oughter go, live dangerously man!" she had her hand up so Clarrie put his up, even paid his fare when the woman came with book and pen.

The trip was two weeks away, the next meeting a month away. Clarrie spent the two weeks worrying about it and remembering a pair of blue eyes. If it hadn't been for the blue eyes he would have forfeited his fare and stayed at home. He did admit to himself that it was, at least, something to think about as he pottered around the house and garden, attacking his chores with greater gusto now. Once in the supermarket a voice across the aisle hailed him, "How ya going, Clarrie?" He'd waved and called back. "Well, thank you." It had been the Treasurer chap whose name he couldn't remember but he felt good that someone wanted to know him.

Came the day of the bus trip. For all his misgivings Clarrie was first at the bus stop, now afraid he'd confused the date and time, but eventually others began to arrive. He sighed with relief when his blue-eyed friend arrived puffing and panting, wearing a pink slack suit which Clarrie thought looked quite dashing. His mother had always been aghast at hussies who wore trousers. The President ushered them onto the bus, a cross between a mother hen and a sergeant major. Clarrie kept close behind his blue-eyed friend, like a dinghy behind a schooner. He helped to heave her up the bus steps as between grunts and puffs she announced to all and sundry, "The kitchen tap was leaking like a sieve and she couldn't stop it, that was what had delayed her."

He squeezed into the seat beside her, firmly, for him, pushing aside a dour, skinny woman who'd tried to thrust herself ahead of him. One or two called out "Hi, Clarrie," and he responded with "Hi" and a diffident smile. He didn't know their names yet, strangely it became urgent to him to put names to faces. The noise was deafening as greetings and gossip were exchanged from one end of the bus to the other. From the greetings he discovered his seat mate was Vi, short for Violet he supposed.

Gradually they settled down to a quieter mood, soft taped music played, the bus driver gave commentaries and he saw and heard of things he'd only read about in a monotonous past. His companion told him to call her Vi, so he asked her to call him Clarrie. She told him more of the leaking tap, told him about the big old house going to pieces around her and the four

children and their families spread all over Australia. "Too much for me to keep up for the children to come home every year or two. The grandchildren have their own lives now." Clarrie told her of his life with Mother, of the tiny home he'd paid off for them. He'd never talked so much nor had anyone who'd listen.

Lunch at a club, something he'd never done before. "Hives of iniquity", Mother had called them. Helping to heave Vi's bulk on and off the bus gave him a great feeling of manly strength, of being needed. By the end of the day he had promised to go round and put a new washer in the tap, the thankful pat on the hand and the grateful blue eyes kept his mind occupied until he bought the washer and fixed the tap.

Gradually, it became habit for him to go round in the evenings and have a yarn or read snippets of news aloud to her while she sewed or knitted. Week-ends were the loneliest, they drifted into an unspoken arrangement, he took his share of the menu to Vi's home where they cooked and ate it together then played a game or two of Crib.

This peaceful, harmless arrangement might have gone on forever if Vi hadn't caught a bad dose of some sort of 'Flu. Clarrie found her one afternoon unable to raise her head from the pillow. He phoned the doctor, washed Vi's face and hands, combed her hair and made her a drink, after all he was no stranger to sickness. Having procured the prescribed antibiotics and dosed Vi according to the doctor's instructions, he decided to spend the night on the lounge. All night he answered her slightest movement with drinks and comforting words. In the morning tired, but happy to have been of use, he suggested letting one of her children know, but she was too sick to care.

Looking through the personal phone index he decided Len was the closest. Vi had told him, with half-hearted pride, about Len who had a used car business. Doris was the favourite but she was in Queensland, the other two just as far away in a western country town. Clarrie phoned Len, the answering brusque voice intimidated him immediately, somehow every word Clarrie uttered was misconstrued. He hung up the phone with the terse cold voice imprinted on his mind. He, Clarrie Albright, had been condemned as, "An old pensioner who had foisted himself on Len's sick mother, Len would be up to sort him out as soon as he had time. Len's father would turn in his grave, etc. etc."

Sick with worry at the thought of Len's impending visit Clarrie stayed with Vi two more nights. The doctor was pleased with her progress, said she'd need care for a

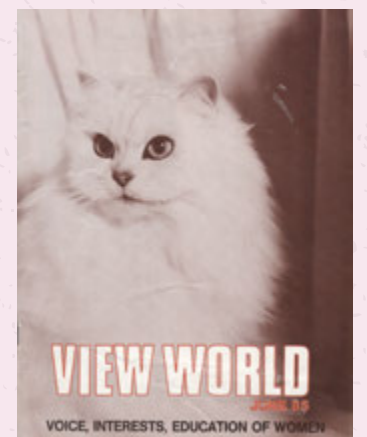
few months, Len had contacted him and was arranging to put his mother in a Home, the doctor shook his head sadly.

Deeply shocked, Clarrie voiced the only sly thought he'd ever had, "Could they move Vi to his home?" The doctor agreed that she should not be stampeded into a Home while she was too weak to resist, normally, she was quite capable of caring for herself. Between them they gently explained the situation to her and with some show of her old spirit, she agreed to be moved to Clarrie's home.

By the time Len arrived, Vi was settled in Clarrie's spare room and feeling fit enough to cope with Len and his plans. He heaped self-righteous indignation on them, ranted about his late father, accused Clarrie of "latching on to a gullible old woman", till Vi ordered him out after making it clear she'd continue to live with Clarrie and sell her house.

Later Clarrie realised that in all the confusion he hadn't mentioned marriage. When Vi was calm and they were at peace again, he did suggest marriage, but she reckoned things were cosy as they were and she couldn't be bothered with any more fuss.

Len wiped his hands of them both, disgusting, never thought he'd live to see the day when his mother would sink to living with an old bloke. He was glad to reach the outskirts of the city, a bit of a detour would take him to Nola and understanding consolation. Didn't know what he'd have done without Nola all these years, always a comfort, she'd never intruded on his married life. Getting late, might as well stop the night and go home tomorrow. Comfortably cradled in Nola's arms he laid back on the pillows and poured out the whole sordid story of his mother's lapse into sin with an old bloke and finished his story commenting, "He didn't know what these old people were coming to."



BRIDGE OF Friendship

Norah Paddle
Brisbania VIEW Club.

Lizzie Baines straightened her back from the wash tub, and wiped aside her hair with a soapy hand. She could still look with pride at this land which Jim had selected so carefully. The gentle slopes lay between the two creeks wandering down from the hills, bounded by the forest of high gums astride the rocky ridges. Even after three years ó she would never forget that year of 1809, it gave her a purr of satisfaction - it was all theirs. The years of hard work in Sydney, the quiet and persistent plea for a land grant, patient hacking through the bush to build the hut; it had all been worth it.

The air was still and hot, the sky an innocent blue, except for the little cloud of brown smoke sifting from the forest below. Lizzie sniffed the air, inspected the tree tops by the creek, and listened. No bird calls just a far off crackling. She bent down to the washing again, the grey water filmed by the sparse homemade soap. Pounding a shirt vigorously she muttered to herself, 'Sure they can look out for themselves in the big house. No use for us to be involved, them and all their servants, horses and tanks for water. Each after one's own, I'm thinking.'

Since dawn Jim had been high on the ridges cutting timber for fences. In the evening the old dray and their one strong horse would plod down the slopes; tomorrow the yard would ring with the sound of the axe. Jim had made sure he owned the land on either side of the creeks, as far as their junction with the river below. He built a rough timber bridge spanning the creek near the 'big house' and used it often to visit Luke Gregg, the overseer, at Vacy Park, as the 'big house'

was rightly named. Young Mr. Vacy had tried to buy the land by the creeks, but Jim was firm. The creeks were a natural barrier to fires, and water for the stock.

Lizzie was hanging her washing on a stretch of rope when six year old Tommy came pounding over the bridge and panted across to her.

"Ma, the fire's coming through the bush near the big house. There's no wind but its sorta eating up the hill. Will I run tell Lukey to bring the horses and cattle over the bridge?"

Lizzie looked down onto the river valley and the new white house beyond their boundary, brown smoke billowing up behind it. The house was barely cleared around, high above the river, still fairly deep in forest. The horse yards had been first priority, and now they were threatened.

"Ma, the horses" Tommy was jumping with impatience. "Lukey told me the Master's

away in Parramatta selling horses, and he's in charge. Ma, we can't let him down."

Lizzie wiped her hands on her rough bag apron. "Yes, tell him to bring the stock over here. Run." She hitched up her skirts and ran across the paddock after him.

"Poor young thing, there all on her own, and the baby too. Alter all, they do be our neighbours." She stopped to gather some feed bags from the fence, and ran across the bridge towards the stables.

Amelia Vacy paced the verandah of her elegant new home, nervously wondering about the smoke and ominous crackling in the forest below the house. She wished she was back in town, even in Parramatta. At least there would be someone to talk with, a little liveliness. Poor Robert, all his money gone into this horse breeding stud, the house barely furnished, servants grumbling, bills unpaid. The soft grey morning dress puffed little draughts about her ankles as she walked, restless, a little frightened of this stillness, oppressive heat and smoke. Surely no fires would come this far; Robert would never have chosen such a place.

There was a rush of feet from the hall, and Bessie, her nursemaid, breathless and wide eyed, bobbed before her.

"Ma'am, the fire, it's coming, it's coming up the hill. The squatter's missus from over the creek's here." Close behind Bessie came a spare and brown faced woman in rough clothes, wearing a long bag apron.

"Mrs. Vacy, the fire will be up here soon. You'd best get the baby over the bridge to my place - she'll be safe there. I've told Luke to get the horses and stock away over the creek too. Now, what do you want to do about the house, Ma'am?"

Amelia stared in dismay. What on earth could she do! Fires were something well out of her experience. Lizzie watched her shocked face, and said slowly. "I believe Mister is not here to give orders, ma'am. The overseer's busy with the stock, but something must be done quickly or you'll lose the lot." Amelia faced the other woman, calm and strong as some forest tree. Panic faded, she had not been bred to responsibility in vain.

"As Mr. Vacy is not here, I shall indeed have to take charge of our home." Turning to Bessie, wringing her hands and trembling, she ordered. "Get Miss Georgina and take her across the bridge for shelter. Stay with her there. Take some food and water, and hurry. Now, Mrs -?" She raised an eyebrow. "Lizzie, ma'am, Lizzie Baines."

"Very well, Mrs. Baines. You will know more of fires than I. Tell me and I will give the orders." Lizzie nodded with a smile and instructions flowed briskly.

"Get all the other girls to bring all the water they can in buckets, tubs, lugs, pots, anything. The fire's coming towards this corner. Keep all the wood wet, these posts and floors. Pity we can't reach the roof." She whisked into the pretty drawing room, already greying with little swirls of smoke. Amelia rang the house bells and the cook and housemaids came rushing along the hall. Lizzie gestured to Amelia Vacy, "Tell them to get all this out of here, and if we can't get those curtains down, they'll have to be soaked in water too." Amelia gazed in horror at her lovely curtains and rugs, new, expensive - and unpaid for. Lizzie's voice broke in roughly.

"You'll lose the lot, they'll burn like paper."

"Then soak them, or carry them away."

The women worked desperately, dragging rugs and furniture into the halls. Amelia Vacy saw it all as a nightmare, heard the breaking of glass and scraping of woodwork. Above all was the crackle of fire and gusts of choking smoke. They drenched the verandah and walls with tubs and buckets of water, running red-faced and urgently back and forth to the wells in the yard, till cook's voice quavered "Ma'am, the water's nearly all gone. The men have used it all on the stables."

"Well, get to the stables and find some bags and blankets. We'll have to be ready to start beating when it comes."

They were already armed with a miscellany of beaters, when one of the men, red-eyed, put his head around a door. "We need a bit of 'elp out 'ere now. It's getting too close."

The two women signalled each other, and

Amelia gave the order. "Come along, we must do what we can."

In the open the heat was scorching, the smoke stinging, the air thick. The women

Joined the line of men, beating at the little runs of flame, blazing falling branches. But it roared away from them and with a great burst the stables and kitchen flared into tall and terrifying flames.

"Thank goodness the horses are safe" - the thought renewed the strength of purpose — Amelia trying not to think of money and the stores destroyed.

The fire beat them back, they retreated closer to the house across the dry lawns shrivelling in the heat. They were encompassed in a world of smoke and flame, nothing else was visible, sky nor land nor river. As they backed against the house, for a brief and frightening moment all seemed to stand still. The overseer's voice shouted clearly, "Here's the wind and a storm." The wind struck with a roar louder than thunder, the smoke rolled before it, flames bent and fluttered away from the house. Somewhere men cheered wearily and Lizzie Baines wiped her grimy hand on her apron. It crossed Amelia Vacy's mind fleetingly that it seemed to be a very useful and sensible garment. Her morning gown was torn, grimy and wet, clinging to weary legs. Her hair was falling down over a brow damp with perspiration. She was tired, aching — and triumphant.

The women advanced again to push the flames back to the tall bushland, beating out little pockets still racing along the ground, the wind sending it back and away. Above the roar of the fire and wind another commotion - thunder rolled across the sky, still hidden with smoke.

"If only it rains" Lizzie said. "No lightning, thank you, just a lot of rain."

The fire retreated back on itself, thunder crackled again, then came the hissing spitting sound of rain. They stood at the edge of the burnt earth; smoke, steam and flame, the glisten of water on the charred leaves. Lizzie relaxed and turned away. The verandah posts were charred and blistered, windows burst, paintwork black and scarred with flying ash.

"The men can handle it now, ma'am. You'd best see to your people. The babe can stay with me a little while."

Later, Amelia Vacy sat in Lizzie's meagre kitchen, holding a mug of tea and nibbling on a slice of bread. Bessie sat nervously beside the dainty cradle where Georgina Vacy slept in peace. In the rough wooden box that served Annie Baines as her cradle, the squatter's child watched this invasion

of her little world.

"I must thank you for all your help, Mrs. Baines. So much more would have been lost without you."

Lizzie shrugged. "We're neighbours, ma'am, and bound to give a hand. But we did manage even though the menfolk were off on business of their own." There was real laughter in her eyes, and Amelia felt a surge of warmth.

"Yes, we are neighbours, and so our lives are together involved. Surely we must be friends, and our children too" she said impetuously.

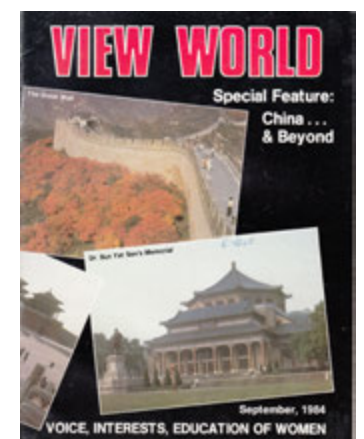
Lizzie shook her head slowly.

"Neighbours, yes, Mrs. Vacy, but I'd not fit into your ways, and you not in mine. The girls, maybe, but I doubt it. P'haps their children, our grandchildren -" she laughed at the thought. "That's making us old already. Who knows what the years'll bring. Ma'am, you'll always be welcome to a mug of tea in my kitchen, and maybe one day I'll take tea on your verandah. The girls may even run together as little ones, but their futures will be far apart. Still and all, we're both landowners," she said with sudden pride, "and who knows what's ahead."

Setting the mugs aside, she straightened her hair and apron.

"Now you'd best get the men to work on a new kitchen, and shelter for the horses. The women can come back here and bake for us both. Later we'll all clean up the mess. Let's get busy, we can't have the menfolk coming home and thinking were useless."

Lizzie walked with her neighbour through her own rough yard, past the restless Vacy thoroughbreds, whimpering dogs and frightened cattle. As they crossed the bridge, Amelia Vacy's grimy hand patted the rough railings. "Always keep this bridge strong, Mrs. Baines. This is one bond at least that we must not sever."



TERROR BY DAY

Mrs. McPherson was busy baby-sitting. She had given the 18-month-old baby his lunch and was putting him down for his nap with three-year-old Mark trailing at her heels.

"Hurry up, Nanna—you promised you'd see me scooter".

"Yes, darling, so I will as soon as Luke settles down. We'll just tidy your room—you help me, there's a big boy, then Luke will be asleep and I'll come upstairs, we'll go up on to the road and I'll watch you on the big scooter".

