

The Birthday Card

*... and other
award-winning
short stories*

*by
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The Birthday Card and other award-winning short stories

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DEDICATION

To the legend of
aj'r-berri –
the golden swan that will never fly.

1
Meat in the Sandwich

Richard sat on his unmade bed under the Megadeath poster, inching ever closer to his Nintendo top score.

Alison stood at the kitchen sink making everyone's lunch sandwiches, breakfast radio blaring.

"Alison!" Mother staggered down the hall, dry retching at the kitchen door. "Alison!"

"Not now Mum, I'm making lunches," said Alison.

Mother dropped dead on the kitchen floor, hooking the cord of the clock radio as she fell, flinging it across the kitchen.

"Mum," said Alison, "if you don't like Triple J, just say so!"

She turned to see her mother on the floor.

"Mum?"

Alison wiped the butter off her thumb with her tunic, then bent over her mother and checked for a pulse. "Oh, bloody brilliant Mum! And how are we supposed to get to school?"

Alison stood up and leaned against the sink.

"Richard!"

"Not now." Richard was less than 200 points from his top score but had only one life left.

"Richard! Come here!"

He put the Nintendo on pause.

Meat in the Sandwich

“What!”

“Richard! Come here! I think Mum’s dead.”

Richard frowned momentarily.

“Whatever.”

“Richard!”

“I SAID, ‘WHATEVER!’”

The Nintendo sprung back into life.

“RICHARD! I’m serious! I think Mum just died on the kitchen floor!”

The distraction was all it took – ‘kaboom!’ Richard’s last Nintendo life evaporated.

“Oh shit, bugger, bum, pus!”

He strode aggressively down the hall. “What! What! What! What!”

Alison pointed at Mum’s body.

Richard shrugged. “Well, what do you want me to do about it?”

“Check it out.”

Richard prodded the corpse with his foot. “Yeah, she’s dead.” He looked at his watch. “S’pose better catch the bus then.”

“What about your lunch?” Alison called after him. “I just made this sandwich for Mum. Do you want it?”

“No way! I’m not eating a dead person’s lunch!”

He stepped over his mother to examine the other sandwiches.

“And I’m not having the Polish salami either. Makes your breath stink!”

He snaffled the non-salami sandwich into his backpack and headed for the door starting a new game on the Nintendo. “See ya sis.”

“And what exactly am I going to do with this?”

Alison held aloft the Polish salami sandwich.

“And what about Mum?”

“I don’t know – you’re the oldest.”

The door slammed and Alison bit her nails pondering her mother’s body.

“Hmm – rent out her room?”

Ruggedly handsome 21 year-old Guy rubbed his chin, hoping his 5 o'clock stubble didn't distract Alison from his steroid-enhanced biceps. They threatened to split the stitching of his t-shirt at any moment, as he raised his arm a little more for Alison's viewing pleasure.

"Yeeees, I don't know," he said, striking an open-legged pose in his lycra bike pants.

"It's easily the best room in the house," said Alison eagerly. "Northerly aspect, not too hot in summer."

The estate agent had told her to press that point.

"And what's the rent?" asked Guy, catching himself in the mirror and realising his raised arm was now blocking Alison's line of sight to his penetrating green eyes, easily his most hypnotic feature.

"We couldn't go lower than \$115 a week," said Alison.

"Dunno," said Guy.

"100?" said Alison.

Guy placed both hands behind his head and alternately flexed each bicep. "Oh, you can do better than that."

"95."

"90?"

"Yeah – alright," said Alison.

"Great," said Guy. "Hmm, bathroom's a bit small."

Alison chased Guy down the hallway and passed him into the kitchen.

"Now, this is the kitchen," she said, stepping over her mother and hurriedly picking up the fallen clock radio.

"Now this is the dishwasher. You just load the dishes in here and put the powder in here, then turn this ..."

"What about her?" Guy pointed to the body on the floor.

"Oh, that's just Mum. Don't mind her ..."

"Your mother!"

Meat in the Sandwich

“Yeah – she spends a lot of time in the kitchen. Now to turn the dishwasher on, you just ...”

“Wait a minute,” said Guy. “Is your mother going to be staying?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Is that a problem!” said Guy. “She can’t stay here!”

“Oh give her a chance,” said Alison. “You hardly know her. And technically the house is hers.”

“That’s hardly the point,” said Guy, quickly checking his buttocks in the reflection of the oven.

I mean, what’s she going to contribute?”

“She’s an excellent cook,” said Alison. “Well, she was.”

Guy shrugged.

“You could use her car,” said Alison.

“Late model?” asked Guy.

“Current model Saab,” said Alison.

Guy groomed his hair.

“Fuel injected,” said Alison.

Guy wobbled his head.

“Twin overheads. All leather interior. Zero to a hundred in 4 seconds!”

Guy flexed his abs, flashed his teeth and struck a ‘Mr Universe’ pose.

I’ll be a regular chick magnet in that baby, he thought.

“And it’s a hatch!” said Alison.

“Oh no!” said Guy. “Not a girlie blouse car!”

He watched his reflection in the microwave door and his pectorals tensed, making his nipples vibrate up and down. “I tell you what – make it 85 a week and we’ve got a deal.”

“But you said 90!” complained Alison.

“That was before I knew about your mother. Now I have to run her car as well!” It’ll probably work out all right, thought Guy. I’ll need the garage for my weights anyway – and my drum kit.

And of course, the 1942 fifteen inch anti-aircraft canon he was restoring.

Suddenly, Guy was assailed by a pungent odour – a mixture of dirty socks, post-aerobic gymnasium and the back alley behind the pizza shop.

“What the hell is that stink?”

Alison ran to the front curtains thinking it might be Richard coming up the driveway, but Guy followed the trail of the smell to the half-open fridge.

“Pwor! What the ...” Guy had pulled opened the fridge door before Alison could return to the kitchen. “Oh! Help! Help! Somebody help me!” He was screaming like a smoke alarm at an indoor tyre burning competition.

“The Polish salami!”

Alison remembered, and hurriedly reached past Guy into the fridge. Holding it at arm’s length, she carried the sandwich to the insinkerator. “I’ll get rid of that right now.”

“Oh! My God! I need a shower!” exclaimed Guy, as the insinkerator happily munched the offending item to nothing, before it let out a long, satisfied burp as Alison turned the kitchen tap off.

“You’ll forgive me if we don’t shake hands,” said Guy heading for the door.

“So you’ll be moving in Friday?”

Guy had no time to answer before he was flattened by the front door. Richard bowled through beeping away on his Nintendo.

“Where the hell have you been?” Alison fumed.

“Bloody Mum didn’t pick me up from footy training, did she!” he yelled from half way down the hall.

“Well, you could have phoned,” retorted Alison.

“Oh and who died and made you mother?” Richard strode past the kitchen door en route to the couch. “Hi Mum. What’s for dinner? I’m starving.”

The television foumped on.

“Oh, that’s my brother Richard,” said Alison to Guy as he picked himself up from the vestibule lino, checking himself for injuries.

Meat in the Sandwich

“Guy – Richard. Richard – Guy. Guy’s going to be moving into Mum’s room.”

“Yeah, whatever,” said Richard. “Buy a vowel, you idiot! Buy a vowel.”

Alison walked Guy to the front gate. “Don’t mind my brother, Guy. He’s only twice as bad as he seems.”

“Yes – so am I,” said Guy, bending over the knee-high fence to stretch his gluteus group.

“Hey Al,” called Richard from the sofa, “have you seen my ferret?”

She turned to Guy as he flung a leg over his bike seat. “Alright – make it 80 bucks.”

The birds were a-tweeting. The trees were a-swaying. A perfect day to bury Mum down behind the shed.

Guy hung out the bunting.

The doctor, the undertaker and Richard waited silently as Alison dragged Mum by the feet, down the back stairs and across the grass.

The only hitch was Mum’s arm tangling with the cat-flap in the screen door, but on the whole it went well, Alison thought.

“Hmmm,” said the doctor, forcing back the lantana with his bottom as he crouched to examine the body.

“So doctor is there any hope?” asked Alison.

“No, I’m afraid she’s completely dead,” said the doc.

“Are you sure?” Alison pressed.

“Of course I’m sure – she’s been dead for two and a half days!”

Best to check, thought Alison. There’s a lot riding on this – 80 bucks a week for a start!

“Can we get a second opinion?” asked Richard.

“Sure,” said the doctor. “The undertaker’s pretty experienced with dead people.”

The undertaker stepped forward and glanced at the body. “Yes – the deceased is definitely dead.”

“Yeah, well you would say that, dickhead,” said Richard.

“Richard! Not in front of Mother,” said Alison.

Richard sneered at the undertaker. Bloody ulterior motive, he thought, and pulled out his Nintendo, with headphones this time, suitable deference to the occasion.

Together the doctor and undertaker folded Mum into her box. Alison lovingly placed one final Polish salami sandwich onto her mother’s chest. Head bowed, she stepped back into Guy’s waiting arm.

“How touching, he said.

Alison nodded pensively, her smile quivering ever so slightly. The undertaker set the lid on the coffin and hammered in the nails.

The doctor removed his stethoscope in reverence as the undertaker commenced a Bible reading that Alison had picked out the night before with a pin.

“And Balaam smote his ass. Three times did he smite his ass, until his ass could be smote no longer, did he smite his ass ...”

And the sun beat down.

The flannelette-lined coffin warmed.

The cheese on the sandwich began to melt.

The coffin jostled towards its final resting place to strains of Vengeance’s ‘Crush the Head of Baby Jesus’, which Guy assumed was his cue to enthusiastically stretch his groin.

Alison smiled, nodded.

And Richard could have sworn he heard amid the beeps and zaps in his headphones, the voice of his mother yelling, “Not the salami! Not the salami!”

He momentarily put the Nintendo on pause to listen.

“Whatever.”

2

Taking Care of Charlie

See this one? The brown one like a star. I call it Charlie's medal. I tried to look after him but he just wasn't meant to make it home I suppose.

We were repelling up this valley. At least we thought we were repelling. The Vietcong sucked us right in. You almost had to admire them. We thought we had them running but we should have known they were backing up too easy.

And Charlie's ahead a little. With all the noise he couldn't hear us yelling at him to slow up. Too late - he's walked into the middle of a land mine. He's realised it himself. The mines are pretty poorly done and you can see them quite clearly, but Charlie's just frozen. I mean, in Vietnam, even the home made mines can bounce up and blow your head off, so you're better off not stepping on them, you know?

So we're all calling to him, to Charlie, pointing the way out of the mines, "through here", "there's one to the left", "step to your right", and bloody Charlie just crosses his legs and sits down! Worst thing you can do.

And it's then we realise the VC have stopped shooting at us. We can still see them. A head here and there through the trees on the other side of Charlie's clearing.

But they just stopped to watch what we're going to do. Laughing and pointing - it's all a bloody game to them.

Well, I can see Charlie's foot marks pretty clear, and the mines too, and I'm the only corporal in the patrol. So I put down my rifle and pack.

"Hang on Charlie. I'll come and hold ya hand." I step lightly into Charlie's footprints. "Come on Charlie. Stand up and start walking back to me in your own footprints."

"Can't. Me legs won't work."

I've taken about seven or eight strides real careful, heel-toe in each scuff mark.

"At least meet me half way, ya lazy bugger," I say to him. You got to be careful calling out - it can make you lose your balance.

"Can't move."

He's really gone this time, I think. "You have to move, Charlie, or a sniper's going to pick you off."

No answer. I stop to check on the little yellow bums. They could have finished us no effort, but they're still standing around laughing at us. Just laughing and pointing and jabbering in that bloody jabber they go on with. Harris gets his lolly up and I see him shoulder his weapon.

"Don't shoot ya bloody moron," I shout. "They'll start shooting back and Charlie and me are in the crossfire."