Mrs. MacPherson wasn't altogether happy to leave the baby asleep and alone in the house, as the house itself was rather isolated, no very close neighbour, and itself the last house before the "green belt".

But—what could happen? She wouldn't let Mark 'scooter' too far away, and she could surely hear the baby cry—if he did, and he rarely did.

Suddenly she raised her head, listening. What Was that? There is someone upstairs, she thought —then Mark said "Is that Mummy come home?"

"No dear", she said, it couldn't be—Mummy has not long left, and won't be home for quite awhile".

Now, Mrs. McPherson was not a timid woman—far from it—she was a sensible, middle-aged Grandmother, active, always occupied with this and that, drove her own car and in other words was a quite 'modern' Grandmother.

She took Mark by the hand and quietly went up the stairs that led to the lounge room, dining room and kitchen, front door, then a terrace with a flight of steps leading up to the road and garage, where her little green sedan car was parked.

As her head grew level with the top of the stairs she saw a man standing at the open

front door—actually inside the door. He was young, none too clean and had a blood stained bandage round his left hand and forearm.

This much flashed to her brain in her first glimpse of him.

She said, as she reached the room, "Who are you, and what are you doing in this house?"

Mark said, "Are you the new baker man?"

The man closed the door behind him very quietly and very quietly stepped forward to within a few feet of Mrs. McPherson.

There was something about him, something cold and callous, his eyes were tired, but hard—like blue steel—he did not speak, he just looked searchingly at Mrs. McPherson, then at Mark, then his eyes left them for a moment and encompassed the room.

"Well", said Mrs. McPherson, "Well . . ."

"Shut up", he said, "shut up and listen—if you know what's good for you and the kids".

He stared hard at her again, took a deep breath and said "I need help, I need it bad. I'm on the run and the police aren't that far behind me. I need help and I need you, old girl—I need you and your car. Oh, yes, I know it's your car and you drive it well. I've been watching this house for a couple of hours and saw you arrive and back the car into the garage. You've handled a car for years; I can tell that—I'm a mechanic." "What help do you want?" Mrs McPherson interrupted the quick flow of his voice. "I can dress your hand, give you some food and send you on your way—that is all".

"That is all, she says", he mimicked—"like Hell 'that is all'—that's not even the beginning.

You can lock this brat in the room with the baby—oh, yes, I even saw you feed him and put him to bed, so I know just where he is. Get this through your thick skull. I need your car and I need you to drive it. My hand was smashed up when I was escaping through a window—after I shot the caretaker!"

She felt sick and terribly afraid—not so much for herself, but for the children in her charge. This desperate man, what might he do to them? Mustering what control she could, she said, "I cannot drive you anywhere, I will not leave these two babies alone—never!"

He lashed out and struck her across the face with his good hand and she reeled under the blow. Mark screamed and clung to her legs—she pulled herself together

and said "It's all right, Mark, the man didn't hurt me, he's just joking it's all right, little fellow!"

"I've got no time to waste", the man said, "are you coming—or—so help me—I'll do the kid in!"

Her brain was racing. "Right, I'll come, I have no choice, but I cannot and will not leave these little ones alone in the house.

You must trust me—I'll go along to a neighbour and ask her to come and mind the children—then I'll go with you!"

"Oh, yes and what'll you tell her, eh? You must think I'm a mug".

"I swear I'll tell her nothing—I'll tell her that my husband's young brother has hurt his hand and needs to be driven to the Doctor at once—she'll believe me as she has never seen my husband or his brother. Let me do this or I cannot go with you. If you kill or hurt us, what good will it do you? You still can't drive the car yourself".

You could see him turning this over in his mind as she spoke. "O.K., let's go, you and me and the kid and I'll wait with him while you speak to this dame—I'll wait—with the gun on him, and if I think you've told her anything I won't mind killing him, not one little bit—get going!"

Mrs. McPherson took Mark by the hand, talking to him softly, about this and that as she went out the door and up the steps to the roadway, her only thoughts then were that the little boy should not be frightened. The man followed close behind. In a few minutes they reached Mrs Hart's gate, and she said, "Let me take the child with me, I give you my word I'll not tell Mrs. Hart anything that concerns you".

"No", he snarled, "get that woman quick, and you, kid, come here. I won't hurt you, I'm your Grandpa's brother, you know, and the older—your Nanna won't be long away, will you Nanna?"

She knelt before the little boy and hugged him. "Wait just a little minute, darling", she said, "I'll get Mrs. Hart to bring her puppy to play with you, how's that, now?"

The child seemed apprehensive, but the promise of the puppy held his interest and he moved nearer the man to wait.

Mrs. McPherson hurried down the steps to the house below and knocked on the door.

Mrs. Hart, a young woman, came out and said, "Why, Mrs Mac., I don't see you often—did you want something?"

"Yes, dear, I'm in urgent need of your help for a short time. My daughter, Margot, has gone out and I am minding the two

young brother has had an accident in the bush and has crushed his hand badly—I must take him to a Doctor at once. Could you, please, come and ‘sit’ with the children until Margot returns?” “Well, Mrs. Mac., it is really awkward for me this morning.”

“Mrs. Hart, I beg you—I cannot tell you more, but it is urgent that I leave now and I want you to be sure to tell Margot that I only left the children because her young Uncle was so injured—this is important!”

“O.K., I’ll manage somehow—you say Margot won’t be long? I’ll bring the new puppy, Mark will like that—just a minute, I’ll be with you”.

Dear God, thought Mrs. McPherson, make her hurry—I can’t trust this man much longer, he is at the end of his tether. Fear gripped her heart and her legs felt like rubber, fear for the children, fear for herself, maybe, but terror was taking hold of her—terror—on this bright, sunny morning. How could this be happening on such a day?

“Mrs Mac”, said Mrs Hart, at her side, “are you all right? Surely things are not that bad, you look really frightened—are you sure you can manage, or would you like me to drive your brother-in-law to the Doctor instead of you?”

She took a deep breath and steadied herself on the hand rail. “No, no, my dear, I’m O.K. I was a bit rattled then, but everything will be all right when I get him to our own Doctor. You will tell Margot, won’t you, that I’ve taken my husband’s young brother to our own Doctor, Dr. Rowe, don’t forget, tell her immediately she comes home, I may need her help with him, later”.

“Sure”, said Mrs. Hart, as they climbed up to the road, “just forget us and hurry off to the Doctor”.

They reached the road and the man had walked ahead with Mark who was, now, chattering like a magpie. He turned, saw the puppy, and ran back. The man went on and got in the car, obviously not wanting Mrs Hart to see him.

“Please go straight down, dear, Luke will sleep for a couple of hours and Margot will be home before he wakes—I must hurry off now. ‘Bye, and many thanks, ‘bye ‘bye, Mark, be a good boy.’ Like all little children, Mark hardly noticed her going, so engrossed was he with the puppy. “See you later”, called Mrs. Hart, “hope the hand will be all right.” Mrs. McPherson got into the driver’s seat and started the car. She glanced at the man—he looked tired and sick, but he turned his head and fixed that steady, cold, hard look on her and simply

said, “Move!” She turned the car out of the garage and proceeded up the hilly, winding road.

He started talking again. “Now, do just as I say and you won’t get hurt—get out of line for one minute and I assure you, you’ve had it! My plan is to reach Singleton as quickly as possible—I’ve got mates there and I can get help to get out of the country. Your job is to drive me there by as many back routes as you can think of, keep off the main highways as much as possible and keep going—fast, whenever you can—got it?”

“Yes”, she said, and could say no more, she had all she could do to concentrate on driving, as she was truly terrified by now.

She drove fast through French’s Forest, stealing a glance, now and then, at her silent companion, silent, but now with the gun out on his lap. Whilst she drove, her thoughts went round and round—what could she do? What sign could she give to anyone in passing? What sign—that he wouldn’t see?

Her brain refused to answer—just drive and drive and get it over with as soon as possible—then what would happen to her? Like as not he’d kill her on some bush road and walk on in to Singleton.

By this time she was past Castle Hill and on her way to the Windsor Road as she planned to take the Putty Road to Singleton—it was quicker and not so much used as the Pacific Highway. Approaching Windsor she broke the long silence (sometimes she wondered was he sleeping, but she doubted it!). “I’m afraid we need petrol—I’m nearly out, and I have no money, what shall we do?”

He seemed to rouse himself with an effort. “Pull in at the first garage, I’ve got money—and don’t try anything smart, my gun will be right on you all the time!”

He sat up straight and became more alert as a garage came into view further along the road. She felt him wince as he moved the injured hand and curse softly to himself.

She slowed to pull into the garage and felt the gun press harder into her side.

“Fill her up, please”, she said, when the attendant came to the window. He put the hose in the tank and came back. “Anything else, Ma’am? Tyres O.K.? Oil?”

“Nothing else, thank you”.

“Lovely day isn’t it?” he chatted on, glanced in at the man.

“Had an accident, sir? You seem to have

a bad hand there—there’s a Doctor a few hundred yards along the road”.

“It looks worse than it is”, the man said. “It bled a lot, but it’s stopped now”.

“Give you some clean bandages, if you like”.

Mrs. McPherson said, “Yes, that would be a good idea, I’ll come in with you and get them”.

“Don’t bother, Ma’am, I’ll bring them right out, no trouble”.

He trotted back into the office.

“You fool”, said the man. “You don’t think I’d let you get out of the car, do you?”

His face was hard and grey with anger and she felt this had been her last and only chance. He thrust some notes into her hand. “Pay for the gas, and get going”, he said.

The attendant was back. “That’ll be exactly three dollars”, he said—and the bandages?” said Mrs. McPherson. “No, no, they are on the house—goodbye and thank you”.

She took the bandages and passed them to the man, got the car into gear and rolled out on to the road again.

“Perhaps you had better let me clean that hand up”, she said, with an effort.

“We’ll see”, he growled, “but move, drive faster, we’re not making good time!”

She put her foot down harder and the needle crept up on the speedo—65—that was enough, she thought. Now they were over the bridge and on the road to Singleton.

The country was less settled and the miles were passing with fewer houses in view.

Waves of nausea came over Mrs. McPherson—the strain was beginning to tell—added to the lack of food since breakfast. She shook her head and tried to keep going.

“It’s no use”, she said, “I’ve got to stop for awhile—I can’t go on!” A threat of hysteria was in her voice.

The man was no fool—he recognised what he heard and said “Right, pull in ahead, there is a clearing, but take the car well in behind the trees”.

She followed his instructions almost unconsciously, stopped the car and fell forward on to the steering wheel—the horn blared forth and he swore and pushed her roughly off it; her head hit the edge of the open window and she stayed there, utterly exhausted.

He left her as she was and began to remove the blood soaked bandage from his left hand, with the gun still on his lap, not far away from his good right hand.

Faintly, as if far away, she heard him cursing and tried to turn her head. Vaguely, as if it was not really happening she saw his bloody hand revealed—saw it start to gush blood again—roused herself and said, “Here, let me help you!”

She struggled up and leant over, taking the clean bandage and thinking “He’s only a boy, really, what made him what he is today?” She finished the job and felt strangely better; perhaps, because of doing something for him—who knows?

“Thanks”, he said. “Now listen—we’ve got to get going. I’ve got to get out of the police net and I know my mates will see to it that I do. I’d rather not have got you into all this, but I had no choice. I was there, you were there and so was the car—and I couldn’t drive it! Get me to Singleton and you can turn straight round and go home, but, so help me, there is nothing I’ll stop at to get there!”

She faced him squarely, he looked grim, hard and grey. There might have been a momentary spark of kindness—but it had passed—and he meant business.

Mrs. McPherson knew the road well she and her husband travelled it each year on their way to Queensland. She guessed she had about one and a half hours, perhaps less, depending on the traffic, to reach Singleton.

As he placed the gun in his right hand again and turned it towards her, she thought “It’s no use appealing to him in any way, I’ve got to go on”, so she moved the car out on to the road once more and drove almost automatically—mile after mile. A few cars passed her both ways and there was nothing she could do to attract their attention.

Neither of them spoke, now. He sat, grim-faced, holding the gun on her—she drove the car—that’s all there was to it.

An hour went by and she knew she was not so far from her destination, or rather, his destination—what then?

She flicked her eyes to the rear vision mirror and in the far distance saw a small, white car. She thought, “what can I do about it? Let him catch us and pass”.

Again and again she looked in the mirror. The little white car was closing the gap—fast, very fast. Something clicked in her brain—“little white car”—yes, yes—dear God, could it possibly be one of the new police Mini Minors?

She slowed very, very gradually not noticeably she hoped—she stole a glance at the man, he had his eyes closed—was he asleep? She slowed a little more and saw that there were two men in the car.

She took her chance and wrenched the wheel to the left, sending her car hurtling off the road—she heard a loud noise and felt a searing pain in her side, then—no more.

Mrs. McPherson regained consciousness slowly, she felt warm and comfortable. She saw faces, people, and a man in a white coat. She shut her eyes again, she was very tired.

Then she heard her daughter’s voice, her husband’s voice and struggled once again to open her eyes.

“Frank Margot—where am I?” she whispered. They drew close. “You’re O.K., Mum”, they both said. Her husband took her hand and held it firmly—her daughter bent to kiss her and a tear dropped on her face. The man in the white coat (must be the Doctor, she thought) stepped forward and the others moved aside.

“You must rest now, Mrs. McPherson”, the Doctor said, “you need sleep, above all else. You’ve had a gruelling day, as well as a slight flesh wound in your side. But there is nothing wrong with you that a good, long rest won’t cure, so I suggest you say ‘Good-night’ to your family and let Nurse tuck you in, eh?” She was practically asleep before they left the room.

Some days later on her way home, with her son-in-law, Alex, driving the car and her husband and daughter either side of her—she learned what had really happened.

“When I got home, Mum”, said her daughter, “I knew almost immediately that something was very wrong. I knew you would never leave the children and I knew that Dad had no younger brother. Then Mrs. Hart said she sensed you were really frightened, more than worried, and she also felt the man did not want to be seen by her.

Then, the bombshell came when Mark told me that the man had slapped your face!”

“She got on to me right away”, Frank continued the story. “I immediately contacted the police, who viewed the matter most seriously. You see, a man with an injured hand had escaped them after a robbery and shooting of the caretaker. Not so very far from Margot’s home, either.

“They took the car’s description and registration number and got the information out to every available police car. They knew he’d get as far away as he

could and before long had a lucky break with a ‘phone call from the garage at Windsor, where you had stopped. The attendant had heard news of the killer’s escape and quickly recognised the colour, make and number of your car. He also remembered the man’s injured hand. So they were really on your trail for some time before you saw them”.

Mrs. McPherson was very quiet for some time then she said, “No one told me—what happened to the boy?”

Margot said, “He was shot whilst escaping, Mum, they couldn’t let him get away. He was a dangerous and desperate criminal and we are very lucky that nothing worse happened”.

The day shone bright and clear, the countryside looked glorious—fresh and sparkling—everything—her family around her—everything was so normal, it was hard to believe that she had ever experienced “terror by day!”



The Exile

Peggy Rose
Wollongong VIEW Club

Nick the Greek owned the Acropolis, the only cafe in Gulgan. Even by moonlight the Acropolis would still have been only a messy, run down eating place. Over the door the Greek flag and the Union Jack drooped wearily across a portrait of the Queen. A smudge of grease hung down the royal countenance and some wag had glued a packet of chewing gum to the hand that held the sceptre.

Fly spotted dummy boxes of chocolates lined the shelves and equally grimy mirrors covered the walls. On the mirrors was scrawled in white paint, "Pineapple Sundae, Fifty Cents" and "Extensive Fish Menu" and "Continental Cuisine" with similar enticements. They were all quite untrue.

At the Acropolis one dish was offered each Saturday the day when everyone came to town from the surrounding farms and ate at Nick's. This same dish sufficed for the rest of the Week.

The food chosen depended on Nick's mood. If he felt the pull of his homeland, baby lamb fragrant with herbs was served.

When he managed to beat down the prices of the local fishermen customers could champ away at grilled John Dory. No lesser fish, mullet or bream, was ever featured at Nick's no matter what its name when it dived and swam.

A firm minded man, Nick. Who else could unblushingly call crumbed sausages an Olympian Delight? Or be game enough to

call a blob of ice cream with six drops of flavouring a Special Sundae?

He was an enormous man with soft brown eyes set in his suety cheeks. His costume

never varied—a dirty shirt with no collar but with a gilt collar stud stuck in the band. Over his trousers he tied an equally stained apron and his grimy feet with long black nails were encased in classic Greek sandals tying round the ankle. A grease spattered Apollo.

On the cafe wall hung a picture, highly coloured, of Nick as a Greek warrior before the Germans invaded his country to help their allies who'd been badly mauled by the gallant Greek army. This Saturday one of the village loafers asked, "Did you really wear all that clobber, Nick? That frilly little skirt and them shoes with pompoms?" Nick glanced up from the counter. He was mixing a milk shake with not much milk and still less flavouring.

"I was a soldier when you were kicking in your cot, Lennie. Out in the hills blowing up Nazis. It was a hard life in the mountains especially when the snow fell". A silence fell on the cafe. All we older men were re-living our war and the youngsters were avid to hear more or these far away adventures. Just like the teacher reading "Treasure Island" on Friday afternoons.

Lennie was pretty drunk so he went a bit further.

"No little sheila, Nick, to keep you warm?"

Nick's face lit up and became firmer, younger. His eyes flashed and he was once again the straight shouldered, virile guerrilla defending his bedevilled country.

"Yes, I had Helena. The girls in our group were all wonderful. We worried the Germans all we could.- bombing transport, stealing stores and helping British and Australian soldiers to safety. Those girls were great shots and handy with the knife. Pretty, all of them. Many a Nazi sentry had his throat cut because he couldn't resist cuddling one of our girls. But Helena — ah, Helena".

Nick's eyes were dreamy. By mistake he sprinkled ten instead of the usual six drops of flavouring. He was really carried away by his memories. He wiped his hands on a ragged towel.

"How can I tell about Helena in words? We all loved her. Even the other girls. She was so tender with the wounded. So useful and quick about the camp. So cheerful. She would sing and dance for us, as gay as a mountain flower in the spring". "She liked you, Nick?" I asked. Nick nodded. He was slopping a wet grey cloth which smelled vilely over my table.

"All the men were mad for her but she chose me. Ah, the times we had. Tramping through the wild thyme, hiding behind

“

Sometimes we could kill a goat or a sheep and have a feast. We were light hearted then in the midst of bitterness. Always I had Helena and her understanding and tenderness. With all the dangers of our outlawed life, the cold and hunger, often starving, usually running, we must have been two of the happiest people alive.

”

rocks from a German patrol with her sweet shape pressed against me and her heart banging with fear. I could feel it through my flesh.

"Weren't you scared too, Nick? I was, all through the war".

He handed me something on a plate. It looked like the same dirty grey cloth, stewed.

"No. I was never frightened. Only for her. The Germans had their methods with women. No. With her I soared above earthly troubles. She was my refuge. My home".

"And your real home? Your parents?"

"Bombed. We visited my village on a raid and there were only four big craters. Luckily I had my Helena. I remember how our gang killed ten Nazis to avenge our people".

"Helena too?"

"Helena and all our girls. In battle they were like men, like the Amazons in the told tales. But afterwards — ah. In our cave Helena and I clung together through the freezing nights, loving each other, taking courage from each other's warm body. We talked of what we'd do after the war. We would have a farm and many children. Children with the prettiest mother in the world, I told her. 'The bravest father', she would answer. Such happiness we had all through those terrible, terrible years.

Sometimes we could kill a goat or a sheep and have a feast. We were light-hearted then in the midst of bitterness. Always I had Helena and her understanding and tenderness. With all the dangers of our outlawed life, the cold and hunger, often starving, usually running, we must have been two of the happiest people alive".

Nick brooded while he worked the espresso machine. His back was still ramrod stiff, his stomach pulled in. He was the hero of the picture — alert with a mild magnificent beard in place of his present slovenly stubble. No wonder Helena had loved him. And what had happened to her? Killed? Taken by the cruel Germans to rot in a death camp! Lost as an anonymous post-war refugee?

I was summoning up enough courage to ask when a child ran into the shop to buy lollies. Nicked loved children and spoilt them, having none of his own. True, the extortionate prices he charged adults covered any slight losses the gifts of sweets might cause.

As the kid went out Mrs. Nick ambled in from the kitchen where she perpetrated all the ghastly meals served at the Acropolis. She was as grimy as her husband. She eyed us five grills and two sandwiches—with a hard cash register glance.

I've often wondered where all those luscious young girls disappear, giving place to matrons like Mrs. Nick. She bulged everywhere and her black dress like a badly made tent, was too tight and

only accentuated the positive. She stood wiping her hands down her frock.

"Nick", she screeched. "Come and help me or I'll lam you with a saucepan, you lazy loafer".

Her dark eyes sparkled with temper.

Nick emerged from his dream. The rugged Grecian hills retreated as the hardened young warrior vanished. Nick's stomach pushed against the counter, his shoulders slumped, his mouth drooped in disillusion. He glanced around at the dreary outpost in an alien land.

He sighed and answered, "Coming, Maria".





Miriam Medaris
Cronulla VIEW Club

VIEW World June 1984

Miss Dewes was planting geraniums in her front garden when the Dandieoola garbage collectors arrived, swept up and emptied her two dustbins on a smelly pyramid in the back of the Council truck.

One of them marched in the gate holding out a small green ornament.

"Ey lady," he shouted, "this 'ere fell outa y'r bin! Isn't broke nor anythink - don' y' wannit?"

"No thank you," she smiled.

He ran off with it to join his mates.

Putting aside her gardening fork, she rose painfully and limped into the house. Well-known in Gowrie Vale, she was an arthritic cripple forever conscious of her clumsy boots and shambling gait.

Later, relaxed in her comfy armchair enjoying a cup of tea, Twink jumped in her lap purring like a crosscut saw. A year ago she had found him in a gutter abandoned, mewling pitifully. She tickled his ear and he curled round like a black pudding.

"I'm glad to get rid of that thing," she murmured.

The previous evening she had taken the china figure from her mantelpiece and tossed it amongst the rubbish before wheeling the bins into the street on her trolley.

As they clanged and dumped in the roadway, the garbage men nattered. "Ey, 'Erb — get a gander't this! Kinda kinky, d'y reckon? Cuteth' wife might like it," said Joe.

He held up the hideosity.

It was her fifty-ninth birthday. Nobody gave her presents so she celebrated by opening an account with the new department store, Kitson Bros, three miles away in Dandieoola. A week earlier it had been declared open by a parliamentarian in the presence of the mayor and a crowd of shoppers. With thirty days to pay she could indulge in more than her customary cash spending.

Just recently she had made an unusual acquaintance — blonded Mrs Laurel Potter — a colorful personality who had descended on Dandieoola from where, no one knew. She might well have sneaked in from a UFO, had little or nothing in common with the community and set up an arts and crafts gift shop in the main street.

Her bizarre window displays attracted attention but there was little demand for her quality goods, many of them on consignment. Sales dwindled and eventually her sole profits derived from trinkets and artificial flowers, which appealed to a largely unimaginative population.

Miss Dewes spent generously but

unwisely on things she did not need, finding Mrs Potter entertaining with her uncountrified clothes and amusing patter. However more than once Miss Dewes was disturbed to have smelt liquor on her.

One afternoon, passing the shop on her way to catch the bus home, Helen Dewes spotted in the window a quaint china ornament glazed in jade — a woman's agonised face framed with serpents instead of hair - the Medusa's Head! Its eccentricity fascinated her. Mrs Potter was not in the shop but a grey-haired man she assumed to be Mr Potter told her it was imported and priced at ten dollars. Cursing her extravagance she bought it, asked after Mrs Potter who was having a day off, then went home and placed it on the mantelshelf where she gazed at it admiringly.

About a month later she found an account from Kitsons in her mailbox. Hobbling inside with it she donned her powerful glasses whilst scanning the itemised goods, some of them unfamiliar. The sum total shocked her. THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS?? She could account for seventy-two, but not the remainder, comprising a frock, two garden chairs and a china knick-knack.

Concerned, she phoned the store. A clerk in the office enquired if she had retained the dockets signed by herself or stamped with the credit plate issued, of which the staff should be able to trace copies. She

did not have them all, but later found those for the seventy-two dollars worth. She was informed the remainder had been checked, but none stamped with her credit plate which she had used since its issue... her signature appearing on ALL copies.

Surely there couldn't be some unscrupulous person operating her account without her knowledge or permission... worse still, forging her signature? Disturbed, the credit manager promised investigation and asked her whom she had told about the account. No one except...except, oh dear. Once at the gift shop she had hastily scribbled her name and address for Mrs. Potter. Restricted to simple pleasures, excited about the opening of the new store, she may have talked too much; but to harbour suspicions of a friend was surely not only unjustifiable, but uncharitable - even absurd!

The woman had shown friendly interest and one day invited her to lunch at the districts best restaurant, where she had suggested that Miss Dewes invest some money in the gift business.

She was refused firmly yet politely. Embarrassed by her friend's ill-concealed anger, the luncheon broke up in sudden and almost indecent haste! Sticking to her guns, Miss Dewes believed that with competition from the big store, there was little future for such alien ventures in somnolent Dandieoola.

Later, following investigation, Kitson Bros. telephoned Miss Dewes asking her to visit their credit office. When she arrived the Manager introduced three saleswomen from Ladies' Frocks, Gifts, and Garden Furniture, then enquired if she was the person to whom they had entered the mystery goods on account.

They all assured him she was. Astounded, she insisted she knew nothing about it. However, the Credit Manager and staff seemed unconvinced, no doubt branding her a doddering old fool or worse, a shady character, bent on diddling the store out of two hundred and twenty-eight dollars!

"I noticed particularly," said one salesgirl, "because when she moved away, she was - er.."

"Lame?" supplied Miss Dewes.

"Er — well, yes, Madam. I beg your pardon....."

The china knick-knack was priced at six dollars. She enquired if they had one similar in stock. Someone went to Gifts on the ground floor and returned with a replica.

Bewildered, Miss Dewes put on her spectacles, then turning it upside down read 'Made in Taiwan'. No doubt there were dozens like it! Poor sight had made her easy prey. In the gift shop she had believed the trade mark to read 'Made in Italy', and at home foolishly neglected to further inspect it.

She stopped woolgathering when the Manager advised her that although this kind of thing happened infrequently, to close the account immediately. The staff and store detective were alerted. If the imposter tried again, she would be arrested.

Two weeks later again he called Miss Dewes and asked her to come to the store urgently. The bus was late and she began to tense. Usually it took her several minutes to struggle in and out of it, fearing it might move whilst she was half way there.

On arrival she hurried to the Credit Office, and was offered a chair opposite another woman whose attire was almost identical with her own. Complete with stick, orthopaedic boots and glasses — but dark ones, which at no time Miss Dewes EVER wore — she sat sandwiched between two stony-faced men, one of whom spoke.

"Miss Dewes, do you recognise this person?"

"\|o..."

He turned to the woman.

"Remove your glasses please, and this!"

He touched her head.

Miss Dewes drew in a sharp breath as the woman removed the glasses and grey wig revealing the familiar eyes and brassy hair of Laurel Potter!

Sometime later, from Court evidence, Miss Dewes learned that the accused's proper name was Annie Kowalski, who had deserted her husband in Hong Kong, had two convictions for shoplifting in New Zealand as well as other bizarre performances and was living with Anton Potter, whose money had financed the gift shop. The grey-haired man!

Kowalski was sentenced to two years' gaol, and Potter, who also had a lively record, given six months as an accessory.

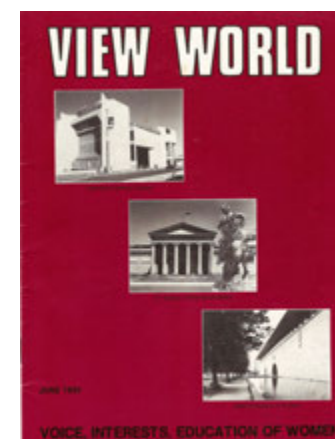
The garden chairs, found on their premises, were returned to the store. The soiled frock was written down as a loss, whilst Miss Dewes retained the Taiwan bauble. Sold "back" to her for a brazen four dollars profit, identical with that shown on her account with Kitson Bros!

In the narrow community, her excursion into questionable company proved humiliating, news of her victimisation appearing on the front page of the Dandieoola Chronicle. She had, nevertheless, merely suffered a similar fate to many other dupes of these miserable two-bit criminals! Poor consolation. Acutely sensitive, she sought seclusion and instead of ignoring gossip and snubs real or imagined, believed herself to be an object of pity and ridicule. Naiveté, lonely old age and her affliction were driving her into paranoid isolation.

She had fallen asleep and woke with a start. It was almost lunchtime. Yawning cavernously, Twink stretched and jumped off her knees. She bent to retrieve the tea-cup he had upset onto the carpet, then once again remembering the evil ornament, consoled herself that only the ignorant are superstitious.

She was unaware that moments after the garbos left, a delivery van collided with them on the street corner. Nobody was injured, the van sustaining most of the damage. Whilst the drivers argued and roundly abused each other, on the floor of the Council truck cabin lay the shattered remains of Joe's tawdry treasure from Taiwan!

"Sorry, Joe," apologised 'Erb, "but couldn' 'elp it, mate, yer snakes got scrambled!"



THE CALENDAR

VIEW World June 1976



Marjorie Baulman
Springwood VIEW Club

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Katy scrubbed the kitchen table in the little farmhouse and pondered on her problem. Three children in three years and, with Mathew away droving months at a time, no help on the farm except for Elijah the half-caste lad who helped with the animals and kept the woodpile stacked. She was just bone weary and who was to say there wouldn't be more babies and consequently more work before she could get breathing space.

In desperation she had consulted the family doctor, a kindly man who explained that in the nineteenth century, science could offer very little assistance on this subject. However, in Germany they had found some success with a system called the Rhythm Method. This involved abstinence at a certain time each month . . . not 100 per cent he explained, but it could be helpful.

Katy placed the ingredients for breadmaking on the table. Ah! Yes. But here was the very essence of the problem. Her husband Mathew Schultz was a wonderful man and she loved him dearly. But he had a mind like a steel trap on some subjects. To his way of thinking childbearing was as easy to a woman as breathing. Didn't the Almighty equip them for such a purpose? Weren't they put on earth to increase and multiply? Provided they were loved and sheltered, it was their function in life and what were they complaining about?

Katy had no objection to a big family, but three children in three years . . . and all this work! She covered the bowl and left the bread to rise. Something had to be done and no use trying to explain the system to Mathew.

Fate was on her side in that his work took him away from home for months at a time. But what if he came home at the wrong time?

Months later Katy sat by the fire darning socks. Mathew was due home tomorrow night, for one night and, according to the calendar, it was the wrong night. So what on earth was she going to do? As the fire burned low she thought of a plan. Poor fellow — she loved him but if he wouldn't see reason, there was no alternative.

Next morning Katy baked cakes, arranged a big bowl of flowers on the dresser and polished the copper for Mathew's homecoming. Then she went out to the barn where Mathew had stored the winter feed for the cattle and, taking the rake, she stood a bale of hay and loosened the shingles on the barn roof until she had made a huge hole.

Exhausted, she sat down and thought how surprised all those suffragettes in the city would be to know that out here in the Never Never there was someone doing her bit for the cause too.

Part of her plan involved Benjamin the pig. He was Mathew's pride and joy and had won several ribbons at the local show. Poor Benjamin . . . she wondered if pigs got hangovers. Mathew always kept a large flagon of rum on the dresser. Katy emptied this into Benjamin's food that night, then broke the bottle.

Katy heard the clip clop of the horse's hooves long before she could see the rider in the dusk. She picked up the lantern and was on the verandah to meet Mathew as he rode in the gate. The dishes had been done, the children cuddled and tucked into bed.

Mathew and Katy sat by the fire and talked. He asked about the happenings on the farm in his absence and she replied that the hens were laying well, that progress was fine generally, but that the shingles on the barn roof had become loosened and that Benjamin was behaving strangely since she had fed him tonight.

Mathew was on his feet in an instant. Nothing must happen to Benjamin. He rushed out into the moonlight, lent against the rail of the pig sty and gasped at the sight of the pig. There he was cavorting around, doing a dance which seemed to combine the steps of the valeta and the schottische.