I'm almost at him, Charlie, you know, and I can hear him going off like a poker machine pay out. "Oh Jesus! Lord! God! God! God! Hare Krishna, rama, rama, rama. Oh Buddha, Buddha, Allah," he's babbling. "Oh Jesus save me. Oh God. God. Satan. Mummy."

"What are you on about, Charles?" I'm right next to him now. "You're going to be right as long as you just shut up." I mumble under my breath, "If you don't, I'll probably kill you myself."

Charlie's just staring at my footsteps. "You got any cigarettes?"

Taking Care of Charlie

For a moment I actually check my pocket. Reflex action, but reflex can get you killed out here.

"We'll have one together when we get out of here. Now Charlie, you gotta stand up. Then I can piggy-back you outa here. Is that ok?"

I grab his arm, he grabs mine and he starts to stand up. I turn around slowly and I can feel his arms tighten around my throat as he pulls himself closer. I gag a little but he climbs aboard and I get my balance. He stinks, you know. Not just from the sweat of the heat and the chase of the patrol. It's true - you can smell fear. But only on someone else apparently.

"Remember when we played piggy-back in second class, Charlie? And at footy training. When was that Charlie? When did we play football together?"

"Don't know."

"Was it first year or second year? Old Johnny Gorman was the coach. You remember Johnny Gorman, Charlie?"

Facing into the sun now, Charlie's footprints are harder to see for some reason.

"What've you stopped for?" Charlie asks.

"It's your turn to carry me," I say. The boys can see the worry on my face.

"To the left. To the left," they're calling.

"My left or yours?"

"Is that a footprint or a bomb?"

"Could be either."

"You want to figure it out, one way or the other. Charlie's getting heavy."

"Step on it and then we'll all know."

I thought of the perfect answer about ten years later, but right then a VC bullet just about parts my hair. Charlie's smell gets suddenly worse, and there's no decision to make.

To this day I'm still deaf from Charlie yelling in my ear. But the click of the bomb under my foot was louder. It was just a homemade mine but it had enough to scar

me up to the inside thigh. Charlie to his credit dragged me the last ten yards.

Anyway, the army doctor's needlework wasn't too flash and you really don't want to see the scar, but that's what the medal's for - bloody Charlie.

I mean, I promised to look after him, but I didn't know how hard he was going to make it for me. I wonder sometimes if he did it deliberately - set up these weird things just to keep me honest, you know?

Like, he was always having animal trouble.

There was this one time, we're just moving from one dug-in to the next, a long line of us, single file like ants and it has to be Charlie who has the boa constrictor fall out of the tree on him. I mean the boa wasn't hungry or anything, it had just fallen asleep in the tree and slowly unraveled from the branch, then gravity takes over, you know and suddenly Charlie's wearing a twenty foot snake!

You've never seen two living creatures trying so hard to get away from each other, getting so tangled up with each other. Bit like half the relationships in the world, I suppose. At least Charlie didn't have to marry the boa.

Though plenty have - that's bravery you don't get a medal for.

Even in war your greatest acts of bravery go unrewarded. Unnoticed except by yourself. I suppose that's reward enough.

Like that time in Lai Dong. It was supposed to be an easy days' stroll - we weren't even in the combat zone. Just packing up communications gear to move to the next observation post. That's what they were called but really they were just eight foot deep holes in the ground with a ladder and a place to set up radio equipment. I just picked up a base plate for the mortar tube and I actually heard the first bullet zing past my helmet and bounce off the base plate. It went straight through Aby's neck. Straight through his 'Star of David' pendant. To this day I wonder if that means something. Suppose you

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shouldn't think like that, but you can't help wondering, can you?

Blood's spurting out of Aby's throat even before he's hit the ground and the corpman's run over to him and he's nearly picked off, and it's too bloody obvious that we're sitting ducks and these VC are hard core.

So Charlie and me, we just dive back in the comm. post dug-in and we're chucking rifles and helmets up to the top and no-one's had time to reassemble the mortar tube.

And we're trying to get on the radio at the same time, not that you can hear over the noise, and people are screaming and mates are dying or at least being wounded. Charlie's screaming into the radio and just getting static, you know, and I run back up the ladder and right in front of me I see Noel about to take a VC blade right in the balls and I pop one off right into that yellow bastard's eyes. Half his head blew off but he just kept staring at me as he fell, even after he fell.

And I see mates with half their arm missing, dragging mates with half their chest missing, and they're trying to get back to the dug-in and a couple of them have made it and a corpman's trying to sort out his medical box, Charlie screaming on the radio, buddies screaming in pain or mouth open with nothing coming out like they're in shock, you know, and I swear I hear a baby crying.

So I look up out of the dug-in again and it's one of the VC lying on his back and it looks like he's been hit by a rocket or something, he's almost totally dismantled, but he's making this real primitive sound. And I see his mate crawling over to him and he sees me and he waves at me to look away or to go away or something and I can't believe it, he takes out his pistol and shoots his own guy through the head. And the baby stops crying.

Then the other VC guy, he looks at me again and then crawls back into the trees.

I count our heads against their firing positions and we're outnumbered about three to one but our guys are holding their place, some of them losing a ton of blood, so I jump back down to get some bandages from the corpsman and I hear Charlie just scream, "You what?" down the radio. Just static. Charlie is totally manic by now, "Australian High Command - please repeat. Over."

Then loud and clear, even I heard it. "Sorry buddy. You guys got yourself into this so get yourselves out of it. We don't work on Sundays."

"They're gonna fucking leave us here," Charlie's just about turned white. "They won't come and get us out because it's Sunday!"

"You sure?"

"They said it about four times - 'We don't work on Sunday.'"

"Get onto his superior, Charlie!"

"That was the superior. Some bloody desk-jockey Colonel."

"Useless piece of ..."

Then a yankie accent on the radio. "What's your position?"

A nearby bloody Yankee chopper has somehow intercepted the call. Charlie snatches the radio mike up. "We're in Lai Dong comm. post 5."

"You're breaking up. We don't have your comm. posts on our maps."

"Just follow the noise, Sam."

Well those bloody yanks do a sweep over the whole Lai Dong Valley just to find us and you could hear the rotors over the gun fire, so I ran back up the ladder and there's no joke, bloody six of them choppers, fully stacked - guns, napalm, marines, the lot. That's yanks for you - they're bloody heroes when they outnumber you fifteen to one.

But they drop a full company of marines behind us, then four of the six choppers take off and honest to God, I have never seen that much napalm in one place. You

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could see the VC running in every direction but I swear not one of them got away. Sam hit them with bloody rockets and machine gun fire and grenades and tube launched napalm after napalm and some of the stench drifted over to us. Typical septic overkill, but they didn't need to come and get us, I suppose.

And they were so bloody fast to airvac the wounded.

So it's just about over, but there must be one yellow bum left, and I don't see him, but I see what he did. He lobbs this hand grenade right into the comm. post. And Charlie just looks at me, total terror, you know, and I don't know how I thought of it, but I grabbed a helmet and shoved it over the grenade then stood on the helmet, and just waited, like I know I'm going to get my legs blown off, but it might save some inside the comm. post or something, I don't know what I'm thinking really.

And I wait. And Charlie's staring. And he waits.

Nothing happens. The bloody thing's a fizzer!

And my sergeant turns around carrying a stretcher and sees me standing on a helmet in the middle of the comm. post and he says, "What are you doing dickhead? Do you want to get out of this shit or do you want to just fart around?"

Then I realise that Charlie and me are the only ones to have seen the grenade come in.

So they clear out the wounded and the other four choppers come back and we get all the gear up, squeeze it onto the choppers with the marines.

I go with one of Sam's back to the comm. post for one last sweep and he says, "Hey, you wanna grab that helmet off the floor?"

I smile and say, "Nup. Leave it where it is."

And no-one except Charlie and me know about why I left me helmet.

So we're sitting together at the door of the chopper as it wobbles off the ground and we start to bank away from the ambush site, when there's this sharp blue-

green-yellow flash from the dug-in and my helmet comes flying out, about thirty feet in the air.

And I look at Charlie, who's laughing. I look at the marine next to him, who's reading his pocket Bible.

Then Charlie grabs his radio and yells into it, "Patrol to Lai Dong Australian High Command. Request that Colonel Desk-jockey takes his 'we don't work on Sundays' and shove it up your arse. Over."

Never found out if the Colonel got the message.

Didn't matter much. About a week later Charlie got eaten by a tiger. I mean, we didn't even know there were bloody tigers in the jungle. No-one told us.

But Charlie just goes out one night for a smoke or a piss or something and this tiger leaps out on him and bites his head off. Poor bugger. But that was Charlie. He was always having animal trouble.

3

The World Fully Franked

And so because you asked, the name's Frank.

Frank Bumm.

Yeah - I agree. I reckon Frank's a stupid name too. I'd much rather have one of those strong, trendy Old Testament names like Joshua or Jonathon.

Or Trixie.

My first choice Old Testament name was Maha-shalal-hashbaz. But my mother couldn't spell it. Neither could I when I was born.

I suppose a name like Maha-shalal-hashbaz could get you into big trouble at school. I mean, imagine having a whole roll call dedicated to just one name.

I suppose Frank's alright. It's better than being called Scum. That'd really clash with my surname.

And I suppose Frank's better than being called Salmon Rushdie. I'd hate to be named after a fish. Especially if the fish was a crossed-eyed flathead.

I went to school with a guy who was named after a fish. His name was Screwamullets. Yeah, I know - it's not even proper English. Should be Screw-them-mullets.

Our headmaster decided that no-one was allowed to say Screwamullets' full name in public. He hates bad grammar. So Screwamullets had to have different bits of his name on different rolls. Poor bugger had to do four laps of the playground just to get his name marked off.

Couple of times he missed a lap.

So a note went home to his parents saying that bits of Screwamullets were not attending school. If this did not change these bits would be caned, suspended and/or expelled.

I think they made good on their threats too, but the details were sketchy. There was this rumour that the headmaster had suspended Amullets, but I seem to recall it was always the Screwy bit that was getting into trouble.

Old Screwamullets. You'll never guess what we called him for short. Peter. Strange, coz his name was George. George Screwamullets. He ended up changing his name by deed pill. Everything's so convenient these days. He changed his name to Mulletson. Said he looked it up in a book and he liked the meaning: "son of a mullet". I don't think he ever became a brain surgeon.

I had a fourth cousin who became a Brain-surgeon. You see, a few generations ago, that side of the family tree had been very selfish with their surnames. My great-great-grandfather was Mr Bigge. And he married a Gertrude Foote. So they became the legendary Bigge-Footes of Melbourne. Their son Arnold rather recklessly fell in love with one of the Arnotts-Biscuit-Fruitcake-Prendeghasts of Yarra Glengowrie. So the whole thing was Bigg-Foote-Arnotts-Biscuit-Fruitcake-Prendeghast-Bracket-Yarra-Glengowrie-Close-Bracket. The bracket words slipped in when Arnold was reciting the name to a rather dim celebrant at the registry, and under Family Law, once it's written down on a form, the name has to stand. The whole wedding ground to a halt when they couldn't find enough pens to sign the marriage certificate.

And so the name passed down the generations to my fourth cousin. He was always getting worked over at school, coz by the time the teachers had marked off his name, all the other kids had missed their bus.

The World Fully Franked

So he was always having to come up with an excuse for not fighting, and one day during his ritual bus-stop bashing, he blurted out, "Just the face! Just the face! Don't break my hands. I'm a brain surgeon!" And right there he got this blinding flash to change his name to Tobias Brain-surgeon. It stopped the punch-ups but now he gets asked really difficult questions at parties. Especially since he's a green grocer. He usually answers these questions by rubbing his chin and saying, "Take two cauliflowers and call me in the morning." I don't know if it's good medical advice, but it really works for him as a pick-up line.