Mathew jumped the fence, grabbed Benjamin and examined him closely but could find nothing wrong. He would have to consult his book on animal husbandry.

On the way to the house, he took a look at the barn roof and the sight that met his eyes left him dumbfounded. Moonlight spilled through the huge hole, all over his precious store of winter feed. If bad weather came he would lose the lot and he had to be away early in the morning.

Back in the warm bright kitchen, she studied the husbandry book. The

ridiculous part about it was the animal seemed to be so content. The hours flew and Benjamin seemed quieter. He would have a tot of rum and tackle the roof. Katy explained she was very sorry but she had knocked the bottle over and smashed it.

This was too much. "You should have been more careful," he stormed.

Katy said curtly. "I apologised, and next time you build a barn you had better do a more thorough job on that roof, Schultz."

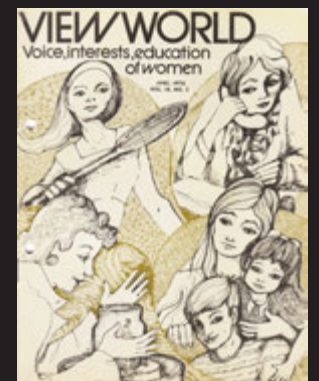
"Schultz!" His beloved Katy had never raised her voice to him before. And to call him by his surname . . .

Dawn streaked the sky as he placed the last shingle in the roof.

Katy had cooked a big breakfast and packed his saddle bags. They parted friends, their difference forgiven. But the experience had shaken Mathew. As he started out on his long journey he felt uneasy.

Mathew sold the cattle at a good price and turned his horse's head for home. The strange feeling of disquiet had never left him and, as he shortened the distance between himself and the farm, his mind dwelt on his adored Katy. Only a couple of miles now and he would be with her.

Growing by the side of the road was a clump of wild freesias and Mathew did something he had never done before. He got down from his horse and picked a bunch for Katy. Armed with these, he started on the last lap of the journey. Will she call me Mathew or Schultz, he wondered.



Long ago, when people spent two bob instead of 20c, in a sleepy town on the coast, there was a steep hill that ran down to the shore, ending in a pleasant, green and shady park.

On the crest of the hill stood a lovely stone church; a quarter of the way down there was a large wool store; and half way down there was a neat, white house surrounded by lots of flowering shrubs and with a smiling, yellow front door.

In this house a four-year-old boy named David lived with his mother, father and baby brother Michael. David was a very ordinary sort of boy with brown hair, a tuft of which always stood up from his crown; large hazel eyes; and five freckles on his nose. He had the most amazing power over his socks — as soon as one was pulled up the other slid to his ankle. When that one was raised, the first subsided.

THE OMNIPOTENT CYCLIST

David had just started to go to Sunday school with the big girls of eight and 10 from a nearby family. It was very confusing: Miss Black, his teacher, said there were no cars when Christ and his disciples were on earth, yet sang "When Mothers of Salem, Their Children brought to Jesus, the stern disciples drove them back....."

Mother could not go to church in the morning and Father was busy playing golf, though he did stay home with the boys while his wife attended the evening service and sang in the choir.

David knew his mother's friends called her Beth; Daddy called her Gorgeous; and the butcher said "Good morning, Mrs Trentham". Daddy's name was Christopher. David could recite: "I am David Christopher Trentham and I live at 45 Park Road".

When it was wet David helped his mother bath Michael, holding the warm dry towel, nappy, vest and nightie at the ready. Before this ceremony David gravely donned his sou'wester, having learned to his chagrin that bathing small boys was a hazardous occupation.

On fine days David played in the garden with his dog, named Sausage by Daddy because he was a mystery. Daddy said each of the dog's four legs, two ears and tail belonged to different breeds, while his body was a sort of terrier, hound, poodle and spaniel hash.

Daddy had found Sausage, a shivering, starving scrap of misery, when walking home from the hospital in the early hours of the morning shortly after David was born. He had nursed the pup by the fire giving it occasional drops of warm milk and brandy, then made it a warm bed in a shoe box. David had been told the story of Sausage many times and knew it was a special dog. Sausage also knew he belonged to a very special family.

David kept busy in the

garden collecting snails in a tin for Daddy, picking up dropped clothes pegs, popping fuchsia buds and rolling down the steep lawn so that when he sat up the sky was whirling.

One day he ran inside and exclaimed, "Mummy, I've just seen Jesus!"

"Have you dear," said Mummy pleasantly, "how nice," and continued spreading Vegemite on wholemeal bread for his lunch.

Mummy forgot this episode until it was repeated two days later, then again after another three days. Her curiosity aroused, she realised this happening was always on a fine warm day, just past midday, when the men from the wool store left for their luncheon break as soon as the whistle sounded.

Intrigued, Mummy announced one sunny day that they would have a picnic on the front verandah, seeing to it that they were there shortly before 12. The whistle blew and shortly afterwards David sputtered through a mouthful of banana: "There he is Mummy, there's Jesus!"

The mother saw an unremarkable young

VIEW World December 1980

Joy Yeo
Murrumbidgee/Narrandera Club.
1st Prize Short Story Competition

man riding a bicycle down the hill, with a brown paper bag, obviously containing his lunch, tucked under his arm.

As the late spring warmed to summer this became a daily event and the woman realised this man, who apparently worked at the wool store, was taking his sandwiches to the park by the sea. She determined to discover his identity. Discovering why David thought he was Jesus was a matter she felt impossible to resolve.

Following a few false leads, she described the young man to the foreman at the wool store, who happened to be a golfing crony of her husband's. He immediately recognised "Jesus" from her description.

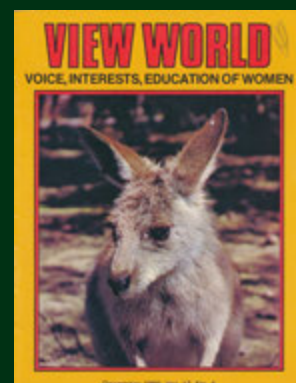
"That's young Geoffrey Mason, fine young fellow, goes to your church. It's a wonder you don't know him," explained the foreman.

That ended one mystery but did not tell why David was convinced the man was Jesus.

Shortly before Christmas, the children from the Sunday school kindergarten invited their parents to hear the youngsters sing carols. Mother and Father both went along with Michael asleep in his pram and David, resplendent in his fawn check shirt and brown trousers, to hear the littlies sing, in total disharmony "Away in a Manger" and "Silent Night".

The plate was passed, pennies reluctantly dropped while the children sang "Hear the pennies dropping, Listen while they fall, every one for Jesus, He shall have them all."

All was revealed when the Sunday school treasurer, one Geoffrey Mason, came in and took the lot away!



VIEW World December 1990

The Legacy



Norah Paddle
Toukley VIEW Club



Old Martha sat in the sun, idly stirring dust with a stick. Occasionally she squinted across the sun-dried paddocks, frowning in thought and worry. She had turned off her hearing aid—it was old and tended to crackle, distracting her thoughts. Getting old, she supposed.

“How are we going to help Andrew?” she muttered to the stick. “Grandpa went deaf, too, runs in the family. What a rotten legacy to pass on to the kid.”

The stick paused, as she drove her mind to inspiration.

“Got to find money, somewhere.”

“How are we going to help Andrew?”

That was impossible. The farm was rundown, drought bleached the pastures, her daughter and son-in-law laboured and fought it but still they could only scratch around, living hand to mouth.

“Money, Andrew’s got to have treatment, somehow.”

The old woman loved her grandson fiercely. She had been shocked by the pieces of conversation picked up when her hearing aid was on. Andrew was going deaf, too, at fourteen. Martha couldn’t understand all the medical terms, what needed to be done. All she gathered was it cost money,

something they couldn’t provide. She felt her son-in-law blamed her, though Jim was a fairly kindly man. Daughter Peg was defeated already, tried to put it aside.

“We can’t do anything, Mum. He’ll just have to put up with it like you.” The blame was there.

“Why, why?” Martha flicked a spill of dust at the family dog, Barney. The old animal stirred then slumped back to sleep.

Staring across the flat valley of brown hills, Martha’s eyes lingered on the smudge of blue ranges. Thin lines of shadow marked the gullies. Something began to stir in her memory. Grandpa had slyly claimed there was gold there—he’d found it. But the old fellow had died suddenly before he told anyone where Martha’s father had gone over many times, tried and failed to turn up a speck. Even the creeks were only gravel and sand. Jim had been scornful when he moved in with Martha and Peg. It wasn’t gold bearing country. Martha, however, recalled her grandfather having little bouts of wealth or so it seemed. Nothing too showy, maybe a few good beasts when they needed them, or a load of feed during a drought. Always looked cunning about it, the old man, just too innocent when questioned.

Now that Grandpa and Dad were gone, one brother lost in the war, the other cleared off to the city. Martha felt it was left to her to try to do something.

“It’s just a chance, Barney. We’ll give it a go. Even a couple of good specks.” She threw the stick away and went indoors.

The family tried to dissuade her. Jim repeated his “Waste of Time”. Peg was horrified at the thought of her old Mum going prospecting alone. For a while she looked hopeful, then her frame sagged, her face closed in and defeated. Andrew wanted to join the hunt but school was more important. Finally Martha turned off her hearing aid and went about packing a change of clothes, a pick, a spade, a sieve and a bucket. She took out the old tent from behind the barn, then the old rifle out of the top cupboard and cleaned it expertly. She filled a box with tins of food, tea and sugar. Something for Barney. Then when she had all she felt was needed, asked Jim to take her on the beat up old truck over to the hills. They argued but Martha stood firm. Her life had been hard, she was tough, had worked like a man, the bush and loneliness held no fears.

Grumbling, Jim gave in. Together they bumped over the dirt track, onto the open plain, crossed the foothills and over the bank of the creek. It was familiar ground, Martha had been here with her father and brothers many times, sometimes looking for Grandpa’s gold, others to shoot a feed of rabbits or catch a few yabbies.

Jim helped put up the tent, checked there was plenty of water in the creek, shade from clumps of spindly gums.

“I’ll be back in three days,” he warned. “That ought to be long enough to get this nonsense out of your system.”

“Just bring some more tucker,” Martha grinned. “I’ll make it a week if I have to.”

“Well, I don’t like leaving you here, it’s too lonely,” Jim lingered.

“Huh,” the old woman was scornful. “There’s plenty of birds, wallabies, rabbits and I’ve got old Barney.”

“But you can’t hear if you turn that darned aid off.”

“What do I want to hear out here? I can see it all and feel it underfoot. And darn listen if I want to.”

“OK, then, do it your way, so long as it isn’t anything stupid.” Jim climbed into the truck and slowly moved down the rough ground. Martha waved and turned to unpack the stores.

For the rest of the day she attacked likely spots with the pick. Nothing showed. In her heart she knew it wasn’t gold country but she had to try. In the heat of the afternoon she squatted by the creek with sieve and bucket. There was nothing showing there either. Near sundown as the billy bubbled on the fire, she fed Barney and settled down to a meal of bread and cheese. With the hearing aid turned up and despite its worn out crackling, Martha listened with quiet enjoyment to the evening bird calls, the rustle of the trees and the running of the creek.

The next two days were the same. Nothing to show for hard work. Jim turned up and though he argued that Martha should throw it in, he had the sense to bring another box of stores.

“Another three days then home you come,” he admonished. Martha chuckled. “I’m getting to like it here, it’s nice and quiet. Even Barney’s enjoying himself chasing rabbits and digging up old bones.”

“That’s OK, so maybe we’ll all come on Saturday and have a break.” Jim looked around at the quiet scene. “Andy and me can do a bit of shooting and he can give

you a hand to look for his own darned gold.”

They parted company and Martha went back to her prospecting. That evening as she tramped to the tent with an armful of firewood, the glint of the setting sun blinded her briefly. A loose stone moved underfoot, she skidded and fell against a rock. She heard rather than felt her ankle snap, then yelled with the sudden pain. For a moment she lay dazed, staring up at the sky, feeling sick and dizzy. She took a deep breath, her mind cleared and she pushed herself up to rest on her hip.

“What a darn silly thing to do,” she shouted as she tried to push the pain away. The right ankle lay crooked. Struggling to sit upright, her hands managed to touch the break. Then for a while she leant against the rock, eyes closed, trying to build up strength.

“What do I do now? Can’t walk on it. I’ll have to splint it up with something. Gawd, three days now.” She shivered. Unheeding a rabbit bounded past, with Barney in pursuit.

“Darn dog, he’s no help. But maybe I can send him home, bring me some help.”

On her skinny rump Martha edged herself along the ground, pushing the stony earth with her hands. She had to reach the tent; the cold of the mountain nights outside would be the end of her.

The firewood lay near. A couple of branches seemed sturdy enough. Shuffling close, gasping in pain she pulled one free then another. She had to rest after every movement. Slowly with one branch firm on the ground, Martha slid cautiously up the rock, scraping her back and arms on the rough surface, fighting off the desire to just drop and lie in the dust. It was almost dark when she stood shakily on one leg, leaning on one branch. Steadying herself, she picked up the other branch and with two uneven crutches, dragged herself down to the tent.

It was dark, she couldn’t balance to reach the lamp, all she wanted to do was flop on her swag, head swimming with pain. Barney came padding in, she had a feeling he was dragging something, not a rabbit surely, but was too exhausted to care. The dog whined but Martha didn’t hear him. She had fallen into a sleep of weariness, conscious only later of the warmth of the dog curled up close beside her.

She woke before dawn. The pain was leaden but she felt stronger for the rest. Barney roused and licked her hands. Martha struggled to sit up and gently touched her ankle.

“Needs something to hold her way

to her pack and found a clean sock. Carefully pulling off her sturdy shoe, she straightened the ankle as well as she could, shuddering at the sharp twinges, then managed to wind the sock around it tightly, tying a knot to hold it in place. Sweat trickled down her face, she felt ill, her head swam. She lay back and rested again.

The sun began to shaft into the tent, Martha turned her hearing aid on and could hear birds. She realised she was hungry and thirsty. She would have to crawl and reach the food. Then she would have to point Barney back home. She look around the pokey tent. Was there any paper anywhere? What could she write with? Scrabbling among the tins, she scratched and tore a label from one. Then the long and painful shuffle to the fire, the stony ground rasping her body, her useless leg. Poking around she found a couple balancing the label on her knee, carefully printed as steadily as she could on the blank side — “Come. Broke ankle”.

She whistled to Barney and caught him when he came, uncertainly, edgy. She twisted the paper into the dog’s collar, where someone could see it. Then lectured him firmly.

“Home. Barney. Go home, straight home. Get Jim, Peg — home, now. Scat.”

The dog wagged his tail, still uncertain. Martha pointed, pushed him, turned his head for home.

“Off quick, fetch Jim.” Barney still hesitated. Martha spoke sharply. “Home boy, home — now,” she roared with a burst of strength. Barney turned and set off at a steady trot leaving Martha perched on her swag. As the dog climbed the bank and loped out of the gully, she felt a bit guilty.

“Poor old fellow, he must be as old as me. Maybe he won’t even make it. Well, I’ll just have to hope.”

She managed to tip the jerry can enough to get a mouthful of water, tore off a piece of bread and broke off a hunk of cheese. Shuffling around, her hand touched something cold and strange. She felt it again then dragged it into view. It was an old leather bag, dirty and damp. It must have been what Barney had dragged in, dug it out of a rabbit hole no doubt. Martha shook it. The bag was heavy, it clinked. With shaky fingers she tugged at the rusting buckle, pulled apart the leather strap. Her hands explored, came out with some slips of paper, coins.

Martha stared, puzzled. Smoothing out the paper, she read the fading print. These were money notes, cheques of some sort, big sums of money. She dropped them and

inspected the coins, strange dull pieces. Rubbing the film from one, she realised what it was. An old gold sovereign. She had seen her grandfather with them. Martha closed her eyes to think harder, pushed her mind back over sixty years and more. She conjured up memories of her father, grandfather.

Her pain was almost forgotten.

“That’s it! I remember Grandpa used to talk about the Margalong bank hold-up by one of the bushrangers. It was a gold rush town then. Think, woman, think. That’s what they said; he threw the money into the bush or buried it or something, meaning to come back after he got out of gaol. But he got shot instead and no one ever found the loot. No one, but cunning old Grandpa — and my old dog Barney.”

Martha tipped the coins into her lap. They clinked and glittered dully in the sunlight. More money, bank notes, surely enough here to fix up young Andrew. She fell back on the swag again to think. Sure, it wasn’t their money and you can’t hide that sort of thing these days. But couldn’t there still be a reward; surely they could get a share of it. That would only be fair. Just a few sovereigns to keep, they’d be worth a bit today.

Jim and Peg and a footsore Barney found her asleep on the swag, clutching the bag. The dog’s warm tongue licked her hand. She woke and stared at them, blank and dazed. Barney whined then she smiled with a shining joy. Patting the bag, Martha managed to croak, “Here’s another legacy of grandpa’s. A good one this time.”





LOOKED LIKE A QUEEN

It had been a hot day, even in the thick shade of our big gum tree. It was always known as our tree because our cubby house was beside its enormous trunk.

MARIE EVANS
MUDGE EVENING VIEW CLUB

It was a lovely tree to climb, the sturdy branches giving us good footholds and front row seats to watch the birds building their nests.

They were so used to us either being up or under the tree that they took little notice of us and we never dreamed of interfering with their nests.

I knew it must be time to put away my dolls and go inside when I saw the car. "Quick Billy, put your tractor away. There's the car and we were supposed to be clean and tidy before Dad arrived." We always lost track of time at the cubby house.

"I wonder what she's like."

"What who is like?" asked Billy.

"Elenora, of course, silly."

"Oh, she'll be lovely, I just know it, it will be great to have a new mum," Billy enthused.

"Well I don't want a new mum. We have managed the last six years without one and I don't know why Dad thinks we need one now."

Clare waved from the house and I knew we must go at once. Clare was our elder sister, she was 16 and helped Dad do most of the housework. Today she was quiet and not her usual self.

She had even sent me to play with Billy when most other days she would make me help prepare the meals. Today she didn't want me around, she didn't want to talk.

Lucky thing, she was going to town on the mail car in the morning to stay with a girlfriend for the few days Elenora was to be with us.

Dad had said she could go if she stayed to meet Elenora and helped make her welcome the first night. He wouldn't let me or Billy go though.

As we rushed in the back gate and headed for the bathroom to tidy up, we met Dad on the verandah. With him was a lovely tall lady. I thought she looked like a queen. What lovely clothes, and that hair — it was blue, no it was nearly purple. Living in Sydney and never seeing the sun I thought must have made it that colour.

I must have been staring, because Dad said very calmly "Alice, have you lost your tongue?"

"Oh no Daddy," I stammered, "I just, er...."

"This is Elenora," he said, "and these two grubby mites are Alice, who is 12, and young Billy who is just eight.

Say hello the two of you."

"Er, hello," I said and ran to my room.

Billy looked up at Elenora, "Hi," he said. "Gee you are tall. Are all the ladies in Sydney that tall?"

"Now Billy, off you go and get clean before tea," Dad ordered.

"He's all right Stan," Elenora said. "Come and give me a kiss Billy."

"Gee, I'm too dirty. I'll give you one later," and he was gone in a flash.

I put on a clean dress and was ready for tea but was too frightened to go out. I was almost in tears when Billy came in. He had put on clean clothes but had forgotten to wash his face and hands and do his hair.

"Oh Billy, go and wash. No come here and I'll do it for you." I was trying to clean off some of the dirt from his face, in between his wriggles and yells, when Clare arrived to see what the fuss was about. He ran from the room and was safely near Dad and Elenora where he knew we couldn't touch him.

Somehow we got through the evening meal. Clare was very quiet and Dad didn't seem himself. Billy talked non-stop. He told Elenora about our cubby house, his chickens and pet lambs and only went to bed when she promised to inspect his treasures first thing next morning.

Clare hardly spoke and excused herself early because she had to be up next morning to catch the mail car into town.

Elenora asked me about school and about my clothes.

She didn't seem to like my dress and I didn't dare tell her it was my best. She also asked if I had any chickens, if I helped Dad and Clare very much, when Clare would be leaving school and whether she would be staying at home when she did.

To all this I just replied "I don't know," and as soon as possible I said good night and went quietly to bed. I didn't know how I felt about her. I didn't want to like her but she was so different from the ladies who lived out here. Her clothes were lovely and she was so beautiful.

Clare was already in bed. "Move over. Don't forget I have to fit in with you. Don't know why she couldn't sleep out here on the verandah instead of us getting out of our room for her," I complained.

"Hop in and be quiet," Clare replied.

Dad and Elenora had moved into the lounge room and as our bed was just under the window, I could hear them talking. Clare told me to go to sleep so we couldn't

hear them — Dad had always told us it was rude to listen to adults talking.

I was thinking about the things I could show Elenora next morning after Billy had shown her his things. Of course he would claim all the chickens and pet lambs and leave me nothing to show her!

Just then I heard Dad say, "What is it my dear?" Gee, he called her dear! "You seem very quiet tonight. Is there something wrong?"

"No Stan, it's just...."

There was a silence and I turned over so I could hear a little better. I knew I shouldn't but something was wrong, or so Dad thought, and I thought I'd better know what it was.

"Come on my dearest, what is it? Didn't you like the children?"

"Oh yes, Stan, they're sweet. It's not that."

"Well, what?" he persisted.

"It's no use Stan I can see it won't work."

"What won't work?" I heard Dad say rather loudly.

"It's this place Stan."

"What's wrong with this place? What do you mean?"

There was a long silence and I noticed that Clare had moved over to hear a bit better. I pretended I hadn't noticed her.

"Stan, I must be honest with you. I couldn't live here in this house. I just didn't realise it was so old or so far from town. Why, it's really in the bush. And no power! You didn't tell me there were kerosene lights."

"I'm sorry dear. I suppose I just didn't think. We take them for granted. I know the house is old, but I did tell you we would build a new one, one day, when I have finished educating the children."

"How long do you think that would be?"

"Let me see. Er.... Alice will have another three years after this, that is three years after Clare finishes. She'll go to boarding school next year and perhaps Billy will go after Alice is finished. I think we should be able to start a new house in say five years, given good seasons."

"That's just the trouble Stan. I'm not prepared to make do for five years."

"Look Elenora, you knew all this before and it was you who suggested I send the two little ones to boarding school."

"That's because I thought it would give us

a better chance here on our own," returned Elenora rather sharply.

"Gee Clare, did you know we were going to boarding school?"

"No I didn't. Be quiet and go to sleep." I knew Clare had no intention of going to sleep and neither did I.

"In other words you want me to get rid of the children. Look Elenora, we must get this straight. My children come first and their education is my first responsibility. One day I hope Billy will come onto the farm with me."

Who was going to speak next? It seemed ages before Elenora said, "I'm sorry Stan. I didn't realise how close you were to them. Not having a family of my own, I just don't understand. But I do know that I can't come between you and them and if I come here I will"

"That needn't be so," Dad said.

"Wait until I finish Stan.

It needn't be so but it would be. And let's face it, I should have done so before I ever came here, I'm a city woman and I know now that I could never live out here. The quiet is already killing me. The isolation, flies and heat are bad enough, but worse still is this house — no power and no conveniences at all.

"When you told me all about it, these things didn't seem to matter, they didn't seem important. Now that I'm here, right in it, they suddenly become alive.

"For the first time, I think I am being practical and realistic. After all Stan, that is why I came out here now isn't it? You wanted me to see it and to be really sure before I said I would marry you.

"I love you but apparently not quite enough. I'm not really cut out for this life and I couldn't marry you now.

Dear Stan, I'm so sorry to hurt you, it's the last thing I want to do, but if I married you I'd not only hurt you more, I'd hurt myself as well as the children. I think it would be easier for both of us if I return to Sydney on the first train tomorrow."

I wanted so badly to talk to Clare but I was sure she'd be asleep. I wasn't going to sleep. I had to stay awake and hear what they had to say next. But they were so quiet I wondered whether they would ever talk to each other again.

The sun was overhead when I woke. Turning, I saw Clare was already up. As I lay there the conversation of last night clouded through my mind. Had Clare heard them? I must talk to her.

When I reached the kitchen I could hardly believe my eyes. It was a quarter to ten — the mail car had already left. Feeling lonely and sad I had my breakfast alone.

When Dad and Billy arrived with the milk, Billy was chattering brightly but I thought Dad looked tired. He told Billy and me to wash up and play until he called us as we had to go to town.

"Go to town?" Billy questioned. "You were in there yesterday. Gee, can we come? What about Elenora, is she coming too?"

"Don't ask so many questions, just go and play. I'll call you when we're ready," Dad replied.

It was cool under the big tree. I wanted to sit alone but Billy kept asking questions:

"What is the matter with Dad and Elenora? Even Clare went off this morning without saying goodbye to me. Did she say goodbye to you Alice?"

"Oh please Billy, just play by yourself and leave me alone. I don't want to talk."

At that I climbed to a high branch and sat watching a bird on her nest. She looked so happy and content.

I felt sad and miserable. I didn't know why. I didn't want a new mum anyway. I guess I felt bad about listening to Dad and Elenora last night. And seeing how sad Dad looked this morning didn't make me feel any better.

I sat for a long time nearly falling asleep, my doll cuddled close to me. The peace and quietness was broken by Billy's call that Dad was waving from the house.

On the way to town we were all very quiet, except Billy who continued asking questions, even at the railway station. "Why are you going home Elenora? Don't you like us? You promised to look at my chickens and pet lambs and you didn't."

"Oh Billy, I am sorry. I clean forgot all about it.

Something has come up dear and I have to go back to Sydney."

"Will you see them next time please Elenora? By that time I might even have some baby rabbits to show you."

"That sounds great. And if there is... Oh, there is my train, I must get my things.

Goodbye Alice, look after your father. Goodbye Billy. Can I have that kiss this time?"

Billy didn't object and she gave him a little kiss. Then she turned to Dad. She took his

hands in hers, "Goodbye Stan dearest," and moved quickly onto the train.

Even Billy was quiet on the drive home. We went about our jobs and got things done without Dad having to tell us.

Tomorrow Clare would be home and everything would be the same — just the four of us.

VIEW World June 1983

The Parting

Alma Dickens
Ballina VIEW Club

ˆA stew boiled is a stew spoiledˆ I said. ˆJust watch it carefully and before it starts to bubble, stir it thoroughly and turn down the gas as low as possible.ˆ

Everybody praised my steak and kidney stews. I had learned the art from my mother who was a good plain cook. When the children were young I stretched the meal further by dropping in little balls of dough which quickly turned into fluffy dumplings.

"This is a good meal to serve on cold days. Don't feel too bad if you have a few failures" I said. "I was a terrible cook at first".

The time had come for another parting. My son Tony was leaving the nest and I was speaking not to my daughter-in-law, but to Karen. No diamond ring on her left hand or an intended gold band either. Just a little puzzle ring on the right hand. I was doing another unpredictable thing. Handing out advice to the girl who was going to share his life. For how long I didn't know, nor did they.

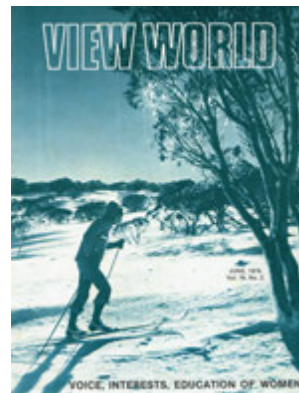
I thought something was afoot a few weeks earlier when I saw them looking in the "Houses To Let" column. It didn't surprise me. One becomes conditioned to changes these days.

A few days later she rushed in, eyes sparkling, happy and excited. "It's just perfect" she said. "We are seeing the agent tonight. Other people are after it too, but I think we have a good chance". Excitement is infectious, but the next day their hopes were dashed. "They won't take single people" they said. So they had to pretend and the next time they were successful.

I went with Tony to see the house. "Dear Lord". I thought, "The things they call Town Houses these days".

At least it was clean and had carpets, but eighty dollars for this tiny house! The floors were not even straight. Thirty years ago it would have been a slum. But I saw their shining eyes and happy faces. "A few indoor plants will make a difference" I said.

On Monday, Tony went to an auction and bought a kitchen setting and a book case. I searched through cupboards and pulled out odd jugs and dishes and my second best dinner set and packed them in cartons. I thought of the gift wrapped presents, the pretty cards, the telegrams, the congratulations that were received when my daughter Jane was married.



“I’ll buy some indoor plants for you” I said so we stacked twenty dollars’ worth in the car and the next day installed them in the old house with some reject armchairs and two bean bags. A mattress on the floor, pretty floral sheets and pillow slips — a present from my other daughter, and their own brand new blankets furnished the bedroom. The book case was filled with dozens of books and the house took on a homely air.

“It looks just great” Tony beamed. Never had I felt closer to my son; perhaps this impending parting invoked tender feelings. “Karen’s parents are taking it badly” he said. “Then I must go down and see them” I replied.

Tony had a few days off before starting with a new firm. It was the right time. A new job, a different house, a new life style. They were eager and ready to begin. But there were wounded feelings. Two mothers must meet. There is an affinity in the same peer group.

My husband had the car for a business appointment and I sensed the urgency for Karen was quiet and sad when she called to see me. I dressed carefully. The tailored suit and flat heeled shoes seemed appropriate. I had to make a good impression.

I was once again weaning myself off cigarettes but I sighed as I rooted through the drawer, found a new packet and rang for a taxi. I gave directions to the driver and we pulled up at the house. I knocked and the door opened. I was surprised. She looked younger and prettier than I expected.

I’m a hand shaker by habit. I reserve kisses for those I love, but hand touching hand is the first tentative seeking for a friend and so I offered my hand to hers. “I am Tony’s mother” I said.

I could see she had been weeping. “I look a mess” she said. Her profuse apologies about the state of the house and her untidiness embarrassed me for I don’t mind a slight untidiness, a bit of clutter, a lived-in look. Pristine cleanliness and perfection tell me nothing. Furniture shop windows are meant to look that way. but homes should show their inhabitant’s personalities.

I can’t resist books; they attract me like a magnet. Had there been a bookcase there, I would have strolled over to see what books she read or picked up a magazine while she was in the kitchen making some tea. There were no flying ducks on the wall or plastic flowers. Nothing to give me a clue to her personality. Just the “Wedding Group” taking pride of place on the mantelpiece.

She returned to the room with two cups of tea. I was standing looking at the photo. The bride in white, the bridesmaids in mauve, symbol of suburban respectability. “That’s my eldest daughter” she said. “She never gave me a day’s worry, so different from Karen. Karen was the smart one. Different as chalk and cheese from her sister.

Educate your children and you lose them” she said bitterly.

What can I tell my friends and relations?”

Worn out cliches came to my lips “It’s only a nine days wonder” I said.

“But they’re so brazen. She won’t even wear a wedding ring.” I wouldn’t mind if they were a bit more sneaky about it.” Well at least she had a sense of humour.

I still had my private thoughts. No. They weren’t sneaky. They were truthful and honest. I had to choose my words carefully. I had to talk to a stranger more than ten years my junior. I had to feel my way. And so we talked about the past. We rolled back the years, back to the hard times. Our strict parents. The precise rules for courting couples, before virginity was an expendable commodity.

My idea of rebellion was to sneak down to the loo, light a forbidden cigarette and then in great haste fan the smoke out in case I was caught. I’d come a long way since then. The air was grey as we smoked. “I’ve smoked forty of these blasted things in two days and I’m dopey with the sleeping pills I have been taking” she said.

Nostalgic memories invoke communication and we were communicating very well. We were using Christian names and she was telling me about the broken marriages of her friends and family.

“It could be worse I suppose. They could be on drugs”, I didn’t mention the occasion when we had come home unexpectedly and found the young people bright-eyed and giggly, their favourite pop group screaming from the stereo and the smoke of incense curling in lazy tendrils and permeating the room. For that matter, too, I didn’t say that my own friends would have exceeded the breathalyser test after our own parties or my own penchant for brandy and dry.

We talked ourselves out until her younger children returned from school. My task was done. “Yes, you’re a good mother” I thought, and so am I. The only difference is I have accepted what we can’t change.

Perhaps my visit had done some good; perhaps not. What did it matter anyhow.