Seeing my fourth cousin being bashed up all the time, really made me glad that mum ditched the Bigge-Foote-Arnotts-Biscuit-Fruitcake-Prendeghast-Bracket-Yarra-Glengowrie-Close-Bracket references. When she married dad she made a firm decision to spend the rest of her days just being a Bumm.

The Bumms were a very mixed family. My mum was a Mormon. My sister was a Moonie. My Dad was a Certified Practicing Accountant.

It was Dad who really screwed me up.

When I was young he used to force me to go to Sunday school, but after a while it got a bit boring, so when I turned 27 I just stopped going altogether.

It was about then I got a job with the Tobacco Institute as a billboard graffitist. I had to go around defacing advertisements for healthy products. I came up with some great slogans like, "Fruit juice melts brain cells." "Apples - think what they're doing to your lungs." "Milk kills - that's why they don't tell you what goes into a cow." But it wasn't all negative stuff. I put some great catch phrases on cigarette ads too, like "Tobacco restores your health", or "Calm down - take a cigarette" and "Medical authorities - what do they know?"

I also had to write pro-tobacco letters to the papers. Things like, "you have more chance of being run over by

a truck than by a cigarette”, and “no-one ever drowned in tobacco”.

Strangely, none of these withering arguments were ever printed, so one day the boss called me in and said, “Bumm, we’re showing you the door.”

“Nice door,” I said.

“Well, I’d like to see you on the other side of it”, he said.

So I cut a hole in it for him.

My next job was as a cab driver. I would have been a brilliant cab driver except I have no sense of direction. I once got lost for 3 weeks - in a roundabout. I still managed to get the full fare out of the Japanese tourists in the back seat though. They just staggered off laughing and shouting, “Is better than Saki! Better than Saki!”

And I’m hopeless in traffic. Like, there was this time when I just took off at the lights, cut off the car next to me, slammed on the brakes, gave the guy the finger, and then realised I wasn’t even in my car.

Once I just dropped the clutch, hit the accelerator, blew tyre smoke all over the car next to me, and then I noticed he was a cop.

Another time I tried to do the right thing and help this poor bugger push start a car. Then as he drove off I noticed it was my car.

There was this other time when I was driving around with this totally ear piercing squeal coming from the brakes all day, and then I get home and noticed the cat’s disappeared.

And I really hate it when a semi-trailer has to tailgate. Once I was up to about 120 clicks, and this dirty big semi was half an inch off my rear bumper, so wham! I just stand on the brakes! You should have seen the look on his face! Actually, I missed it but he told me all about it when he came to visit me in intensive care.

I really can’t win with driving. I mean I’m the kind of guy who can be innocently driving home from this Italian restaurant and the cops will be breath-testing for

The World Fully Franked

garlic. One time I pulled into the breath-test bay and would you believe I can't turn the car alarm off. Then I realise I don't have one - I'd parked on the officer's foot.

Well after this, the cop really has it in for me, so he follows me home, and paints double yellow lines across my driveway. Next morning he had traffic lights erected at my garage door. That afternoon he booked me for hitting 35 cars - on a video game.

I've never had much luck with garages either. My regular service station rounds up \$11.09 to the nearest 20 dollars. And I've been a bit sus about them ever since I put my GT Falcon in for service one morning and got back a VW Beetle in the afternoon. Now my car makes so many strange noises it's been signed up as lead guitarist for a thrash metal band. And it's sure lost a bit of grunt. I mean, now I'm always getting burnt off at the lights - by push bikes.

I hate motorists who speed. Like the other day, this clown went flying past me doing around 160 in a school zone - he must have been, coz I was doing 130.

I was in a rush because of trouble at my job. The trouble is I don't have a job. But I was still in a rush to stand in line at Centrelink for 6 hours. They treat me very special at Centrelink. I've had 47 different career advisers. Now I have 47 different career options.

The best advice I've had so far is to take one of my hobbies and turn it into a job. Is there really a market for *papier mache* jewellery?

Another adviser said I should work on a TV show. So I thought up a new twist for a cooking show - under water. I put it in a letter to a TV executive but he wrote back and said I needed help. I wrote back, "Of course I need help you goose. You think I can produce this show on my own?" I never heard from him after that. I guess it was the recipe I had in the pilot - onion-flavoured chewing gum. Sad to see television being run by vegetaters.

I've been a vegetarian for years. Anything that goes with a good steak.

But don't get me wrong - I still love animals. In fact I'll eat anything you put in front of me.

I'm not your average animal liberationist. In fact, I'm very hard to pigeon-hole. I think it's my rebellious streak. Like when I walk down the street I just love to stand in 'no standing' zones. Sometimes I'll even stop in 'no stopping' zones. When I go to the supermarket, I go to the 8-items-or-less counter with 8 items. Then I buy a packet of Tic Tacs just to show them.

Or sometimes I'll go to the 8-items-or-less counter with nothing. Then I buy nine copies of the TV Week.

I think it's this culturally-challenged streak in me that causes people to constantly ask me, "Frank Bumm, what's life all about?"

I generally answer by telling them what life's not all about.

Like it's not all about just being a great guy. Especially if you're a girl.

And it's not all about these New Age beliefs either. Well, that's what my astrologer tells me. Actually, I don't believe in astrology but that's because I'm a Scorpio and we're just naturally sceptical.

Some people will believe anything. Some people will believe everything. Like creation and evolution. I used to believe both. Gave me a headache. Now I'd rather believe that something made everything rather than that nothing made anything. Or is that everything made nothing and anything made something? Or maybe everything and something banded together with nothing to make anything? I'm starting to get that headache again.

Life's not necessarily just about making money. In fact, my life isn't anything about making money. Although I did start out with nothing and I still have most of it left. Thanks to a second mortgage.

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I'm right into prosperity. I have 247 books on the subject. At 29.95 a pop, someone out there is getting pretty prosperous. This is a great comfort to me. So you see - money can buy you happiness in a vicarious kind of way.

Life's not just about having fun either. People do some strange things for fun. They go out and get so drunk they end up spending the night throwing up in a toilet bowl - and then they'll tell you what a great time they had. It's good to see people enjoying themselves.

Some people smoke grass for fun. I used to smoke eucalyptus leaves. They don't get you high, but boy they sure clean out your sinuses.

Life's not just all about being ultra-spiritual. I had friend who tried all that. You'd open his 'fridge and he'd have Praise Mayonnaise and Miracle Margarine. And he always drove a Honda - said it kept his family in one Accord.

Some people get so hooked on religion. They spend the whole weekend chanting. Then all week they study the sayings of their prophets. They'll even get into fights about it. Personally, I can't take Rugby League that seriously.

And life's not all about spending all your time in church. Like I used to live in a garage and not once did I turn into a car. Didn't even develop an oil leak.

Once I was in this church and I went up the front, so the preacher said to me that Jesus was going to come and live inside me. This freaked me out coz I was wearing a tight body-shirt and tight jeans at the time. Had visions of swelling up like the Incredible Hulk right there in the sanctuary. Not that I wouldn't want a body like the Incredible Hulk. It'd be a great advantage when bludging cigarettes. I reckon the Hulk must collect a lot of lighters too.

And with my luck swelling up like the Incredible Hulk in a place of worship would turn out to be some sort of mortal sin. I think I read that in Leviticus once. So

instead of eternal salvation, I'd end up with 40 years penance in a hair-lined shirt.

I used to think life was all about having a good laugh. I still take this very seriously. In fact when I'm having a good laugh I get this really serious expression on my face. The heartier the laugh the more serious the expression. Once I went to an Eddy Murphy movie and I laughed so hard my face turned to concrete for 2 days. My whole body was jiggling with mirth but my face was like a driveway. It's quite entertaining to watch. My landlady sells tickets. It's a great way to pay the rent. In the end though, I reckon life's simply about developing a good name. Which aint easy when your name's Frank Bumm.

But I'm working on it.

How many A's in Maha-shalal-hashbaz?

4

The birthday card

Transparency - it is the perfect place to hide.

To be so conspicuous, so brazen as to be above suspicion.

It can be done.

In fact, we all do it. Every day.

It's probably the reason I'm standing here now, collecting my Ph.D. And it is mine. It carries my name: Blaine Ladderly PhD. It will look so much more impressive on the door than mere "counselor."

And so it should, for this is no ordinary doctorate. Mine is a thesis to solve unsolvable crimes, discover new psychologies, and impeach the unimpeachable. An academic masterpiece.

Thanks in small measure, I suppose, to The Man.

Our first meeting in 1985 was an anticlimax. Well, it was for me.

I had been fully briefed, even down to trivialities about his illustrious youth at university, where he topped every class and taunted the lecturers in debate, especially the Catholic theology professors.

Then inexplicably, he failed every subject in 1970, even his favoured psychology and anatomy, refusing to hand in his final assignment on human reproduction, despite an assured pass from the course director.

He joined the police academy the following year where all would eat his scholastic dust, especially in child-protection law, homicide and forensics.

By age twenty-eight, he'd risen to Senior Detective Inspector, advisor to the Minister and state union president. An impeccable career and one that earned him priority into restricted-access police information, Government and departmental libraries where he spent hours, days and years of free time cross-referencing the documents and diaries he would eventually leave for me in the boot of his car. "For Blaine" they were marked. "For your precious Ph.D."

For twenty-five years he never deviated. A truly driven pathology, not to be dismissed lightly - I was first to recognise it. I was first to publish.

But at that first meeting I encountered a thirty-six year old man whose sky-blue eyes were overcast in burnout, his light ginger hair unkempt, his face sullen behind a trimmed ginger beard. The O'Brien murder had upended his equilibrium. As first detective to view the body *in situ*, well, The Man had seen murders before, but this was unambiguous in its horror. A local pharmacist Lionel O'Brien, lay murdered, his genitals, groin, perineum and anus mutilated, his head almost severed from the shoulders. The pharmacist's own dirty socks and a savagely tight tie-gag had been used to suppress his agonised screams.

The Man noted, "Time of death: 4.15pm April 3rd. No forced entry; use of personal effects - killer familiar with victim's home." I was never one for irony until I read that.

The only other clue was a birthday card between the fingers of the unfortunate chemist, the cover of which featured babies on a conveyor belt with the caption:

The Birthday Card

"On this day, all those years ago, in that great baby-making factory in the sky, the foreman shouted, 'At last a perfect one! Let's go have a beer.'"

The 1969 copyright on the back of the card suggested it was so old, there'd be no chance to trace where it was purchased, and with no further slayings, the strongest theory was that the widely respected O'Brien had fallen victim to mistaken identity.

"First his daughter, now this," The Man would lament to colleagues.

April 3rd, 1985 - the day of the O'Brien murder and five years exactly since the pharmacist's only child, Ellen, had committed suicide. With her stunning red hair, so like his, Ellen had been the source of Lionel's every breath. No one was surprised when this angelic girl entered St Anthony's Convent early in 1970, but no one could comprehend that she would take her own life just ten years on. No explanation, just a one word note: *"Rachel."*

April 3rd. It might have been significant, it might not, but the investigating team found no causal link despite hours of searching.

The Man took personal responsibility, capitulating under the weight of this, his first and most public failure, leaving him unable to face the relatives or be present at the inquest.

Unable to cope with his everyday duties, The Man was referred to me.

"Lionel paid a high price for not selling condoms," he quipped in our first session.

"The pharmacist was Catholic, then?"

"With a name like O'Brien! I think so! "

"You used to give the Catholics a hard time at uni."

"You've done your homework."

"Is that why you feel guilty for this?"

"Not guilt. Just disappointment."

"Let the side down?"

“Missed something. Made mistakes.”

“That’s inevitable sometimes.”

“So I have your permission, do I? That’s gratifying.”

“You don’t need my permission to be human,” I said.

“I’ll keep it in mind next time,” he said.

Even after three months we had made little progress, his depression consuming him, so I recommended extended stress leave. About a year later I received his first letter. He was working as an itinerant farm-hand on a Lachlan River cattle property owned by a Lawry and Ros Goldby.

The main thing he noted about the Goldbys was their hair colour, “how ridiculous it is that two such black-haired parents as Lawry and Ros would have a daughter with such glowing, flowing, bright red flames. Alison is simply magnificent. And her blue eyes are just captivating.”

His letters proved a great coup for my manuscript - the kind of personal detail that really improves one’s chances of permanent funding.

The Man was cautious with the 17 year old Alison Goldby, but gradually he developed a close friendship with her. “Why didn’t you ever marry?” she once asked him, the question too brash to be comfortable.

“There’s only ever been one,” he replied, “Ellen O’Brien. A golden rose that will never die.”

“Sounds like love,” she said. “What happened?”

“Her father sent her to a convent. St Anthony’s.”

He turned to see if St Anthony’s meant anything to her, to see how much she knew.

Alison frowned. Said nothing, so he pressed her. “Her father was a pharmacist. Lionel O’Brien,” he laughed. “Lionel the loser. Had red hair - just like Ellen. Just like you. She had blue eyes too.” He looked at the girl silently. “Things should have been different.”

“You should have married her,” Alison said. “Marriage and children. That’s what dad says. He didn’t feel like a man until I came along.”

The Birthday Card

“So that’s what Lawry says, does he?”

Next day Lawry Goldby drowned in the cattle dip, trampled under a hundred hooves, The Man being the only witness. The police figured Lawry had been watching from his customary perch when the rotting wooden rail gave way and he tumbled in. The Man continued to prod the cattle through, oblivious to Goldby’s misfortune.

By the time The Man dived in and dragged his boss out of the pit, Lawry Goldby was far gone, bruised beyond recognition although The Man pounded Lawry’s dead chest and puffed frantically into his purple lips for twenty minutes before the ambulance arrived.

The doctor noted the time of death: “4.15pm April 3rd 1988 - accidental drowning.”

No questions were asked with such a reputable witness.

Lawry Goldby’s untimely demise quashed any celebration of Alison’s eighteenth birthday, so The Man made a point of giving her a card.

“Babies on a conveyor belt,” she mused. “Peculiar.”

In the months after Lawry Goldby’s departure The Man became increasingly preoccupied with Alison. Something of a father figure, he would write in his diary.

“What’s your middle name?” he asked her one day.

“Maureen.”

“Maureen! You’re kidding!” He could hardly contain his anger.

“It’s not that bad!” she protested. “It’s after a friend of the family.”

“Some friend,” he fumed. “It should be Rachel.”

“Yuk!”

“Rachel’s a great name. It’s Hebrew for ‘links in a chain’.”

He paused to summon up words of direct approach.

“You know, you have the same petite nose and mouth as your mum.”

She laughed. "Fancy my mum now, do you? Well you must need glasses because my mother doesn't have a petite nose at all!"

"How would you know?" he said quietly. "How would you know what Ellen looked like?"

Alison Goldby unraveled instantly. She had known about her adoption since childhood but suddenly her secret lazy dream-life had turned nightmare reality.

"Haven't you ever noticed how you and I have exactly the same eyes?" he said.

He was crying, but Alison's every freckle had turned white, her pupils dilated, her stomach punched her with nausea. In a single moment her pretend existence cracked right through - even thinking was no longer safe.

"Impossible! Never!" she screamed, jumping off the fence, and sprinting into the house.

"I just had to know you were alive," he said quietly. "I had to let you know I cared."

A minute's hiatus and Ros Goldby came, striding her robust frame along the homestead perimeter. "You have to go," she called. "You shouldn't be here."

"She's eighteen."

"It makes no difference. I'll pay you and you'll have to leave."

"You could never pay me what you owe."

Ros's trembling hands counted out a succession of fifties. Through the curtains, Alison watched The Man's face, struck by its now obvious similarities to her own.

"You've been a good worker. Take a bonus," Ros said bundling a handful into The Man's palm.

"Say goodbye to Rachel for me."

"Her name is Alison," said Ros, averting her eyes.

"Of course," The Man said. "Twenty thousand gives you naming rights."

Ros Goldby was struck utterly mute.

"I've seen all the receipts, Ros. All the 'donations' Lawry sent to St Anthony's. Your money might have

The Birthday Card

helped you jump the adoption queue, but it can never change my daughter's blood."

He walked off the property, caught a train back to Sydney. Back to the force.

Six years later he turned up at my consulting rooms one morning.

"We're about to crack the O'Brien case," he said.

"Breakthrough?"

"A decade's inaction and you call it a breakthrough - more like an anniversary," he laughed. "I can't believe no one saw it. There were clues everywhere. Actually," he regained seriousness, "you've had them in your notebook all the time!"

He reached into his pocket. "Except for this one." He handed me a small yellowing receipt.

Dee Why Newsagency.

14.5.70.

Greeting card 99c.

Greeting card 99c.

Greeting card 99c.

Sub. tot: \$2.97

Total: \$2.97

He drilled me with his eyes. "Do unconscionable things to good people and good people will do unconscionable things." For ten seconds his vice like stare impaled me in silence before he smiled wryly and looked at his watch. "10.15 am. You have until 4.15, Blaine. Six hours to change the world." He turned to go, then looked back. "Oh, and by the way - happy birthday."

"April 3rd isn't my birthday."

I pulled his file and surveyed pages of disconnected scribble. Prattle about birthday cards, and suicides.

And April 3rd.

I cantered down to archives to retrieve the O'Brien papers.

"What does the Births Deaths and Marriages print out say?" I mumbled to myself as I flicked through the file. I searched it front to back twice but there was no BDM print out and I could almost hear him taunting me. What does it mean, Blaine? What does it mean?

That incessant pen-clicking when I'm down these blind alleys.

"How did he know that they all died on the same date?"

"How would I know," said a passing archivist. I grabbed her.

"Get BDM to cross-match April 3rd with the name O'Brien. Just Sydney, the last 30 years."

"It'll take days!"

"I need it by lunchtime."

An hour later BDM faxed each certificate one by one.

Lionel O'Brien. Died: 4.15pm April 3rd, 1985.

Ellen O'Brien. Died: 4.15pm April 3rd, 1980.

But then a birth certificate.

Rachel O'Brien. Born 4.15pm April 3rd 1970.

Mother: Ellen O'Brien. Josephite novice. St Anthony's Convent Croydon.

Father: unknown.

"Father: 'unknown'? Not any more." Then came the original birth registration form detailing the baby. The Man's name had been included as the father all right, but had been crossed out and initialed M.B.

"M.B. M.B.? Who the hell are you, and where are you going to be at 4.15 this afternoon?"

Basic policing, Blaine, I could hear The Man say. His voice was so clear. Just follow the trail, Blaine. I knew him so well, now I had to think like him.

My hurried explanations seemed to amuse St Anthony's Mother Superior. "You've been watching too many Bruce Willis movies," she quipped with raised

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eyebrow, but nonetheless, she efficiently recovered the Goldby file and sifted it through.

"Someone's tampered with these," the Superior said hotly. "They're all out of order."

"Go to the back of the file," I said on a hunch. She did. Nothing.

"Go to the middle." Again nothing.

"Turn it over. Go from back to front."

Blank page after blank page. Then suddenly, a completed form.

"What's this? It doesn't belong here. It's personal."

I scanned it quickly. "Who's Maureen Bellarmine?"

"She was the Principal Officer. Wonderful woman. She used to counsel all the pregnant girls and sign off all the adoption placements. Why's her 1960 medical chart here?" The Superior secreted it away. "So, she had a hysterectomy."

"M.B." I said. "Do you know where she lives?"

"In that waterside mansion on Woolwich Point."

"I'll get a unit over there immediately."

I looked at my watch. "3.40pm. We should make it."

The unmarked police car drew around the circular drive, its blue flash panning the hedges. The officer jogged up the steps and knocked loudly. "Mrs Bellarmine! Mrs Bellarmine!"

The old widow shuffled to the door. "Alright. Alright. I'm a sixty-five year old woman, not an Olympic athlete."

She peeped through the eye-piece to see a plain-clothed detective holding out his badge.

"Oh! Police!" she squealed, as she opened the door.

"Sorry to hurry you Mrs Bellarmine, but we've had reports of an intruder around your garden.

Seen anyone suspicious?"

“Nothing.”

He held his two-way up to his mouth. “VL 2MC mobile 70 to control.” Just static. He tried again. No response.

“We must be in a valley. Can I use your phone?”

“Of course!” She shut and bolted the door behind him. “Through here to the study.”

The room was peppered with framed citations.

“My goodness!” said the officer as he read them. “Maureen Bellarmine. B. Soc. Sc. (Hon). Maureen Bellarmine. OAM. For services to adoption. Maureen Bellarmine. In appreciation of your fund-raising for St Anthony’s Convent.”

“Oh,” she said coyly, “My little career.”

“Little career, indeed,” he said, shifting to seven smaller wooden frames encasing seven youthful faces. “These your children?”

“Oh yes, I’m very proud of them.”

And I’m sure they’re very proud of you!” he amazed “I don’t envy a woman giving birth to seven children.”

“Oh, you tend to forget the pain,” she said, smiling weakly, and wondering why he didn’t seem to want to use the phone.

“Childbirth is a marvel,” he continued, running a finger across the top of the frames. “One birth is a miracle. But seven!” He chuckled. “That’s phenomenal - especially for a woman who doesn’t have a womb!”

He spun on his heels engaging her eye to eye. “It’s been a long time, Maudie.”

“I know you,” she quaked. “I know you. You’re that boy who wouldn’t leave us alone. The university student.”

The Man lifted his enormous fist and plunged it into her fragile face, a half effort that rendered her unconscious for thirty seconds. A full blow would have killed her, but it was enough to knock her septum almost into her brain.

“That’s for Ellen and Rachel. This is for the thousands.”

The Birthday Card

When she came to, he had dragged her by the hair into the kitchen, blood cascading from her nose and mouth.

"Don't kill me. Please don't kill me. My children," she whimpered through swollen lips.

"Whose children? Whose children, Maudie?" he menaced in her ear. "Our children. The children you stole from us, Maudie! Remember us? The ones you doomed to living death."

"Please don't kill me."

"That's good Maudie. Beg me. Beg like a dog. Just like Ellen begged you to hold her baby."

"It's the way things were done. We had to be tough. Please! Don't kill me!"

"Why would I kill you, Maudie? I want you to live for a long, long time, so that you'll learn what it's like to never be able to hug your children, to never hold their head to your chest, to never tell them you love them."

The first siren ricocheted around the Bellarmine hedges at 4.10pm.

The Man was sitting in his car with the door and boot open.

Conveyor-belt-baby birthday card in his hand inscribed in angelic script:

Dearest Rachel,

Lamp of my soul.

Be not ashamed.

I am first of many, so that we may be the last of few.

I am Prince among eunuchs - my manhood sold to the highest bidder.

The world must know what has been done to us but how I wish there was some other way.

So shall I awake a martyr in paradise or a demon in the flame?

All I know is this: as long as I breathe, I reside in hell.

Kyrie elieson my love.

Today, I shall again kiss sweet Ellen's hand.

He had carefully placed his pen on the dashboard, and put a bullet through his head.

Maureen lay on the floor of the living room, her tongue and both arms mangled in the sink disposal. She was pronounced D.O.A.

So fours years on I stand here, mortar board and gown, receiving these plaudits. Entering the new millennium as 'doctor'. Who would have thought?

Final tally: three murders, two suicides, and a porcelain red head with a plastic life.

But of course, the ledger is balanced by the brilliance of my Ph.D.

Which is surely a fair trade: to exchange a few otherwise insignificant lives, for new light on this trap we call humanity.

No more opinions. No more blind assumptions.

Just my data, which speaks precisely, impartially, transparently.

And gives us all the perfect place to hide.

5

That it were a dreaming

'Who will believe our story and to whom is the truth revealed? Behold, the anointed child grows like a tender shoot.'