Their course was set. Angry and bitter words would not change their minds. This loving relationship was being tested. I told myself I was rationalising, but in my heart I felt they were right.

And now it was Sunday. Moving out day. It took several trips to take the last of their belongings. We sat together and had our last cup of coffee. He held me close and we were both close to tears. I kissed Karen and they were gone.

We sat by the fire, my husband and I. “Only one left now. It’s an empty feeling” he said.

“Yes, you dear man” I thought. Perhaps I can spare a little more time for you. I had to spread it around before. Yes. I still had a lovely daughter at home. A child no longer who would not stay with us until she left home as a bride. This mature woman of nineteen loved us but did not need us. Now was the time to think of ourselves.

I felt restless. I couldn’t settle to watch television. I passed Tony’s room now, so tidy and empty. I settled into bed with a book. Now we don’t have to close our bedroom door. Now I could snuggle in his arms and we could talk in normal voices as we did many years before I had to say in a whisper “Shh, you’ll wake the boys”.

Tomorrow was another day — a busy day. I had plans. The bedroom opposite would be a utility room. I would set up my machine on the desk, store my magazines there, my press cuttings and the overflow from the house. There was a desk for my typewriter, and who knows, I might even write a story called “The Parting”

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, bobbled 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, the, 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.

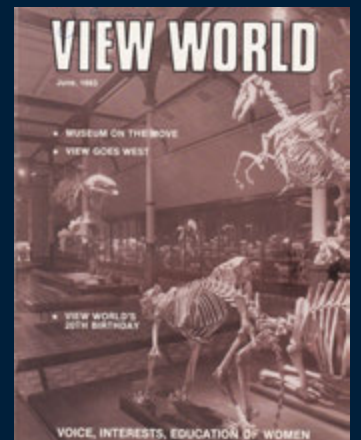
She’d halted a few yards from the open grave, under a tree. He’d tried not to look

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.”



The Red Steer



The day dawned bright and clear, giving no hint of the horror which lay ahead.

Trudy Crook
West Wyalong VIEW Club
2nd Prize Short Story Competition

Down by the creek an old man goanna clung high on a dead tree like some prehistoric sentinel. Only his eyes moved as he surveyed his territory. He calmly watched the beginning of the end...

Heat waves were already shimmering and dancing in the paddocks and the bitumen road ahead looked wet with rain as the mirages began to play their tricks.

The driver leaned across and switched on the car radio. The announcer's voice blared out false gaiety. "RG, voice of the Riverina, and it's time to shake a leg, all you sleepy-heads out th..." The driver groaned as the voice hit him and he fumbled with the knob until he located some music. Aaah! That's better! He settled more comfortably behind the wheel and lit another cigarette. He flipped the match out of the window and concentrated on another hundred miles of nothing.

The old goanna saw but he did not comprehend. He made heavy weather of his journey to the ground and lumbered off in search of food.

The tuft of grass disappeared with a little puff of smoke, then another tuft, and another... By the time the car had rattled over the wooden bridge across the creek, the blackened patch was spreading towards the fence and the stubble paddocks beyond.

The driver whistled as his car roared through a cutting — and his legacy roared through the fence into two hundred acres of bone dry straw.

Phones rang simultaneously all over the district and the three long rings of the fire call caused a flurry of activity as women hastened to answer. They listened carefully to the postmistress then sped off to summon the menfolk.

Joe, the fire brigade captain, cursed as the old engine spluttered and died, then roared to life again. He waited as his wife hurried from the house and stowed the big esky bottle of water on the seat beside him. He could hear the ice clunking against the plastic container as the water swirled and settled. It sounded good and he'd surely need it before the day was done. He revved the old fire truck and, with a brief nod to his wife, roared off down the track towards the road where neighbours were gathering to fight the fire.

By the time the fire truck arrived, the stubble paddock was finished and the hungry flames were busily devouring the horse paddock. The wind was shifting and turning with a mind of its own, driving the fire this way and that. The men worked frantically, dowsing the flank of the blaze with knapsack sprays and trying to widen the fire break to starve the greedy flames of fuel. But the fickle, capricious breezes

continually outwitted them, gaily tossing little rivulets of fire into fresh areas of grass and scrub.

There were seven hundred ewes and lambs in the south paddock and a party of men were sent to move them. The men cut the fences but the sheep were obstinate, even though they were obviously disturbed by the smell of the smoke. They refused to be driven and stubbornly formed a tight mob. The smaller lambs were curious but the old ewes stood their ground and disdainfully watched the men as they charged towards the mob with the truck. The men yelled and waved their hats; the driver banged on the door of the truck with his fist and blew the horn wildly. But all they managed to do was split the mob. Half the flock headed steadily for the cut fence and safety, while the rest jogged aimlessly back to the middle of the paddock as if to keep an appointment with death...

By now the fire had attained major proportions — the best part of five thousand acres had gone, with many miles of fencing. Three homesteads had been saved by a combination of miracle and sheer hard work but many sheds and haystacks had been burned.

No one had time to count the stock losses, but many sheep had surely perished. Bushfire brigades from as far as 30 miles away were now in attendance and the scene took on a nightmarish quality as men and trucks loomed up out of the clouds of dust and smoke, then vanished again.

Meanwhile, the women were fighting the fire in their own way. They gathered at a homestead well out of the path of the fire. Women from far and near, all pitched in to prepare food for the men. Even those who had been forced to flee their homes pushed their fears to the back of their minds and worked with a will. They worked steadily, pausing only to mop away the sweat which streamed down their faces.

Usually a working bee such as this would have had the old kitchen ringing with laughter and talk, but today was different... An implacable enemy was threatening their homes, their livelihood, their very existence and their men were out pitting wit and courage against the rampaging monster they facetiously called the Red Steer.

No, not much of a day for gossip. Best just to work steadily and try not to think too much about the death and destruction being meted out in the next valley.

Eventually, the cardboard cartons were filled with sandwiches and the seemingly endless lines of thermoses and esky

bottles filled with strong tea. Old glass bottles were carefully rinsed and filled with cold milk — some of the bottles still flaunting colourful labels from an earlier stage of their career.

They struggled out of the house with their cumbersome burdens — cartons of sandwiches and cups, copious supplies of water and tea.

Someone fetched an old tin dish and some soap so the men could wash and four of the women climbed into the station wagon and set out for Rogan's Corner, where the fire captain had requested food. One woman drove to town for further supplies of bread and meat and the rest went back into the house for a well-earned cup of tea before they tackled the next batch of food.

Like cowboys in some insane western movie, the fire fighters herded the stampeding fire towards the big clay pan. Men worked desperately to clear the area where they hoped to deliver the coup de grace.

If only the wind stayed steady! They had the fire boxed in on one side with a fire break and men patrolled the ploughed area pouncing on stray fingers of fire which groped for an escape route.

Ahead of the fire, the clay pan was a hive of activity. About 40 men ranged across it, some with flails made of leather nailed to stout wooden stakes, some with wet bags and knapsack sprays. The fire trucks were ranged alongside the men, with engines running in case a quick retreat was needed.

The men had back-burned a narrow strip at the far edge of the clay pan. A tractor with hastily fitted dozer blade was straining around the perimeter of the burned patch to enlarge the barren section into which the fire was being channeled.

It all depended on a host of "ifs"... If the men guarding the firebreak succeeded in preventing the fire from creeping over and getting into the thick grass of the stock route... If the wind didn't change now and drive the flames past the hastily prepared line of defence into the neighbouring scrub paddock... If, if... It seemed life was just a series of ifs" and "maybes"!

The men were tense and watchful as the fire roared towards them. Frightened, too.... only ignorance knows no fear when faced by such a foe.

And it worked! The fire roared toward the clay pan like an express train from hell, and died of starvation in the area prepared by the men.

Well, it wasn't quite that simple — a couple of wattle trees exploded into flames but

the old fire trucks were ready for that and drenched them with the big hoses. And small areas the men had missed in their haste burned fiercely until bagged out. But it was over.

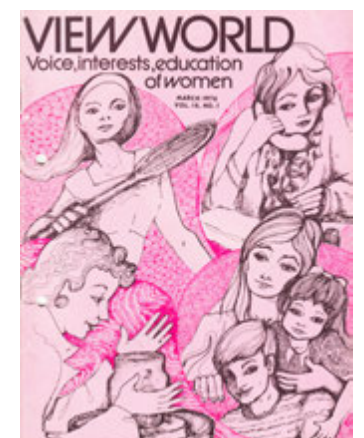
The young police constable obviously didn't relish his task as he moved among the dead and injured sheep, mercifully putting the living out of their misery. He mechanically reloaded the rifle and moved towards the next blackened and smouldering heap. He'd looked forward to a country transfer for so long, sweating out the years in the jungle they call the city, longing for the day he could take his wife and young family away to the peace and quiet of the bush.

The old ewe tried to struggle to her feet as he approached, but her feet were no longer there. She fell back on her side and the young constable put the muzzle of the rifle behind her ear and pulled the trigger. He caught a whiff of burned flesh and the city didn't look so bad after all.

Shots were ringing out all over the valley as men in other paddocks performed the same ghastly job. Then there was silence...

The men headed wearily for the trucks. For most of them, the fire was over and they were going home to bath and bed. Two brigades were left for the night watch, to ensure that the smouldering stumps and fence posts didn't start another blaze. The talk was desultory as they watched the darkness. They drank the tea the women had brought and ate the rest of the sandwiches.

When the sun came up, they too went home ...



If Only I Had Told

Marjorie Adams
Springwood VIEW Club



I pressed shaking fingers over my closed eyelids to blot out the pictured face in the newspaper. Staring at the kaleidoscope of moving lights on pulsing darkness, I tried to make my mind a blank.

Only for a moment, for a horrible compulsion forced me to drop my hands and again look shrinkingly at the photograph.

Under it in stark black and white, the printed words:

"Anna-Marie Simprino, 16, accused of the murder of Elaine Carrington.

"Oh, my God," my voice was a whisper in the empty room, "it can't be."

I pushed myself up from the table and stumbled over to the window. Leaning my forehead on the cool glass I stared out on to the road.

But I saw nothing of the living world of people walking, talking, busy with their own affairs.

Before me, as if projected on a screen, I watched a childish face surrounded with thick, dark curls peering down at me from the top of a cliff.

A moment, and then it was gone.

Six years ago it had all begun. I had been asked to join the Windarra Social Group, pressed to do so by my next door neighbour.

"Do you all the good in the world, my dear, help you to have more confidence in yourself?" The woman had nodded and smiled with the superiority of a female who had never doubted her own place in the universe.

More confidence in myself — me — who was afraid to open my mouth to bleat good-morning to the butcher — what would I have to say to all those women?

But I went — oh, yes, I went — and drifted around the edge of the group — until that day.

It was the president — I can't even remember her name after all this time — who read out a letter from some friend of hers who was a social worker, suggesting that the group become a foster-mother to distressed migrant families. She had in mind, for a beginning, an Italian widow with two little daughters.

Anna-Marie and Luci.

The other members had snatched at the idea and enthusiastically formed a committee to go into the matter.

They had interviewed the widow, a Mrs. Simprino, and talked to her little daughters, and at the next general meeting produced a photo of the girls.

Anna-Marie: Ten years old. Vivacious, pretty, ingratiating.

Luci: Shy, awkward, frightened. Six years old.

Anna-Marie, Anna-Marie.

The group could talk of no-one else. The family was poverty-stricken and the poor mother was a helpless, rather stupid wom-

an — unable to speak much English — but the child was intelligent and must have her chance.

Hovering, I had muttered, "And little Luci — ?" but no one took any notice of me — as usual.

The group, having found a new outlet for its collective energy, made pretty clothes for Anna-Marie, gave her books and toys.

She must be a good advertisement for them all.

But looking at the pale face of the smaller child in the photo I had come to a decision.

I would adopt — only in my mind, of course — little Luci and try to give her some of the beauty her sister was receiving. See that she had more than just the indifferent after-thoughts of the other ladies.

Slipping into the dank, dark little house in Redfern, I would smile nervously at the inarticulate widow and then sitting down would put my arm around Luci's shrinking little shoulders and try and talk to her.

Occasionally I would give her a pretty handkerchief or a cake of scented soap. Small things, but I had so little money left from my tiny income — and anyway children do not need expensive presents to make them happy.

Gradually Luci and I had come to a silent understanding, which the elder girl watched with scornful superiority.

A year — or had it been longer? — time had no meaning now — the members had continued with their self-imposed task of looking after the Italian family.

But then the inevitable had happened. The interest had at first waned and then disappeared as a new object had taken over. What had it been? The making of bark pictures or some such activity.

"But I didn't desert little Luci!" I said the words aloud.

That day — I gave her a new doll. It was so pretty, the sort of doll I wanted when I was her age; but mother wouldn't give me one — said it was a waste of money and I'd better spend my time learning something useful — being so plain I'd have no hope of getting a husband when I grew up.

I remember going early to the Simprino's house, intending to take Luci to the beach, but the widow had kept talking, talking and I thought we would never get away.

It was all about how difficult Anna was becoming.

"She disobedient — say no, no, when I ask her to go to the shops, she refuse to help with the work and the man from the school say she no go there anymore. What am I

to do, Miss? The other ladies I no see any more, and Anna — she bad girl!"

I hadn't wanted to be bothered with Mrs. Simprino's troubles — it was her business to keep her daughter in order. I would not see that Anna-Marie was becoming a fiercely envious and frustrated girl.

Was it, because of the developing sexual exuberance of her body that I rejected her? Italian girls mature early, and I...

Stiffly I turned my head and looked at my image in the mirror over the mantelpiece.

But I had loved little Luci, and she had loved me.

That day had been so beautiful. The sea so calm and the sky such a deep blue, with white gulls wheeling over our heads as we walked along the top of the cliff.

Yet — even then — that feeling of being watched — but all my life I had been afraid — of what? Had it been a shadow of the future? God knows.

And then it happened. Luci dropped the doll over the cliff edge.

One moment she was laughing, her small face pink with excitement and then — catastrophe.

It hadn't fallen very far — only a few yards on to a jutting piece of rock.

"I was always afraid of heights," my voice was a cry in the loneliness, "but there was no one else to climb down and get it."

Waves below, beating on the rocks, behind us the thick scrub smelling aromatic in the hot sun. Voices coming from a distance — none near enough to help.

And that unseen presence. Watching.

"I had to go down, hadn't I — Luci would have been heart-broken if she had lost it — there was nothing else I could do."

My palms had been wet with the sweat of fear and my heart had beaten heavily, like a drum, as I began that awful descent.

But after all it had not been so dangerous, there had been plenty of foot space and rocks handy to my clawing fingers.

The doll face, lying there, staring up with a bland, simpering emptiness, undamaged — while that other face — little Luci —

Oh, God—don't let me remember it.

One moment she was bending over the edge, watching me, and then her small body falling, screaming, to the rock below.

And above, her sister peering, childish eyes looking down at me.

Just looking.-

Only six years ago — it seems a black eternity — endlessly filled with guilt.

If only I had told the truth — made people believe me. There must have been somebody who had seen Anna-Marie sneaking after Luci and me? But I was a coward, frightened of the world's opinion, of eyes looking at me.

Just looking.

As those eyes on the cliff top had looked into my brain and left terror there.

Driven by anguished guilt I once more looked at the photograph.

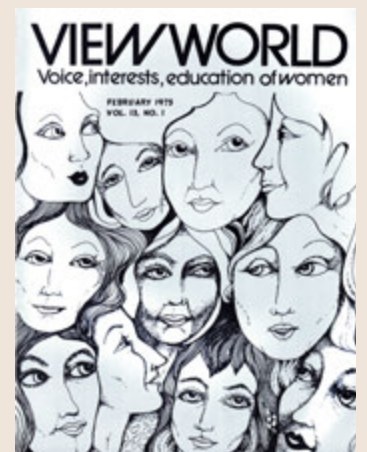
A beautiful young face, caught by a sentimental photographer in a moment of tearful pathos, looked out at me.

This a girl who had allegedly driven a knife into the side of another girl? Who would believe it?

The evidence was so circumstantial - only the gasping, half-understood words of a dying girl — that Anna-Marie had hated her for taking away her boy-friend — but the dead girl had been an inveterate filcher of other girls' boys, The murderess could have been any one of a half dozen vengeful females.