From the ancient wisdoms

Will I live your lie all my days?

Why will you not believe my truth? Is it the colour of my skin? Is it the sound of my voice?

But I have a dreaming. And this you will believe. It is a legend of the family that once was, of the mother that loves a child, of the squatters who stole the mother's life and now live there in her place.

ϕε

There was a girl born by her traditional name Mariyala Wilca-wilca, Princess of the Quiet Sea.

Her father was the headland and her mother was the beach.

Mariyala grew up with her father never speaking to her, never showing love.

Her mother was warm and smiling, and she knew that Mariyala longed to dance.

One day Mariyala met the breeze and he asked her, "Are you free, as I am free?"

“I don’t know what free is,” replied Mariyala, “but I do long to dance.”

“To dance is to be free,” said the breeze.

And so they danced, Mariyala and the breeze, and the sound of their laughter reached the ears of her father. But he said nothing.

Her mother also said nothing – but she watched her daughter and smiled with Mariyala as she enjoyed the breeze’s delights.

And in their dance Mariyala came to carry his child. “We shall name her Becca,” said the breeze secretly to Mariyala, “for Becca means ‘loops in a rope.’ She shall form a bond between the land, the sea and the air.” And Mariyala agreed, vowing to marry the breeze.

When her father came to know that Mariyala was carrying the child of the breeze, he was greatly angered. He broke his silence with a thunder, and spoke at last to Mariyala, saying, “You shall not marry the breeze, for he is not one of us. He is different.

And you shall not cast your eye on his child that you carry, for it is the child of the very darkness.”

Then he threw huge rocks down at Mariyala so that she retreated some way into the land and her mother formed a barrier to protect her daughter.

In the evening the breeze came to dance again with Mariyala but he could not find her.

Instead he found her mother who warned him, “By your very life you shall never return here, for Mariyala’s father, my husband, seeks to kill you for this thing that you have done.”

“I must come here,” said the breeze, “for I love Mariyala more than my life.”

“My husband will kill you if he sees you with Mariyala,” insisted the mother. “You must go from here.”

But it was too late. Mariyala’s father heard the voice of the breeze and thundered at him, hurling rocks at the breeze, but the breeze escaped between the trees.

That it were a dreaming

From there, he called to Mariyala in words that heightened the spirit essence within her.

She caught his words and answered in a whisper.

Every night for three months the breeze would come to the trees and sing his love to Mariyala. She would kiss the air at the sound of his voice, but she could never escape to him. She remained trapped between her mother's protection and her father's anger.

And so the day came when she would give birth to Becca, a golden swan.

'Can a woman forget the fruit of her womb, or the child that suckled at her breast? Likewise, I will never forget you. Look – I have engraved your name on the palm of my hand.'

From the ancient wisdoms

For eighteen days and eighteen nights Mariyala tended to Becca, loving her and providing for her.

For eighteen days and eighteen nights the breeze would come and wrap himself around Becca, caressing and protecting her.

And the three grew in their union, so that Mariyala's mother became jealous and told her husband what had happened.

So the headland called to the-land-beyond-the-great-divide to come in the evening and swallow the child. "Follow the breeze," he said, "and he will lead you to it."

The very next night the-land-beyond-the-great-divide flew on the back of the breeze and overcame him. The-land-beyond-the-great-divide pushed back the waters of Mariyala and scooped up the child, carrying her away. The-land-beyond-the-great-divide did not swallow the child, but shackled Becca into the yoke of a working beast, placing on her back burdens for which a golden swan was never created.

And the years and the dust of the-land-beyond-the-great-divide covered Becca, so that she no longer saw

herself dressed in golden down, but only in browns and blacks and greys.

This is why some tell the legend of Aj'r-berri, the emu with hidden feathers of gold.

And this is why the breeze howls through the trees at night calling for his love, and why he roams the-land-beyond-the-great-divide looking for his daughter. And this is why, when the beach releases Mariyala back into the sea, her soul remains lifeless in the brackish lagoon while her spirit essence is lost in the ocean.

And this is why, when the breeze once again dances with the sea, the spirit essence of Mariyala is enraged against the headland.

And this is why to this day, the headland still hurls rocks at the sea, and why the breeze still wrestles with the sands of the beach – for there is no bond between the land the sea and the air. It has been stolen to the-land-beyond-the-great-divide.

ϕε

'It shall be restored to you, the years that the locust has eaten. You shall be lifted up, given hope and you shall prosper, for I will bring you home from the land where you were sent.'

From the ancient wisdoms

So can you believe my truth?

Or will you forever be distracted by the colour of my skin and the sound of my voice?

Shall Becca ever know the dreaming the breeze has for her?

Oh that it were a mere dreaming.

Oh that it were.

6

Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

“Was that my agent? Was that my agent on the phone?”

From his wicker throne on the back porch, Alan could hear the hand piece going back in the cradle, the conversation having been tantalisingly on the cusp of earshot.

“Was that my agent?” he queried again as Janice kicked open the fly screen door and came to him with his tea.

“No, it wasn’t your agent,” she replied, rolling her eyes at the tedium of having given her husband the same answer after every telephone call for the last two years.

“Ridiculous,” he humphed. “There must be a bit part in a commercial or a voice over or something out there. Richard’s just not trying hard enough.”

He flapped his Sydney Morning Herald like he was laying out a new bed sheet. “I’ll phone him in a minute and give him a blast.”

The old man noticed Janice mouthing the words with him. “Don’t be insolent,” he growled. “Richard’s just not trying and I will phone him.”

She sat down in her own wicker chair and braced herself as Alan took his first sip of tea.

“Oh, not hot enough, Jannie! Not hot enough.” This too she might have lip-synced with him, but she dared not. “You call this a cup of tea! It has to be hot, Jannie. Hot.”

"I boiled it three times," she protested, "then I brought it straight out as soon as it had drawn. It'd be too hot for anybody else!"

"Well, I'm not anybody else. You know I like it burning everything as it goes down."

"You've deadened all the nerves in your throat," she breathed to herself as she took the cup back to the kitchen. "Stupid man."

"And not in the microwave," he called after her. "Warm it the proper way - on the stove."

In the kitchen Janice muttered to herself, knowing it would do no good to argue. He would only shout her down with his opera-trained voice. She closed the kitchen door so Alan wouldn't hear the ding of the microwave, then dialed seventy seconds, praying he wouldn't come in looking for biscuits.

"Oh, bring the biscuits when you come back," he called, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well who was it?" Alan asked, as Janice returned with a suitably hot cup of tea.

"Who was what?" she replied.

"Who was on the phone? If it wasn't Richard, then who was it? One of your no talent students, I suppose."

"Plenty of my students have plenty of talent," Janice replied. "They get their fair share of auditions. And call backs. And parts."

"So much for standards," he said flapping his broad sheet, "So which nonentity was it this time?"

"It wasn't a student," she said. "It was Lorelle."

"Pah! What does your stupid sister want now?"

"Nothing. Nothing really."

"Don't say nothing, when it was clearly something!"

Alan insisted. "It all seemed pretty animated from what I could tell. That's why I thought it was Richard. Thought you were giving him a serve. Suppose I should have known better. You always take his side." He sipped his tea. "Humph. Nearly hot enough. Suppose that'll do. So, what were you talking about?"

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“What?” Janice snapped, having almost raised the open page of *The Great Gatsby* to her eyes.

“What were you discussing so intensely with your sister? And don’t tell me, ‘nothing’.”

“Oh just Cathy,” Janice answered fumbling for a change of subject before he could probe further. “Biscuit?”

“Oh, not the savouries. Is that all we’ve got? Savouries! I wanted the chocolate ones. I’m sure I saw chocolate ones.”

“They’re not good for your diabetes,” Janice goaded him, knowing a fully blown argument about his health and eating habits was more palatable than his usual line on her sister and niece.

“Probably right.” He acquiesced, recognising her game and realising he was onto something. “So, what about Cathy?”

Somehow, she wasn’t surprised he’d forgotten. “The surgeon took the lot, and a little bit of bowel too, but he doesn’t think it’s spread to the stomach, although they took a biopsy.”

“Is she up and walking?”

“The surgery was only yesterday. Give her some time.”

“Oh Jannie.” He laughed. “Come on. When I had cancer surgery I was up the next day - both times!”

“You were not.”

“Of course I was. When they took that section of bowel I was up just a few hours later.”

“Hoh!” she coughed. “What rubbish. You slept through a whole day, then moaned for the next twenty-four hours.”

“And when they took the kidney,” Alan ignored the interjection, “I was eating and walking around the ward inside a day.”

“You were moaning and groaning the ward down,” she said. “And you never let up on that poor nurse’s buzzer.”

Alan's thoughts were on such a roll he hardly noticed Janice's interruption. "Cathy's too weak-minded. You have to have some fight to beat cancer, and Cathy just doesn't have it. I've lived with cancer for twenty years and I've never let it get the better of me. That's the key. I'm not surprised she's giving in. All her life she's been weak. So self-centred. It's always been about her getting the easy life and now she has to fight a bit she just doesn't have it."

"Go easy." Janice tried to slow his momentum but there was no stopping it.

"Cathy's brought this on herself. She ignored the signs months ago," Alan said finally. "She's just getting what she deserves."

The greatest shame Janice felt was not that the man she had married thought this way, but that after thirty-five years of marriage, she found herself agreeing with him as a matter of well-worn routine.

Alan flapped his newspaper pleased with his triumph, then sipped his tea and took a handful of savoury biscuits. Even with his mouth full, Janice dared not break the silence.

He squinted at the crossword. "That can't be right. Eight down - seven letters. Japanese for tidal wave. Starts with 't', an 'n' in the middle, it has to be tsunami, but to fit it has to end with an 'i'."

"That's right, isn't it?" Janice said, relieved by the indifference of a crossword. "Tsunami does end with an 'i'."

"No it doesn't," he patronised. "It ends with an 'e'."

"Hand me that dictionary," Janice said, certain this was a bet she could win.

"I'm telling you, it's an 'e'," he said.

She thumbed through the pages mumbling the index words at the top of the pages.

"It's not here," she grumbled.

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Alan shook his head. "Ha! What do those Oxford dons do with their time, if they can't put a perfectly common word like tsunami in their dictionary?"

"I'm sure it ends with an 'i,'" Janice insisted.

"No it doesn't, Jannie," he persisted. "Never once have I ever seen the word with an 'i'. Always an 'e'."

"I'll get the Dictionary of Geography," said Janice, certain that for the first time in her married life she might be able to actually prove him wrong.

"No, don't worry. The crossword's definitely wrong. I'll write to the Herald about it."

Janice went inside to the bookshelf and pulled down the Dictionary of Geography. The nervous excitement created by the unfamiliar scent of victory made the pages too thick to turn and the print too small to focus, but eventually she found it.

"It's an 'i,'" she called from the drawing room.

"No, no," came his reply. "You're wrong Jannie. You're wrong. Definitely an 'e'."

"Well if I'm wrong," she said kicking open the screen door with newfound conviction, "then the Penguin Dictionary of Geography is wrong too."

Janice thrust the paperback under his nose.

"Oh really! Unbelievable!" he coughed. "Even the Penguin dictionary has it wrong. I'll have to write to them too!"

Janice returned the book to the shelf, and the biscuits to the pantry, where she pondered the encroaching coolness on the back porch.

"You better come in and get ready for dinner. Rohan will be here soon," she called to her husband from the kitchen.

"Does he have to come around?" Alan said from the porch, his voice now a little raspy with the colder twilight.

"It is Mother's Day," she said. "A boy's entitled to see his mother on Mother's Day."

The screen door clanked behind him as he strode with the gait of a man thirty years his junior, down the hall to the kitchen putting his tea mug in the sink.

"I don't see why. My son doesn't come to see me on Mother's Day. Why should yours?"

"You're not a mother," she answered.

"You know what I mean," he said trying unsuccessfully to clear his throat.

"Graham's relationship with you is different to Rohan's relationship with me," she said. "Graham has a lot on. He's very busy."

And besides, she thought, he hates your guts.

"Graham's all wrapped up in himself," he replied. "He's not the man I raised him to be. Not that Rohan's much different. All those years when he was a kid I tried to have some influence on him, but he's just like his father. A real bore."

"Go have your shower," she said, cutting him off before he started on her first husband. "Rohan will be here any minute."

The old man almost power-walked back down the hall to the bedroom and its *en suite*.

He monitored his fitness as he went, proud that he hadn't succumbed to the maladies that had beset so many of his contemporaries, although the repeated mention of Rohan's name had set his shoulder twitching. There was this rather scratchy throat, which he attempted to see off with a few vocal exercises, as he rolled back the door to the shower recess.

"Hmmm. Hmm. Hmmm. Hummmaaaar." The *voce basso* did not reverberate around the *en suite* as it usually did. Rather than free his voice up, the humming seemed to make it worse. He tried to make it louder, but the harder he tried, the squeakier his voice became, until nothing but a thin wheeze of air would come, where most days would be a top A flat in falsetto.

His shoulder continued to twitch as he noticed for the first time in his life, the claustrophobic confines of the

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shower recess. He shut off the water and called out to Jannie, but all that would come was a pathetic dry whisper. He banged on the glass and shakily slid the door back to reach for his towel, dropping it twice before managing to wrap it around himself. He sat on the toilet with the lid down breathing heavily and shivering as Janice opened the concertina door to the en suite.

“What’s going on? What’s all the banging?”

I’ve lost my voice, he mouthed but nothing came.

“What? What’s the matter?” said Janice as he pointed frantically to his throat. “Have you swallowed something? Are you choking?”

Alan waved an annoyed, dismissive hand which clouded Janice in the breast, while he continued to gesticulate with the other hand around his throat.

“What is it, then?” she asked with equal frustration, to which he jumped up and wrote on the steam in the mirror, “Voice gone”, before giving her an unforgiving stare.

He had hardly finished underlining the mirror-message for the fifth time, when the door bell rang.

“Rohan! He’ll know what to do,” Janice said scurrying to the door.

“Happy Mother’s Day,” said an enormous bunch of daffodils, from behind which poked Rohan’s diminutive head.

He kissed his mother gently on the cheek and stepped through the door looking around the vestibule, his hand outstretched for a polite handshake with someone not there.

“Where’s everybody’s favourite cactus?” he asked. “Given us both a Mother’s Day present and gone out, has he?”

“He’s in the en suite,” his mother answered. “I think he’s lost his voice.”

“Really?”

“I think so. He just staggered out of the shower pointing at his throat and wheezing. He doesn’t seem to be able to say a word.”

“So there is a God who answers prayer,” said Rohan, with a half smile that his mother willingly exchanged. “Maybe tonight I’ll get to finish a sentence.”

They wandered into the bedroom and found Alan prostrate on the bed in a well-rehearsed theatre-corpse pose.

“All hail, old man,” said Rohan, an habitual greeting that rankled with his step-father at the best of times, let alone in such a moment of septuagenarian helplessness.

Alan tossed a nondescript gesture at Rohan, a gesture that balanced awkwardly between a reluctant ‘hello’ and a petulant ‘go away’.

“He doesn’t seem to have a temperature,” said Janice, as she placed a palm on her husband’s head, prompting an unambiguous ‘leave me alone’ gesticulation from the patient.

“Oh well, if that’s the way you’re going to be,” she said pulling away from the bed. “Are you getting dressed to have dinner with us, or will I just turn off the light and see you in the morning?”

No answer, so she turned off the light and guided Rohan back through the door with the words, “He’s getting worse, you know.”

Alan lay there in the dark, straining to decipher the distant kitchen chat, but all he could hear was the punctuation of Janice and Rohan’s laughter.

Behaving like school children, he thought. She changes when she gets with him. Loses all maturity.

In the end, Alan was seated at the table before the soup had been served, pen and paper in hand. He hammered his spoon on the table with the vigour of a woodpecker seeking termites in a tree then held up a note, ‘What are you talking about?’

“Oh nothing,” said Janice.

“Nothing,” agreed Rohan.

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‘Don’t say nothing!’ came the frenetic note underpinned by trademark glare.

“It was just a time with Dad,” Rohan offered, then burst into laughter with his mother.

‘What about your father?’ Alan scribbled.

“Oh just this one time years ago,” offered Janice before Alan could scour a hole through the pad with the inevitable note. “I made a Pavlova. First time I’d ever got a ‘pav’ to sit right. And William came home and I had him taste a bit, and he hardly reacted at all. Just swallowed it and said, ‘It’s a bit salty.’ And I suddenly discovered,” Janice prepared her laugh, “I’d mistaken the salt canister for the sugar!”

“Two cups of salt in the Pavlova,” guffawed Rohan, “and Dad just says, ‘Oh, it’s a bit salty!’” Janice and Rohan split their sides laughing, while Alan raised an eyebrow.

‘Typical William,’ came Alan’s notation. ‘He never could express himself.’

The note was alternated from Janice’s face to Rohan’s until their flippancy subsided. An awkward silence followed as soup was ladled out of the tureen and into appropriate bowls.

“Have you heard from Aunty Lorelle?” Rohan asked, searching for a more circumspect topic of conversation.

“Yes,” said his mother, “Cath’s in a pretty bad way. They want to start chemo straight away but she’s too weak after the surgery. They took all her women’s bits, you know - and some bowel, and they took a biopsy of ...”

Alan suddenly started banging the blunt end of his butter knife furiously on the table, leaving a small dent in the teak. He tossed the knife down on the bread plate, then scribbled a note: ‘PLEASE! We’re eating!!!!’ then underlined it three times.

Janice continued, “Like I said, they took a biopsy of Cath’s stomach, but the surgeon thinks it’ll be clear. If

there's cancer in the stomach of course, well there's nothing they can do."

Alan held up his note again flapping it in their faces and tapping it with his pen.

"Get a grip, Gramps!" said Rohan. "You'll have a conniption. The pen and pad were slammed down on the table, before a slightly crooked but fully-loaded index finger waggled all over the bread basket and nearly sent a bottle of sparkling apple into Rohan's lap, followed by a barrage of silent expletives.

Rohan and Janice smirked at each other.

"So how's Auntie Lorelle holding up?" asked Rohan.

"Ok. She has her faith and everything - you know. Says God's going to heal Cathy, all that sort of stuff. I was thinking of going down there for a few days, when Cath's at home after the chemo. Lorelle's going to need a hand."

Total horror etched its way across Alan's face and he took the trouble to write, 'Damn it all. Drat the blithering woman' on his pad, although he only underlined it twice.

§§§

The meal presently came to an end and they rose from the table, Rohan to take the dessert dishes to the kitchen, Alan went to the back porch to fetch his wicker chair and put it in front of the television in the lounge room.

"I'm just going to powder my nose," said Janice as Rohan came and sat down on the couch next to his step-father, who was flicking through the television guide.

The main bathroom door shut and locked with a click.

Rohan looked at the old man who leaned forward to pick up the remote. Rohan slid his hand under and grabbed the remote first, snatching it to himself as Alan scowled and snapped his fingers wanting the 'boy' to

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hand over what had suddenly become some sort of primal power stick.

With his free hand Rohan brushed the pad and pen across the coffee table, out of his step-father's reach.

"I've been meaning to have a talk with you for some time, Alan," said Rohan, hurriedly calculating how to make best use of the opportunity. He felt no need to blast - why, when the old man couldn't shout him down? And why risk his mother hearing the exchange from the bathroom?

"Thirty-five years is a long time," Rohan said. "A very long time to put up with someone." Rohan was surprised by his total sense of calm. For once he could speak in a whisper and the old man had no choice but to listen.

"You know Alan, for my whole life, since I was ten years old, you have absolutely tormented me. Not just mild irritation, Alan. Utter torture. The way you'd force-feed your opera into me twenty-four hours a day. Your stupid carry-on every time you came home and wanted your phone messages delivered to you before you even got the key out of the door. The way you had to cut across every second I ever tried to spend with my mother. The way you tried to crush the life out of anything I achieved.

"Even now, I'm forty-five years old and you still treat me like I'm a preschooler. It doesn't matter what my opinion is on anything, it's always wrong.

"If you dumped your own son with half of what you've dumped on me, then no wonder he doesn't want anything to do with you. You crushed the life out of him just the same as you tried to crush the life out of me.

"And as for Mum. Well, you're just bone lucky. A lesser person would have sneaked in on you one night and sliced you into little pieces like a Christmas turkey. In fact, I'm surprised someone else hasn't done it."

Rohan spoke quietly, but directly.

“Someone had to tell you, Alan. You’re the nastiest, most mean-spirited person on the planet. The reason I reckon you’re still alive is that God just doesn’t want your company. But you’re going to have to die sooner or later, and perhaps there are a few things you need to think about before then. A few bridges you need to build before you go. Because the way things stand, no-one’s going to come to your funeral. And that’ll be pretty hard on Mum.”

The toilet flushed signaling the end of the moment as the bathroom door latch clicked open.

“Bloody lucky to have her,” repeated Rohan under his breath, convinced it had been in vain, but at least he’d unloaded just a little. He shuddered to think of the repercussions once the old man got his voice back.

For his part, Alan defiantly breathed one long breath through his nostrils and flicked the corner of the television program flat, before holding it up to read.

“What’s on tele?” said Janice seeing the remote in Rohan’s hand. He handed it back to its keeper.

“Alan’s pick,” said Rohan. “It’s all up to you, Alan. Like it always is.”

Alan pumped the relevant number and the television burst into the ABC Nightly News.

Janice sat down next to her son on the couch and whispered in his ear, “I heard every word, son.” She patted him on the thigh.

§§§

As Janice pushed her overnight bag through the front door, the phone rang.

“I’ll get it,” called Alan from the bedroom, “it’s probably Richard.”

Janice placed her bag at her feet and thought about the last few days. He’d not flinched when she made arrangements to go and help Lorelle care for Cathy. He had convalesced in an almost conciliatory manner as his

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voice returned. And once it had, he never mentioned the 'chat' Rohan had had with him on Mother's Day, although his shoulder started twitching at any mention of her son's name.

"It was just one of your students," he said as he came through to meet her at the front door. "I told her you'd be away for three days, and to ring you after that."

"Why'd you say that? I could have spoken to her."

"Just thought it was best," he said.

Janice could feel the old irritation rising. "Oh, Alan, think! Who was it?"

"Didn't take a message," he said blithely. "I think she said Sonia or Sophia or something like that."

"Sophie Saltimbanco?" she asked.

"Possibly."

"Oh Alan, she was auditioning for Nancy in Oliver. She's probably got a call-back and needs some coaching."

She trudged back into the drawing room. Looking after Cathy on chemo for a few days was starting to look like a pleasant escape.

She dialed Sophie's home number but there was no answer, and her mobile had been diverted to voicemail. Janice left a message and with the muscles on either side of her jaw clenching, she marched backed to the front door and took a number of deep breaths before stepping outside where her overnight bag and her husband both waited.

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

He had opened her bag and had both hands inside. "Just putting in some good reading material for you," he replied. "You've taken weeks to get halfway through this dreadful Gatsby thing." He waved it in her face. "You're obviously not enjoying it, so I put in some Voltaire and Jung."

She gave a thin, exasperated smile. "Thanks. If Cath feels like discussing the French Enlightenment or the

integration of personality between throwing up, then I'm sure they'll come in handy."

She stood on tip-toe to peck him on the cheek then took back her Gatsby.

"No need to snatch," he said.

"Now, are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" he asked. "I could be packed in a few minutes."