But those eyes in the photograph were the eyes that had watched me from the cliff top.

If only I had told...



Travelling COMPANIONS

Carolyn had noticed the small middle-aged woman in the departure lounge at Tullamarine Airport. With her neatly permed white hair, robin-bright eyes and pink flowered dress in a style fashionable a decade or two earlier, she seemed the quintessence of everybody's favourite aunt.

Evelyn Paton

Winner 1991 Arts Day Short Story Competition

Carolyn was familiar with the type. They would talk to anybody who would listen, tell them their life history at the drop of a hat, ask piercing questions—and Carolyn attracted the type like bees to a honey pot.

Now from her window seat in the aircraft bound for Sydney, she watched with growing apprehension as the little woman made her way along the aisle in her direction. Festooned with a variety of plastic bags and paper parcels, and oblivious to the fact that she was holding up at least twenty people behind her, she paused every thirty seconds to peer short-sightedly at the numbers above the seats.

"Ah! This is it," With an exclamation of triumph and beaming brightly she came to a halt at Carolyn's row, confirming her worst fears. Ordinarily, she would not have minded too much. She was an easy going person with a kind heart, but at the moment she had other things on her mind. Closing her eyes she leaned back against the seat, ignoring what was going on around her. In her head she went over the important speech which she was going to make that evening. "Madam Chairman, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed an honour. . . . She could visualise herself standing at the rostrum in the elegant hotel in Sydney, tall and slender, her chic midnight blue Thai silk dress a perfect foil

for her fair hair and blue eyes.

"My very word, that's better!" The tinny voice at her side yanked Carolyn back to the present and she opened her eyes with a jerk. The little woman was now ensconced in the seat next to her and had taken off her shoes.

Wiggling her toes up and down with delight, she emitted a long sigh of relief. "My feet are killing me," she confided to Carolyn in a conspiratorial tone, proceeding to rub them vigorously. "It's that hot!" She sank back with a gasp, then, after a moment, leaned forward again and, from the pocket of the seat in front of her, extracted the list of safety instructions and fanned herself with energy. An expression of ecstasy crept over her pink face. "Beaut," she murmured happily, "Simply beaut!"



By this time the plane had started to taxi along the runway, preparatory to taking off, and Carolyn hoped that the woman would now settle down, and keep quiet. But it seemed that her luck was out,

"So, what's taking you to Sydney?" Her companion turned towards her, eyebrows arched in query. "Do you live there?"

Carolyn stifled an exclamation of irritation. Was she going to have to put up with this all the way to Sydney? she wondered.

For a moment she considered pretending not to have heard the question, but she could not resist the temptation of putting the exasperating individual in her place. "Actually, I am going to Sydney for a very important dinner this evening," she said with a certain smugness. "And I am making the presentation to the guest of honour, Lady Anne Wallace."

"Is that right?" The other did not seem too impressed, and Carolyn continued rather pompously. "She's the wife of the famous industrialist, Sir Harry Wallace, you know. One of Australia's greatest philanthropists," she added for good measure.

"Is that right?" Still Carolyn felt that the reiterated response was hardly adequate for such an important pronouncement.



"Lady Anne was a first-class actress in her day," she went on loftily. "She played many famous parts — Hedda Gabler, Lady Bracknell" her voice trailed off, as she realised that she was flogging a dead horse. This woman would never have heard of Hedda Gabler or Lady Bracknell.

They were now airborne, and Carolyn turned and looked out of the window, her eyes narrowing in a frown. "Darn the woman," she muttered. She had quite spoiled the day for her. She felt discomposed, and shifted in her seat uneasily.

"Are you feeling crook, love?" Once again her companion's voice broke into her thoughts.

Unsmiling, Carolyn turned to look at her. "I have a slight headache," she replied stiffly. "I have rather a lot on my mind."

"What you need is a Bex, a cup of tea and a good lie down." The woman laughed uproariously at her remark, rocking backwards and forwards in her seat. "Remember that?" She poked Carolyn in the ribs. "Used to hear it all the time!" Carolyn smiled icily.

"I used to live in Sydney." A reminiscent look came into the other's hazel eyes. "In Balmain." She grinned pertly. "Of course, it wasn't trendy then like it is now. We had a nice little house with a pink oleander at the front door and a good backyard for the children to play in." She heaved a nostalgic sigh. "Happy days they were. Both our children were born there — a boy and girl — a pigeon pair you might say!" She chuckled and a touch of pride crept into her voice. "They've both got good jobs, thank goodness. The boy works in a hospital and the girl in an office."

"Really." Carolyn put a little more warmth into her tone. Thankfully, by this time they were not too far from Sydney and she would not have to put up with the incessant prattle for very much longer.

"Fasten your seat belts please." The voice over the tannoy warned them that they were coming into land at Mascot Airport and Carolyn's spirits rose. The plane tilted into its last circuit and swung towards the landing approach. As always, at the sight of the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House against a backdrop of enamel blue

sky, Carolyn could not help drawing in her breath in wonder and admiration.

With a long shrieking roar the plane's wheels touched, bounced, and the brakes bit. The aircraft slowly taxied to a halt. Immediately, the little woman stood up and began gathering together her many bits and pieces, once again holding up the dozens of people behind her.

"Oo roo, love," she called gaily over her shoulder as she left. "Nice talking to you. See you again, I hope!"

"Not if I see you first," thought Carolyn rather uncharitably, as she too made her way to the exit.

Having only an overnight bag she had no luggage to collect from the carousel. Quickly she went through to the terminal, where her sister Kay was waiting to meet her.

In the excitement of seeing Kay again and exchanging all their news, Carolyn completely forgot about her bothersome little travelling companion, and began to look forward to the evening ahead.

Kay had always been notoriously slow in getting herself ready to go out, and by the time they left the house, they were running late for the dinner. It was difficult to find a taxi right away and when they did the traffic was exceptionally heavy. The Fates seemed to be conspiring against them.

As a result, the dinner had already started when they reached the hotel, and they were placed at a table behind a rather large pillar with a poor view of the important guests at the top table.

Halfway through the first course, when they had regained their composure a little, Kay leaned over and whispered, "That man and woman at the end of the top table are Lady Wallace's son and daughter." She indicated a good-looking man in his thirties and a pretty woman of around the same age sitting beside him. "He's a noted surgeon and she's a lawyer."

Carolyn was impressed. "They look very distinguished," she replied, and craned her neck around the pillar. "I can't quite make out Lady Wallace though. She's hidden behind that huge flower arrangement."

"You will when you make your speech," countered Kay with a laugh. "Do you have it prepared?"

Carolyn nodded. "I've been doing it in my sleep for the last week," she replied with a rueful grin.

At last the dinner drew to a close and the chairman announced that Lady Wallace would address the company. From her place at the centre of the table a small white-haired woman wearing an exquisite

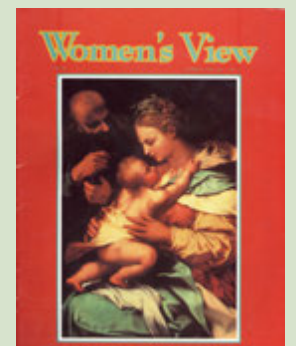
dress of sea green chiffon stood up. She began to speak in a beautiful clear cultured voice with that timbre which is essential in a really good public speaker.

Curious to see what the lady looked like Carolyn rose from her own seat to obtain a better view. Suddenly, with a gasp of consternation she fell back onto her chair, hands to her mouth, hot colour flooding her face. "Oh, no! Oh, no!" she repeated, unaware of Kay's puzzled glance. For the rest of the speech she sat sunk in embarrassment and misery.

"And I shall now call on Miss Carolyn West to make the presentation to Lady Wallace." Suddenly she heard the chairman make the announcement which she was dreading.

How Carolyn ever made it onto the platform or succeeded in blurting out her well-prepared speech she never knew. Her mouth was dry and her tongue seemed to be made of flannel. But as she handed over the delicate crystal bowl to the guest of honour, that personage slowly and deliberately closed one eyelid over one bright hazel eye.

"Oo roo, love," whispered Lady Wallace.



The Dream

Ferma McLean
Speers Point VIEW Club
1st Prize VIEW Literary Award

"We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." Amplified sound filled the supermarket, and Sandra felt ready to scream. What hope was there for either when one had four children and no money?

She reached for an orange jelly and nervously knocked it to the floor, bent to retrieve it and saw something dark lying almost hidden behind an open carton. As she picked it up and thrust it into her shabby handbag, she glanced guiltily along the aisle, and was relieved to see that there were not other shoppers there.

With rapidly beating heart she pushed her trolley to the back of the store and along to the breakfast foods. She stood for a moment to steady herself. After all, she had no intention of keeping her find. She just needed time to think. If it were handed in at the checkout how could she be sure it would reach its rightful owner?

She felt like a smuggler passing through customs as she paid the checkout girl, but the latter was totally disinterested. She rang up the cost of the few purchases, then resumed her conversation with the girl at the next outlet.

As Sandra hurried to the bus stop she came to the gleaming new supermarket, with its wide aisles, uncluttered by cardboard cartons, and its tempting merchandise, and wished she could afford to shop there. But every cent she saved at the cheaper one meant more food for the children and herself. When there was not enough she went without.

"Hello, Sandra," said a pleasant voice beside her. She turned to see Gail, whose husband had worked with Danny before the latter had walked out on his job and deserted her. "How are you getting on?"

"Oh, we're managing, thank you, Gail. But it isn't easy to provide for a family on a deserted wife's allowance."

"Why don't you get a job?"

"I would if I could afford child care, but Peter is only two and there is no one to leave him with."

"I'm sorry. If there is any way I can help..." Gail's voice faded out as she shrank from the possibility of being called upon. "I must rush," she added quickly. "I have to put these things in the car, then I want to go to the toy shop. They have some wonderful specials."

A wave of despair swept over Sandra as she stood near the entrance to the glitzy supermarket, clutching her battered handbag and yellow plastic bag of essential groceries.

Toys, she thought. It's three years since I've been able to buy toys for the kids. I've never bought a toy for Peter."

"Are you alright, dear?" asked a solicitous elderly lady. "You look quite ill!"

"Yes, I'm alright, thank you. I was deep in thought."

"I think you should sit down for a while,"

the woman insisted, as she led Sandra to the bus stop. "You must rest until you feel better."

"Thank you. Thank you very much," said Sandra in a shaken voice, unaccustomed to having anyone show concern for her.

She knew it was Gail's mention of toys which had upset her. The charities had been very kind. And she was immensely grateful for the food and toys they had provided for the past two Christmases, but she would love to buy something for the children herself. Her thoughts went back to find her.

The bus arrived at that moment, and she chose a seat well away from other passengers, so that she could take it out and examine it. Her heart began to pound again she realised that it could help to solve her pressing problems. She told herself that the owner could not possibly need it as much as she did.

She replaced it in her handbag and leaned back in her seat, totally exhausted. She tried to feel relieved, but instead felt oppressed by guilt.

She decided to return the item to its owner. There was a phone number inside it, written in a shaky hand.

Sandra picked Peter up from the home of a neighbour, who had reluctantly agreed to mind him, because he had a cough and temperature, then hurried home to be there when the other three children

arrived home from school.

She collected her mail from the letterbox, and despair almost overwhelmed her again as she opened an account from the gas company, a final notice from the electricity authority and a solicitor's letter, threatening her with eviction if she failed to pay part of her back rent within fourteen days. That meant they could be homeless for Christmas.

It was raining when the children tumbled through the front door, all talking at once.

"Mum, there's a hole in my shoe and my sock is all wet," shouted David.

"Mum, my class will be going to the museum next week and I have to take the money by Friday," cried Jane excitedly.

Lisa complained of feeling sick. Sandra felt her hot little head and realised that she must be put to bed. How in heaven's name could she seek help with the rent and other expenses tomorrow, with two of the children too ill to take out? "I'm hungry," cried David loudly. "Can I have something to eat?"

The struggle had become too much and who would blame her for taking advantage?

"You can each have half a slice of bread with margarine. David, please don't shout. I have a headache."

"Not bread and margarine again!" David's voice was louder than ever. "Why can't we have biscuits like other kids?"

"Because biscuits are expensive and bread is better for you."

"Damn bread!" yelled David. "You can keep it! I don't want any."

"David, don't speak to me like that! It's not my fault that we can't afford anything but the bare necessities. Heaven knows I try." She startled the children by bursting into tears. Jane was immediately anxious and David looked abashed. The two younger children were non-plussed.

"Don't worry, Mummy," comforted Jane. "I don't want to go to the museum. And we don't mind eating bread and margarine. Truly, we don't." She glared at David and put her arms around her mother's shaking shoulders. "Thank you, Jane dear," sobbed Sandra, as she fought for composure. "You are a thoughtful little girl. You will go to the museum. We'll manage somehow."

With a numb feeling she decided that she would have to use her find to meet the overwhelming financial pressures and provide for her family's needs. The

struggle had become too much and who would blame her for taking advantage of an unexpected reprieve?

She lay awake, long after the children had gone to sleep, feeling relieved and determinedly pushing aside any thoughts which would undermine her decision.

She slept fitfully and awoke in the small hours, after a vivid dream in which her mother had returned to life to admonish her.

The face which she had always remembered as benign and smiling had worn a sad and disappointed expression. It's my find, she thought! My mother would never have condoned such lack of honesty. I'll have to return it first thing in the morning. Please God, we'll manage somehow.

As soon as the two older children had left for school Sandra called the handwritten number, asking for R. Browning.

She explained to the soft-voiced elderly lady that she had found her lost possession and would bring it to her, if Mrs Browning would give her the address, and provided she could get a baby-sitter.

Mrs Browning immediately offered to meet the cost of the babysitter and her fares and to give Sandra a small reward. "I'm afraid I can't spare very much," she said, and Sandra stifled the thought that but for her Mrs Browning would have to spare the full value of her loss.

She forgot any critical thoughts, however, when she met the old lady. Mrs Browning had a sweet, kind face, not unlike that of her own mother and was effusive in her praise of Sandra's honesty. She insisted on making a cup of tea and offering delectable chocolate biscuits, an unthinkable treat for Sandra, while asking her about herself and family.

"Perhaps you would bring the children to visit me sometime," she suggested, almost pleadingly. "I am alone in the world. I lost my husband last year, and our only daughter was killed in an accident as a teenager. I do love children." "Yes, I'd like to do that," Sandra answered politely, but her thoughts were on the calls she had to make, before hurrying home to take over from the babysitter.

As she rose to leave Mrs Browning did a little sum, while explaining that she had drawn out almost all the money she had in the Building Society to pay her phone bill, her electricity account and an instalment on her rates, then she offered Sandra a reward of \$25.

"I do wish it could be more," she said and Sandra knew she meant it.

In the following three weeks Sandra

averted her eyes each time she passed the Christmas toy and food displays. This Christmas would be even more grim than the last two, as she felt she could not approach the welfare agencies for toys when they had been so helpful with her pressing expenses, and there were so many needy people.

When the phone rang on the Saturday morning before Christmas and the caller announced herself as Mrs Browning, Sandra could not remember for a moment who Mrs Browning was.

Then she recalled the kindly lady and guessed she would be repeating the invitation to bring the children to visit. Sandra's first impulse was to decline, but when Mrs Browning offered to pay the bus fares for all five of them and to provide a festive afternoon tea, she felt she could not deprive the children of such a treat.

They were overawed by the impeccable neatness and charm of Mrs Browning's small cottage, so they ate with some degree of restraint, but there was very little food left when they had finished.

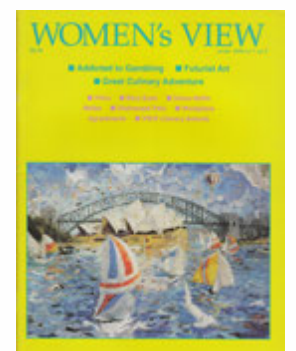
"Mrs Browning, you must let us wash up," Sandra volunteered, as they were about to leave.

"No, my dear. That will give me something to do when you've gone." She smiled at the children. "I hope you'll come and visit me again."

"Oh, yes, we will, we will!" they chorused, and Sandra added her affirmation.