"No thanks," she replied, wondering just what possible use he could be, looking after Cathy or Lorelle. "You'll be fine once you've worked out the microwave. It's not hard. The instruction booklet is in the third drawer. I'll be back on Thursday night and Rohan will call or drop in to check on you." There was a single rotation of the old man's shoulder.

"See you in three days," she said, then dropped into the driver's seat of the 1980 Honda Civic. She backed out of the driveway, waved and called with a smile through the open window, "Look after yourself, dear."

Alan watched her disappear around the corner before turning to go back inside. He looked at his watch. Half past four. She'll be at Cathy's place in about two hours, he thought. I'll call her then just to make sure she's arrived.

Two hours. Suppose I'll cook dinner. By the time it's cooked and eaten, it'll be time to phone.

He opened the freezer to find the three pre-prepared meals Janice had made for him sitting neatly stacked and labeled. Lasagna, chicken *cacciatore*, and *chili con carne*.

"Lasagna methinks," he said as he removed it from the freezer and turned to square off with the microwave. He hadn't wanted her to buy this 'blithering damned machine' in the first place. Now it stood between him and his meal.

He looked the machine over. How hard could it be? He'd watched her use it dozens of times. Just pop it in, press the buttons and stand back waiting for that annoying 'ding'. Remove from oven and serve. Easy.

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Alan opened the door of the machine. It was like a huge mouth that was going to consume his dinner before he had a chance, but still he placed the plastic Chinese take-away container full of frozen lasagna into the belly of the beast, closed the door and stepped back to see if it all looked right. So far so good.

He pressed the minute button twice, hit 'start' and the microwave hummed into action.

There were a few minor sizzles and pops here and there but presently the two minutes expired with a resounding 'ding'. He opened the microwave door and removed the lid from the lasagna to see nothing but a crisp layer of frost covering the still frozen lasagna.

"Drat the stupid bloody ..."

He shut the door and stepped back to think. Microwave. Microwave oven. Well, it is an oven. Let's use it like an oven. A lasagna this size would take about thirty minutes to cook. Now these things are supposed to be fast, so let's take five minutes off.

He dialed up twenty-five minutes, hit the start button and trotted out to the back porch to settle into the World News page. He was just enjoying an article on all this suicide bombing nonsense in Palestine, a loud bang came from the kitchen.

"Damn and drat the fool thing!"

A grey-black pillow unfurled itself from the microwave's gut as he hit the 'open door' button. Bits of lasagna dripped all over the innards of the beast and the lid of the Chinese container teetered at forty-five degrees.

Frantically fanning the monster's belch, he peered in to see what it had done to his dinner. Nothing but charcoal embedded with melted plastic. He fetched the tongs and after a few vigorous shakes, removed the remnant to the sink. It hissed in protest as it disappeared down the insinkerator.

"Blast it all, and damn the thing."

He slammed the microwave's mouth shut and opened the pantry.

"Humph! Breakfast cereal." It was better than nothing and with Janice away he could have lashings of sugar, as well as ice cream for dessert.

§§§

For the first two days Alan had phoned Cathy's place every two hours. Where are the kitchen mittens? Where do you keep the spare soap? How should I get boot polish off the bathtub? I want to program the VCR. Not a word about the microwave however.

So it was no surprise to anyone when on the third day, the phone rang yet again. "Bloody hell," said Janice. "Can't he leave us alone for just one day?"

But Lorelle returned, "It's Rohan. Says he's been trying to call Alan but he just keeps getting the answer service."

"Hello Dear," said Janice as she took the phone.

"How's Cath?" he asked.

"Fair. A little bit dehydrated, I think."

"Give her my love, will you. Look Mum, I've been trying to reach Alan but I think he's screening the calls."

"That'd be right," said Janice. "After Mother's Day - you know. I wouldn't worry about it. He's been ringing here every other minute, so he's OK. Or as OK as he can be without someone to wait on him hand and foot."

"I figured as much," said Rohan, "I just didn't want him having a go at me saying I didn't ring. Just covering my own back, you know."

"Yes, well he seems to be his usual self, whinging and complaining about everything, and I'm going back this afternoon, so thanks for trying. I'll call you from home tonight."

They rang off and Janice had an uneasy feeling. She dialed her home number. No answer, just the answer message.

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“Hello Alan, it’s me Jan. If you’re there, pick up.”

No answer. She looked at the time - mid-morning. He’s probably up the street getting his paper.

Two hours later there’d been no call back. Three hours. Four hours. It came time to return home so she called him again. Same result.

“Why don’t you call the neighbours?” Lorelle suggested.

Janice suddenly realised that they had lived there for fifteen years, as had the neighbours, and they hadn’t spoken for fourteen years and eight months.

She’d forgotten their names. In fact, there wasn’t anybody she could think of who could get there inside the two hours it would take her to drive back home.

So she drove.

With each mile the vine of guilt wound its way around her conscience. I shouldn’t have left him. He’s hopeless on his own. What if something’s happened to him? Has he been taking his medication? Stupid man - he’s probably forgotten.

Thorns of panic grew from the creeper of guilt. Every traffic light teased her with elongated periods of red. Every crossing bore dawdling schoolchildren. Every pensioner seemed to conspire to be driving the car in front of her.

Finally she pulled the Honda into the driveway, and leaving her bag in the boot, she ran to the front door. It fell open without a key, so she called, “Alan! Alan.”

She checked the bedroom. The bed was made. An unopened bottle of pills on the bedside table.

In the drawing room, she noticed the red message light blinking on the answer service so out of habit, pushed it and listened as she searched.

“Alan! Alan!” she continued to call as she checked the bathroom and *en suite* and the kitchen. The beeps and drones of messages from Rohan and herself formed a backdrop until a different voice arrested her attention.

“Alan, Richard here. Sorry things have been a bit slow of late. There’s a Cadbury commercial I’ve put you up for. You’d be perfect. You have to be an old conductor with an orchestra.

You’re exactly what they’re after. Pay’s very good too, so give us a call back as soon as you’re in. Waiting to hear from you.”

“Alan!” she called even more desperately as she burst through the back door. His wicker chair was gone from the porch.

“Where the hell are you?” She squinted toward the willows that hung their weeping over the back fence from the neighbours and there in the shade was Alan. Sitting on his wicker chair.

Having found him she didn’t know whether to run down to him or walk more casually, so she hesitated and called.

“Alan?”

He didn’t move. She took a haunting step towards him. Then another. “Alan?” She was quieter, almost resigned. As she parted the fronds of the willow she saw he was sitting slumped with a booklet between his fingers.

She bent down and took it slowly out of his grip. The microwave manual. What was he doing in the backyard reading the microwave manual?

As tentatively as someone opening bad-news mail, she placed her hand gently on his forehead. Even before she touched it, she could feel it was cold, then, as her hand made contact with his skin, he jumped violently.

“Damn it all to blazes, woman!” he shouted as he leaped out of his chair, almost knocking her to the ground with the flailing of his arms. “Do you have to sneak up on me like that? You could have scared me to death.”

“I thought you were ...”

“Blithering blazes and all, Jannie!”

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“Well, don’t get all high and mighty,” she protested. “We’ve been looking everywhere. People have been phoning! Why don’t you answer the phone?”

“Well what’s a message machine for then?” he said gruffly.

“You are supposed to answer the messages.” She turned from him and made for the back door, muttering to herself and suddenly fully aware that her bag remained packed and still in the boot of the car.

“What messages?” he retorted.

“We’ve all been trying to phone you, to see if you’re all right. Rohan. Me. Lorelle. There’s even a message there from ...”

“Of course I’m all right. Why wouldn’t I be all right?” he said, starting to raise his voice and catching Janice as she flung back the wire door, almost hitting him.

“Now settle right down, Jannie! Everybody panics just because I don’t answer the messages the minute they’re left.”

Janice went into the drawing room and took a few deep breaths, first looking out the window to her car in the driveway, then staring at the blinking red light on the message machine.

“So who else rang?” he said coming down the hall.

She continued to stare as the red light on the message machine continued to blink.

“Jannie!” he called more forcefully from just outside the entrance to the drawing room. She grabbed her coat.

“I asked you, so who else rang?” Alan had just entered the drawing room from the hallway.

“Oh, no one important,” said Janice as she pressed the delete button.

The red light stopped blinking.

Appendix: Author's Notes

Meat in the Sandwich

This short story started life in 2000 as a script for a short film.

With no budget, no actors, no time and no camera the story had little chance of ever becoming a film.

So I converted it to a short story and it won a Commended Award at the University of Central Queensland Open Short Story Competition.

Once I started converting the film script to a short story, I found the dark comedy worked even better in its new form, since the omnipotent narrator could enhance the humour through tight description of the events, allowing the reader to interpret the comedy to suit their own taste, rather than have an actor, director and editor interpret the comic moments for the viewer, on behalf of the writer.

Perhaps this is a story that was bound to be written by the parent of teenagers. The technique was to juxtapose how a single mum feels, against one teen's self-focused conscientious nature and the other younger teen's complete self-absorption.

As the author, I would claim a level of exaggeration in the teen attitudes, but many parents might regard the portrayal of teen attitude as fairly accurate.

Author's notes

While most of the characters in the story are clear caricatures, the more rounded humanity of main character, Alison, gives the story sufficient sense of realism to keep the narrative on the right side of believability.

This makes the ending more powerful having the surreal growing out of a reality that has slightly cartoon edges.

In fact, as a short film, this might work as an animation. The character of Guy is definitely a cartoon 'jock' and even the doctor and undertaker carry cartoon-like two-dimensionality. Only Alison can really be imagined in three dimensions.

Black comedy is a dangerous and tricky genre. It is very easy to get out of control with it and become gross. At the same time, while it is prudent to avoid becoming gross, it is also a mistake to become too 'safe'. So, Black comedy requires a very delicate balance of the surreal – to make the 'black' palatable – and the real to make the comedy believable and effective. It's important to avoid making the 'black' too real and the comedy too surreal.

Taking Care of Charlie

I'm not afraid to attack politically incorrect topics. There are a few stories in this collection like that.

This is one of them. However, I thought some of the politically incorrect sentiment in this story was necessary to brooch the topic in the first place, was necessary to set the scene accurately and was necessary to create the characters in their time.

I wanted to write this story because it sets in stone some little known things about Australian forces' time in Vietnam.

In some ways, I didn't write this story – I merely stitched together a number of things I heard from Vietnam vets, particularly my uncle who served as a corporal on the front line in the late 60s and early 70s.

One or two of his medals were for carrying a fellow soldier out of a landmined area. And yes – he and his unit were rescued from an ambush by American helicopters after Australian command refused to help them out on a Sunday. According to my uncle, the reason given in the real ambush, is the reason given in this story. No-one believes that this would happen, but my uncle is adamant that's how it occurred.

Just on a note of writing technique – when the story gets to the description of the ambush, the reader might notice a sudden increase in the occurrence of the word “and.” I used this technique to take out the ‘though-breaths’ that we insert as we read. This was to serve the dual purpose of speeding up the pace and the sense of confusion inherent in the middle of an ambush, and to increase the sense of the spoken word. This story is supposed to be voiced by a Vietnam vet at a bar. So to suddenly increase the frequency of the word “and” makes the narrative sound more spoken and more rushed, as if the narrator is getting more excited and perhaps confused. It was a technique I used to heighten the ‘voice’ of the piece and the sense of a spoken narrative rather than a written and read narrative. I hope the reader could hear the veteran speaking out loud, especially through this portion.

I actually toyed with create the voice with a lot more truncation of words, odd vernacular and phonetic spellings, but in the end I thought these techniques may take away from the universality of the story – perhaps making the voice too idiosyncratic. Every person hears the story with a slightly different voice that they can personally relate too. Making the voice too prescriptive would remove voice options from the reader – and I wanted each reader to impose a voice they knew personally onto this story so it would be more intimate to them.

Regarding the swearing in the story – I kept it to a minimum and I would imagine there would be a lot

Author's notes

more of it among combat troops on the front line. But I wanted to keep the story accessible to young readers, family readers – and to my auntie and cousins of course.