"There's just one thing before you go, Sandra dear," said the old lady. "There was something tucked away in a secret compartment of the wallet you returned to me and I decided that if it brought me luck, you must share it with me." She held out a sealed envelope.

"This is a cheque for your half of first prize in the last Jackpot Lottery."



WOMEN'S VIEW Winter 1998



Jasmine

Margaret Greenland

VIEW Prize-Winning Short Story

"Sold, to Mr and Mrs Robbins!" I jumped with joy, turning to my husband Frank. "Oh, Frank, isn't it wonderful: the house is finally ours!" "Yes, it is ours, but I know someone who will not approve — your mother." "I know, but she will get used to the idea."

Her mother had lived there when she was young. My Mum was in her early 70s and had not wanted us to attend the auction, but our children were grown, all living their own lives, now we were free to have our house in the country and it was only two hours from the city.

We had sold the family home and travelled around looking for something special. When I saw the auction sign on the house something seemed to draw me closer; the house was everything we wanted: the previous owner had moved interstate but had made many renovations to the old place.

We moved in two weeks later. The house had been built in 1877; originally it had been the manse for the nearby church. It looked rather sad, this sandstone dwelling with windows to the floor, slate covered the sloping roof and upstairs there was an attic.

Inside there were four very large rooms, all leading off the hallway, the kitchen and bathroom had been renewed. Someone had also added a sunroom and a conservatory, Frank would love that for his orchids.

We unpacked everything except my antique doll collection: that could wait; we were completely exhausted. As I drifted off to sleep the whole house seemed to creak. We settled in and I was surprised when Frank said: "I'll have to fix the doors: they seem to open of their own accord, especially at night."

That night whilst I reading in bed, there was suddenly a warm gust of air, and what was that smell? It was jasmine but where to investigate and ventured into the hall, rubbing my eyes in disbelief. There walking along the hall was a girl, raven hair falling to her waist, dressed in white muslin.

Shaking all over I watched, as she opened the doors one by one and went inside, coming out of each room quite distressed and then headed for the attic. Following her I found she was sitting on the floor sobbing with her hands clasped around her knees.

I ran back to bed, shocked. Did we have a ghost or was it a dream? It's time I asked my mother a few questions, I thought. I rang her the next day.

"Mum, what was the reason you did not want us to buy the house. I know your mother lived there, but why did they leave?" "All I know is, they left when she was about 13. Your great-grandfather could not live there anymore, but I have

Mum's diary; I'll give it to Emma. Isn't she coming to stay with you for a few days with the twins?"

"Yes, she is coming for the weekend. Thanks, Mum. I'd love to see the diary so give it to Emma."

Next day whilst waiting for Frank at the local shopping centre I decided to do some investigating and made my way to the courthouse.

I had always referred to my grand-mother as Grandy; her father had been the local minister. I was surprised to discover there were three children, not two: Prudence, Mark and Amy. Grandy had always said her father was narrow-minded and strict. Mark had left home when he was 15. She never saw him again.

From the courthouse I went to the local cemetery. The graves in one section were weather-beaten, but eventually I found the family crypt — Matthew and Sarah Johnson — no-one else. Puzzled, I continued my search. Over in the corner was a lonely grave; under a magnificent old gnarled apple tree was a cross. 'Prudence Johnson, aged 17 years; departed this life because of her own folly'. But that was not all: close to the fence was a small grave, no marker, but it was completely covered in jasmine.

Wearily I rejoined Frank and told him of my discovery. "Well, Jenny, we have to face it: we have a rather unhappy ghost, but quite harmless." A week later my daughter Emma, her husband Jeff and their six-month-old twins Laura and Jake arrived for the weekend.

"Mum, would you mind the twins for a while? Jeff and myself would like to live in the country too; we would like to look around for a house, oh and Nana gave me this book for you."

"Yes, of course, we will look after the twins. I'll put the cot in our bedroom." After dinner when everyone had retired I looked at the diary, bound in very soft leather; it smelt very old. Gingerly opening the cover I read: 'Amy Johnson on her ninth birthday', which was inscribed on the flyleaf. The first entries were a childish scrawl. I skimmed through until one entry caught my eye.

"July, 1885: Papa has locked Prudence in the attic. I do miss her so. Nothing is the same since the young minister came to help Papa. The young minister has gone now, but Prudence is so unhappy. She cries when I talk to her through the door when Papa and Mama are not home.

September, 1885: I am still sad. Prudence is still in the attic. Last night I awoke to her screaming. Mark defied Papa - he broke down the door. I don't know how, but Prudence had a baby girl; we were too

late: the baby was dead. Papa stormed in and snatched the tiny bundle. Prudence did not know her baby was dead. Prudence died two days later. The baby was called Jasmine. Mark and I buried her and planted the jasmine. Mark made a cross which papa destroyed. "How dare you flaunt our shame?" Mark and Papa argued. Mark called him a murderer. Mark left that night. I never saw him again.

November, 1885: Papa says we are leaving this house to live in town. He nailed the door of the attic shut, but I see Prudence all the time. I am all alone now."

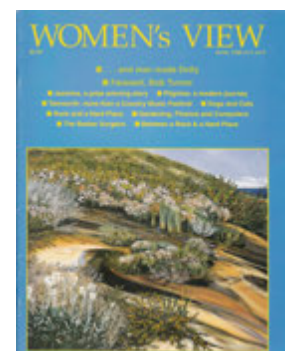
Sadly I lay the diary on the table, thinking what a pious hypocrite my grandfather was; but I understood that Prudence was still looking for her baby.

Later that night, awakening with a start, Jake was screaming. Frank and I leapt out of bed. Jake was alone in the cot. Where was Laura?

"Jenny, where could she be?" "Let's try the attic!" Racing up the stairs two at a time we found Prudence on the floor holding Laura in her arms. The smell of jasmine was overpowering. Laura was content, gurgling and smiling. Lifting up Laura I said: "She is tired, I'll put her to bed." We guarded the twins all night. The smell of jasmine was everywhere. I was relieved when Emma and Jeff returned to take them home.

I was unpacking my dolls at last. Taking one doll in a basket I placed it in the attic. The house was hushed: Frank and I tip-toed up the stairs — no smell of jasmine.

"Looks like she has gone, Jenny," Frank remarked. "I just hope she has found peace, Frank." She has gone but so has the doll. On the pillow was a sprig of jasmine but I never found the doll.



..... GREATER LOVE



She placed the package on the kitchen table and lowered herself wearily into the old armchair. Slowly she eased her shoes off, the bunions were painful today.

Winifred Potts

Mudgee VIEW Club

1st Prize Short Story Competition



by WINIFRED POTTS
Mudgee VIEW Club

1st PRIZE SHORT STORY COMPETITION

In the stillness the ticking of the clock was like a hammer mercilessly battering at life. Dazed with emotion and fatigue, the boy's short life floated through her mind, from the moment the midwife had held up him up and cried, "A beautiful boy".

Seven years since her last confinement but the surge of love and closeness she'd felt then had been greater than after the four earlier births.

Forgotten was the tearing, searing pain as, clutching the iron bedhead, she'd forced the man-child into the world.

Dear God, how she had loved him then and even more as the years went by and they became mates rather than mother and son.

They were living in a rented semi-detached house, struggling to pay off this block of land to get the children into a bigger, cleaner area and fulfil Arthur's dream of being a market gardener.

The boy had enjoyed a few years of happy childhood before the Depression had forced them out here to erect a shack and eke out a meagre existence. No plans for the children then.

The years had dragged by. One by one the older children had drifted off in search of work until only Arthur, the boy and herself were left.

When a postal note for a few shillings had arrived she'd known one of them had a job of sorts and still cared. Strange how it had always arrived just in time to stave off real hunger. Her lips twitched at the memory of the all-day suckers she'd always bought him as a treat. "Lamp posts" he had called them.

The walk to and from the post office was hard enough and the almost weightless packet had felt like a tombstone in her hand. Through the window the morning sun cast a glow over and around it. No need to open it. She knew what it was: a permanent reminder of the cost of her guarantee of a feed until she died.

Staring unseeing at the sun-haloed package, she knew she should call Arthur, let him know his long awaited parcel had arrived. But she needed a few minutes alone, to sorrow in her own way. The last tears had long ago been drained from her bone dry body so the inner torture knew no outer relief.

Arthur had filled in the forms, gone through all the red tape to get them. She hadn't wanted. What use were they? Just a constant reminder.

Clearly she could see the days, then weeks, then months ahead as Arthur examined and fondled them and showed them proudly to anyone who called. She would die a bit more with each showing. People soon tired of that sort of thing, had no patience with old folk's sentiment. Anyway, there were thousands of others.

She'd seen too much of life and knew where the packages would end, four useless mass-produced metal shapes in the bottom of the old tin trunk.

Surrounded then by others worse off than themselves, she'd been thankful that at least she had no young babies. It had worried her to see young couples with small children living in humpies, sharing one another's troubles and what little else they had.

Many a night she'd sat in a tin shack by the light of a candle tending a sick child and comforting a worried young mother.

The Country Club, a few miles away, had tried to have their shacks removed. Said they ruined the scenery for the guests passing in their fancy cars. They'd failed because the shacks were on ground owned by people like themselves who had allowed destitute relatives and friends to camp there too.

Even now her feet ached at the memory of the miles she had walked to and from the Country Club to earn five shillings. She'd had to be so careful, too, for fear the dole was stopped.

The boy had left school at 14 and tried to help Arthur establish his market garden. But with no money for equipment they couldn't do much. Arthur had been too old and sick, too domineering and had taken all the boy's work for granted.

Strong and willing, the boy had been able to get a bit of work in the market gardens springing up around them. It made life easier — he gave her every penny he earned and asked for nothing.

How old was he when he joined the Militia? Sixteen? Seventeen? She couldn't remember. Spurred on no doubt by Arthur's reminiscing about army life, his Militia nights and bivouacs became his only recreation.

She could still see Arthur inspecting the

boy and proudly brushing him down before he set off for parade nights. Of course he'd received some pay for those nights. She had always tried to see he kept it for himself but mostly he'd bought her some small comfort with the money.

She remembered the evening that war was declared — it seemed so far away, it couldn't affect them. She had soon learned that it could, and did.

Later the news broadcast stating so many millions of pounds had been voted to the War Effort. She'd wondered where the money had suddenly come from when just a few weeks before people were lucky to have sixpence for a loaf of bread and men were begging for work.

First the eldest boy wrote that he'd landed a "cushie" job. He'd managed to get a fair education before the Depression. He hadn't been seen or heard of much after-wards.

The second boy had arrived home, handsome in his new uniform. She hadn't had the heart to tell him that it wouldn't be the carefree adventure that he imagined or that his elder brother would be better off when it was all over. The girls joined the forces too.

Then the final leaves. With each farewell some part of her died. In the worried, sleepless nights she'd heard the steady breathing of the boy in the other room and had given thanks that he was still with her.

It had to come. She'd known before he'd ever said a word. He'd crept, half ashamed, to his Militia nights, hurt and defenceless against the jibes of passing AIF men. "Choco soldier" he'd said they called him. Him, not yet 18! So tall, how were strangers to know?

Arthur, full of British Empire, King and Country, hadn't even been able to talk sense in the sleepless night hours, couldn't see that she had given enough in three children. Why take her baby?

Sitting now, in isolated misery, she recalled that 18th birthday as clearly as the night it happened. The boy, tall and gangly, not yet filled out to manhood, blowing out the candles on his favourite chocolate cake.

As the last candle flickered and died he'd said, "I want to enlist now!" She could have wiped the fatuous grin from Arthur's face. Her own face had been so stiff she couldn't move a muscle.

Days of talk, sleepless nights. The boy seemed to see her point of view better than Arthur, who was trying to relive his own youth and the few years of glory a uniform had given him.

She had pitied Arthur then, because she knew the Depression had ruined all his

hopes and dreams. The memory of a few years of war was the only glamour left to cling to out of a life spent battling to feed a family.

At last the boy had made it clear he would enlist with or without their consent. He'd said, "If I go without consent you won't know where I am. It's not just the choco slurs, I want to be among men and do my bit."

She'd known for a long time that Arthur's domineering was making the boy resentful, anxious to escape and spread his wings.

So consent had been given. Dear God, how had they used a pen for such a purpose?

The boy was a man when he arrived home in his new uniform. Alone in the kitchen he was still her baby, sneaking bits and pieces of the favourite foods she cooked for him, teasing and tying her apron strings to the chair.

It was in the kitchen that he had whispered, "I've made you a pay allotment. After all, I've been your main support for a few years." Protesting had only made him laugh and tease her more.

The wonderful leaves grew further apart but were precious oases in a life of continuous news reports. Arthur would switch on the wireless at 6am and they'd heard every news bulletin from then until they went to bed; followed every military move and blunder until she thought her brain could stand no more.

Then the Final Leave. It was then that he'd told her he'd made a big enough pay allotment for her to receive a pension if anything happened to him. Almost speechless with the pain of parting, her protests were brushed away as, laughing and hugging her, he'd said, "I'll be happy knowing you won't be short of a bob. Anyway, it won't be needed — I'll be back."

They'd heard no more until the letter arrived from Singapore. She'd slept well that night. A wonderful experience for the boy, the letter had been full of the beauty of the place. The Japs would never get there; Arthur had been so sure of the "British Bastion" bit.

How she had awaited and devoured each letter. The other three children wrote too — George in the Middle East, the girls up north somewhere but the letters from Singapore were her life line. Of course, Arthur had always read them first, while her hand had ached to grab them from him so she could see the beloved writing and hold something his hands had touched.

They'd know the Japanese were in the Pacific. But, fed all their lives on the myth of "white supremacy" and "British superiority", they'd thought of the Japanese as

one thinks of toy soldiers, quaint but not dangerous.

The announcement of the fall of Singapore had seen them dumb and frozen in their chairs. It just wasn't possible! As the news bulletins came and went they'd realised it was not only possible but an accomplished fact.

Sleepless nights had been followed by days when they'd made a pretence of living. One sleepless night, praying, worrying, crying inwardly, she had felt his nearness, so close she could have touched him, but her arms wouldn't move.

She knew then that he would never return — he had come home for the last time.

Still hope rose and fell: they bought newspapers to read the missing lists, then one day his name appeared. The official letter, "missing, presumed dead", had been like an anti-climax, too late even to stir new pain.

Always hope, there were reports of stragglers coming out of the jungle. Putting his photo in a newspaper brought one response. Arthur wrote in reply but the weeks dragged into months before they gave up all hope of news from that source. She had convinced herself that the soldier who had written to them had, on second thoughts, decided the details were best left untold. So she'd never know where or how he died or whether he was still rotting in the jungle.

The squeak of the door brought her back from the past to stare at the sun-haloed package. Arthur's voice, "You're back. Did they come?" She pointed to the table.

He fumbled for his glasses and put them on carefully to avoid further damage to the arm, neatly bound with cotton. He picked up the package, studied their name and address turned it over and said, "You haven't opened it?" She shook her head in reply.

Carefully, with shaking arthritic hands, he broke the seals and unwrapped the package. He fumbled with the enclosed slips of papers, brought them into focus and read them.

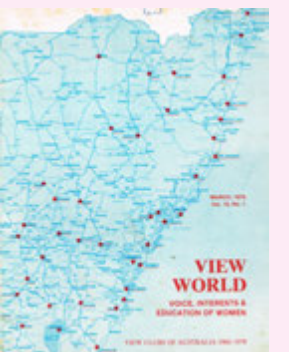
Finished reading, he lifted the four tissue-wrapped packets from the box and slowly undid them. One by one he held them to the light and read aloud the inscription on each one.

Visibly straightening his stooped back, head erect, proudly he lifted them all in the palm of his left hand and gently stroked them with his right hand. Pure love transfigured his old, unshaven face. To her, dumbly watching, he was caressing and loving the boy as he had done in childhood sickness. How could she ruin his few moments of pride and joy by saying what they meant to her?

He passed her the slips to read: a yellow card telling them where to address any queries; a printed paper ticking the boy's entitlements and how to mount them; lastly a white card stating "With the compliments of the Minister of State for the Army".

The words that sprang to her lips were never uttered — "My baby's life, with my compliments."

She let the slips of paper fall to the floor and shuddered as the sun glittered and glowed on the four War Service Medals, the price of the boy's life and her insurance against want.





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