This story was Highly Commended in the Tom Howard Short Story Competition 2001.

The World Fully Franked

There's really not all that much to say about this story. It did actually start life as a stand-up comedy monologue and was performed probably two or three times in a more casual tone than as written here. Those performances were about 15 years before the story was written down. Interestingly, I could still remember most of it *verbatim* so many years later, which indicates that either I did a great job of memorising – unlikely according to my wife who claims I have an appalling memory – or that the gags were strong enough to be memorable.

I hope for some people they are. I workshopped this story with a group of writers and some just loved it as it was, insisting it was hilarious, while others found the constant stream of one-liners annoying and wanted the gags woven into more of a situation or a legitimate story. I tried to write the story into a situation of being stuck next to Frank on a long flight, but in the end, the diversions to in-flight scene-setting proved to be more of a distraction and quite frankly, (pun intended) it all just became too hard.

So I kept the narrative pretty much as I remember it from the stand-up monologue. I fully expect reaction to the story to fall into the two extremes exhibited by the workshop group.

With my stand up career floating like a brick, it is unlikely the monologue would ever be performed again and since it floated around my head for 15 years, I thought it was worth putting down on paper. Frank

Bumm is probably too 'old-school' to be resurrected by a real stand up comedian.

But I'm working on it.

How many A's in ... oh, never mind.

The Birthday Card

This story won a Highly Commended in The Chronicle short story competition in 2000 and was selected out of hundreds of stories for the University of Technology Sydney Anthology that year, albeit slightly edited.

The story appears here in its original form.

Of the stories in this book, this is my favourite – thus I named the collection after it.

My intention with this story was to write a piece that had not one character in it who was likeable or elicited empathy in the reader. I'm not sure I succeeded – in fact, I am sure I didn't. During the workshopping stage of the story the consensus of the reviewers was that the character of Rachel had to be the character of empathy. I had originally made her somewhat excessively opinionated and quite hateful towards The Man. After the workshop comments I relented and made her a little more likeable.

My thesis for my Masters in Writing was around the necessary triad in western narrative – the hero, the villain and the victim. My intention for this story was to make all three detestable, but my colleagues insisted that the victim, as they saw it – Rachel – had to be the empathetic character. I gave up my ambitions for the totally detestable character list and made Rachel more of a standard victim.

My original was much more graphic in its descriptions of the injuries and violence and again, my workshop colleagues found this objectionable. My own thoughts on the matter are that gratuitous sex or violence does not make a story more 'arty', so it was easy to tone back the graphic description. I think it is a

Author's notes

mistake to be graphic for the sake of appearing more literary or more controversial. If you want to be controversial then choose controversial subjects and work the subject itself – not gratuitous description. It's easy to be controversial by increasing the swearing, insulting religion or being overly violent. That doesn't make the work more artistic – actually, if anything, it merely cheapens the artistic merit of the work and distracts from the more important message that might be there.

I certainly didn't want the violence to distract from the commentaries I wanted to make with this story.

What is probably surprising for some is that I find the character of the narrator in this story, far more abhorrent than the character of The Man. I don't expect all readers to agree with that, but I did want to make a comment about the academic collection of data. We know many quite ugly things about being human, but we rarely question how academics collected the data. How did Kinsey know that young children can reach orgasm, if he did not perform experiments to find out? How do we know about separation anxieties among family members without wantonly separating families? How do we know there is a killer in all of us without Stanley Milgram pushing unsuspecting guinea pigs towards the act of killing?

How did Dr Burnard of the Royal Women's Hospital Sydney Early Natal Ward publish his papers on the effects of various chemicals on infant digestion, without running the experiments?

We have all this so-called academic data but hardly ever question what study produced the data and what sort of monster conceived the experiment.

So in this story, the narrator feels no shame in using this dreadful series of crimes – starting with the theft of a baby from its mother – to blithely produce a thesis for nothing other than self-gratification, self-glory and self-promotion.

For me as writer, the narrator in this story is more the monster, because it is the monster we miss – it is the monster who receives the plaudits of the world. We are blinded by this monster’s presumption of altruism. It is a self-presumption of altruism that we fall for.

The narrator is the most exposed character in this story, but we miss the narrator’s evil because he is so obvious he is invisible.

In the same way, we miss much of academia’s sordid underbelly often because the ugly data that results from academic study has so permeated our lives.

Often the only way to gain insight into an ugly truth is to run an even more ugly experiment. We, as a collective species seem to rather run the ugly experiment than leave well-enough alone.

And so we torture twin siblings by separating them at birth – just so we can answer the ‘nature versus nurture’ question.

We test flawed economic theories on large populations behind insidious walls, just to see if our economic rationale will work out.

We expose low-ranking military personnel to massive doses of radiation, or naked asbestos or agent orange, just to see what will happen.

We allow electro-shock therapy and deep-sleep therapy and then claim it was in the patient’s best interests to be tortured and maimed, or worse still we do these things in secret and then claim it was “the mores of the time.”

In this story, what happens to the pharmacist’s daughter and by implication, Rachel, is used as a metaphor of academia’s ugly side. The depravity of *The Man* is representative of the experimental subject who is used as a lab rat, then discarded. Society abhors them, yet they are victims themselves and creations of an even more abhorrent system – a system which parades itself as society’s hero.

Author's notes

As I said before, I don't expect all who read this story will agree. I hope most who read this story will just enjoy an interesting murder mystery.

And maybe those reading these notes who see the story as just a good yarn, will be somewhat bemused by my own analysis of my own story. After all, it's just a story.

But these are some insights into why this is my favourite story in this collection. It works just as a story. But it works on the metaphoric level as well.

And, sad to say, it works on a psychologically therapeutic level as well. In some ways, this story is the anti-thesis of my novel, *Rebecca's Law*. In *Rebecca's Law* I spent around 160,000 words exploring the socially acceptable side of a father's reaction to the removal of a child for adoption. In *The Birthday Card* I spend 3,000 words exploring the very dark side to a father's reaction in the same circumstances. The word ratio of 53:1 for the two genres I hope is an allowable ratio to indulge the dark side.

Another reason I like this story is that it enters the dark side without humour. This is a departure for me. A common factor in the other stories of this collection is that the dark side is usually tempered by some humour or poetry.

However, in *The Birthday Card* the dark side is unambiguous, unapologetic, unhumorous, and all-pervasive. This is not territory I venture into much at all – in fact, this is probably the only time. The darkness is stark. It is not camouflaged by flowery words (as in *That it were a dreaming*) or cartoonery (as in *Meat in the Sandwich*) or empathetic characterisation (as in *Taking Care of Charlie*). The dark is just bold and underlined. It is what it is, replete with evil's pathetic attempts to excuse itself – and this can be found in almost all the characters: Blaine Ladderly, Maureen Bellarmine, and of course The Man himself.

Note also for the reader – I gave the narrator a name but not a gender, and I gave the main protagonist a gender but not a name. This was an attempt to remove their social standing but to still identify them very much as human. This technique strips away the personal aspect of their humanity, but they are still clearly identified as human beings and maybe even, as people we know, despite not knowing the gender or name (respectively) in the story.

Yet another reason I like this story is I know how it was written. First of all, I conceived the story one sleepless night in bed. The whole story basically came to me one night when I was trying to conceive if one wanted to carry out the perfect murder, how would one do it? I hit upon a lifelong obsession and hiding in the most transparent way. I then sat down to map out the story, and wrote the whole narrative basically backwards.

This was so that I could start work with an open and revealed murderer and then slowly close the revelation of his identity as I worked backward from the end of the story to the beginning.

Doing this enabled me to invoke a certain amount of tension into the narrative as I could reveal the murderer to the reader just slightly before I revealed the identity to the characters in the story.

Some of the character names in the story are significant. Many allude to the names of characters in *Rebecca's Law*. So, for example, Rebecca becomes Rachel – both names derive from wives of Biblical patriarchs. In point of actual fact, it is the name Rebecca that has the Hebrew meaning “loops in a rope”, not the name Rachel.

The name Blaine Ladderly was somewhat android and uni-sex, but also an allusion to “blatant ladder climber”, which was probably more for my own amusement than anyone else's.

Author's notes

The name Maureen Bellarmine derives from the character in *Rebecca's Law* also called Maureen, and the notorious Italian Inquisitor of the late 14th Century, Bellarmine, who prosecuted Galileo.

Originally, there were around 12 or 14 noteworthy characters in *The Birthday Card* which were reduced to 8 main characters for the final draft. Originally, there were other police and the pharmacist's wife and son were also involved. There were also siblings to Rachel and parents of Lawry.

The simplification of the character list certainly works to make for a better story and this is probably a good lesson for budding short-story writers. Keep the number of characters down – see if there is any way to combine characters. There is limited time to outwork the plot – particularly in a mystery like this one – without having your reader constantly being introduced to new characters and having to work out more and more relationships.

A good rule of thumb on this score is to realise that the working memory can usually only comfortably contain 7 items. So to have around 7 characters for a short story is probably optimal.

That it Were a Dreaming

When I first unveiled this story, a Creative Doctorate candidate who was an acquaintance, read the story and was rather dismissive, saying, "Well, there's nothing in this story that hasn't been done before."

I asked her what the story meant to her. Her explanation was only partially correct, but in most part wrong.

And this has been the general reaction ever since. People who read this story only catch half of the significance, or only half of the controversy.

There is a certain amount of political correctness on the surface of this story. Most people reading this story

in Australia, are deathly offended, because they see it as a white man retelling the Aboriginal man's dreamtime. And so it becomes a white parody of Aboriginal storytelling. It would be like a European person painting in an Aboriginal dot-painting style.

In fact, that is not the story at all – the actual notions embedded below the surface of this story are far more politically incorrect than that. For those who have a reflex of getting offended at this sort of thing, this story is definitely one to raise a few blood pressures.

But before having this sort of reaction, which I maintain is a mere reflex, I would ask that the reader consider the irony of white man being offended by the story, when Aboriginal people have been unreservedly supportive of its underlying message.

However, before I reveal its true message, I ask that you read the story first before reading these notes (as is the habit of some). This story really will be spoilt if you read these notes first.

Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

The truth is this story is fairly accurately based on real people. During the workshopping stage of this story a number of comments were made that the story stretched the suspension of disbelief too far, since the wife, Janice, would never have put up with Alan's behaviour for so long.

Actually, 'Sovereign' probably took the least imagination to write of all the stories in this collection. The only truly imaginative element in the story is the idea that the operatic *basso* lost his voice for a short time. This never happened. Perhaps it was less imagination and more wishful thinking on the part of those whom I observed living this life.

This story is more about the relationships than the action. As with life, the action just forms opportunity for relationships to outwork themselves. This could be said

Author's notes

about the other stories, but with the other stories in this collection the action is probably more compelling. In this story, it is the relationships that bind the story, not the action.

I tried to place the relationships into a “show-don’t-tell” narrative. So I wanted the reader to get a sense of the relationships rather than a description of the relationships.

I hope that certain people in certain circumstances can relate to it. Children of divorce for example. Women married to overbearing men. Anyone trying to relate to ‘theatricals’.

So yes, dear reader, the relationships are real, as are many of the incidents in the story. The cousin has since died from her ovarian cancer a couple of years after the story was written, and indeed *El Basso* himself died about 8 years after the writing – which would have made Alan an octogenarian when the story was written, not a septuagenarian, as mentioned in the narrative. The simple rectangular chapel for Cathy’s funeral was absolutely packed and not a dry eye in the place. The high Anglican Church for Alan’s funeral was half-full – or half empty, depending whether you’re an exaggerator or a realist.

But which ever way you live and exit this life, in the end the red light always stops blinking.

OUTRO

And so ...
To the legend of
aj'r-berri –
the golden swan that will never fly ...

The red light blinks on –
for now.