

## **A Charming Neighbour** – JB Rowley

“Let’s face it, John. You’re boring. No, worse than that. You’re... you’re vapid.” His wife spat the last word out, emphasising each syllable.

John Hambleton-Smith had always believed he was appreciated and admired for his quiet charm. It wasn’t until his wife of two years challenged this belief prior to leaving him for a graffiti artist that he had cause to question it. Vapid? For a time John worried that what his wife had said might be true. Eventually, he arrived at the reassuring conclusion that she was merely trying to justify her betrayal with a spiteful falsehood.

This illusion still comforted him five years later as he prepared for his annual holiday. Even though he was going to the same place at the same time as he always did, he knew this year would be different. Exquisite anticipation accompanied his final preparations.

As he had every other year John arranged for Rick Anderson, the car salesman who lived next door, to look after his house while he was away.

When he handed Rick the spare key he said, as he always did, “Help yourself to a bottle or two from the cellar.”

John had an impressive collection of wines and Rick Anderson, who frequently entertained lady friends, invariably took John at his word. Rick’s gold bracelet slid along his tanned outstretched arm as he accepted the key and acknowledged John’s offer with a conspiratorial wink.

“Now, that’s what I call a good neighbour,” he said.

“A new supply of Coonawarra Shiraz arrived this week,” said John, knowing the wine to be a favourite of Rick’s.

“Hey, Johnno, you’re the man,” said Rick, thrusting his index finger at John in a gesture of approval.

After that, John tidied his already tidy house and double-checked that everything was in its proper place. Finally, only one task remained; the one he had saved till last because its completion would accord him

## Role of a Lifetime

contentment. He went down to the wine cellar where the carton of Shiraz sat on the floor waiting to be unpacked. With meticulous care, he removed each bottle and placed it on a rack. The carton the wine had been packed in was an unusual one: wax-coated cardboard fashioned to look like timber. Too good to throw away. He would get rid of the inside packaging, but the carton he could put to good use. With a pair of scissors, he cut off the four lid flaps and neatened the edges, converting the carton to a waste-paper basket. You can never have enough waste-paper bins thought John. The flaps would come in handy too, even more useful perhaps, than the carton.

When he had finished in the cellar, he paused at the top of the steps to gaze at the scene below. His appreciative glance took in the symmetrical stacks of bottles, the oak wine racks that matched the oak stairs and the clean slate floor. He nodded his satisfaction and closed the cellar door.

Several days later, John Hambleton-Smith was enjoying tropical warmth and spectacular ocean views through floor-to-ceiling windows in a north Queensland eco-resort when his holiday was interrupted by news from home. The policewoman at the other end of the telephone line gravely announced the accidental death of Rick Anderson. An exclamation of astonishment escaped John's lips before he voiced his shock.

"Rick? Dead? I was only talking to him just the other day. I gave him a spare key... you know... a key to my house. He keeps an eye on it for me when I'm away."

Before he could express his surprise that the police had taken the trouble to notify him of his neighbour's death, the policewoman delivered the final piece of news with gentle diplomacy. Mr Anderson's body, she said, had been discovered in John's home.

"In *my* house?"

The policewoman explained that they were called to John's home after a neighbour noticed the front door had been wide open for several hours.

"How did it happen?"

"It appears he fell down the stairs of the wine cellar and hit his head on the slate floor."

## Role of a Lifetime

“The cellar stairs? But I’m sure those steps are safe. I keep them well maintained.”

“You needn’t concern yourself about that, sir. The steps have been thoroughly checked. We think Mr Anderson simply tripped and fell, perhaps a momentary lack of concentration.”

“Are you sure? I’d hate to think...”

To allay John’s anxiety, the policewoman described how they had searched the cellar floor for a tennis ball or something similar that might have caused Mr Anderson to fall had it been left on the steps. There was nothing on the cellar floor, she said, except an empty wine carton and its lid flaps stowed near the stairwell.

When the call ended, John reflected on fond memories of his neighbour. In particular, he recalled recent flattering remarks Rick had made about him. He had overheard the comments a few weeks earlier when he had popped into Rick’s place unannounced. As he approached the back door, Rick’s voice glided through an open window.

“Yep, this is a first-rate street. Good neighbours here. I’ve got Mrs Gardner on one side; she’s a good stick. On the other side there’s my old mate, John Hambleton-Smith.”

John decided to return home rather than intrude on Rick and his visitor, but he paused at the mention of his name.

“I couldn’t wish for a better neighbour than John,” said Rick. John remembered how he had blushed with pleasure and silently returned the compliment.

It was as he turned to go, that he heard Rick say, “A vapid sort of a chap, though.”

He had retraced his steps then. Vapid. He wished Rick had not used that word.



*JB Rowley is a writer of books, teacher of English, teller of stories and seeker of silent solitude. She loves living in the city of Melbourne where her life is fertile with friends but sometimes yearns for the wild ways and languid days of the East Gippsland bush where she grew up.*

## ***A Hand's Clasp***

– Norm Cowper

I have seen some appalling things but this takes the cake. The ground surrounding me is blackened and charred. The air is filled with the pungent odour of kerosene. There is not a single piece of aircraft left intact. Instead, everywhere I look there are pieces of clothing, luggage, papers and mangled aircraft skin. There are thousands of little multi-coloured electrical wires mixed in with the detritus. The colours remind me of my youth. All I ever wanted to be was an airline pilot. I once imagined myself wearing a pilot's uniform with the badge at my chest. That would have been something, people would have looked up to me. I spent many years of my youth gaining my private pilot's licence. But the killjoy medico's made me perform an eye test and that was when they discovered I was colour blind. A commercial pilot's licence was out of the question. It wasn't fair, I remember it took a long while to get over the disappointment, I'm not sure if I ever got over it.

I have searched everywhere and now I have found it. I can't believe it. I am fuming and seething, barely controlling my anger. How can this happen? Lying on the ground in front of me are two hands clasped tightly seemingly at odds with the surrounding horror. There is nothing attached to the hands, no body or anything. Just two hands with some red gristle at the wrists highlighting the fact that they have been ripped off their arms. The owner of one hand is male. I can see that. I sense it is a firm hand from a strong and honourable man. He has thick muscular fingers, but I detect a hint of gentleness about him too. I can see the faint white ring on his wrist where his watch must have been. I imagine the watch was probably a Rolex. The hand looks like it is from someone who owns a Rolex. The woman's hand is gripped by the man's hand. Her fingernails are immaculately manicured with bright red nail varnish. The slim fingers curl around the man's hand, holding on to it with an intimate grasp. On the index finger there is a silver ring with a red garnet stone standing proudly in an elaborate setting. The garnet sparkles through the macabre scene with a haunting red light. I squint my eyes and examine the hand more closely. On one finger there is an

## *Role of a Lifetime*

obvious tan line where a wedding ring must have been. The pale indentation extends all the way around the circumference of the finger above the knuckle. Even in all the calamity of the crash, I don't think the wedding ring has come off of its own accord.

Looking at the two hands I think of my wife. We were married young, she fell for the dashing young pilot destined for an airline. I lived for the admiration in her eyes and the envy of my peers. I remember the way she looked at me the day I was refused a commercial licence. It was as if something had died in her. My best friend Jim, he was never as good a flyer as I was. But he just kept plodding along, steadfast in his self belief. Now he is a captain with a large airline and I am left to rot on the sidelines cleaning up after the big boy's mistakes. My wife doesn't see through him, she tries to hide it from me but I can see it in her eyes when she meets him. It was a mistake to stay in aviation, I know that now. I should have kept her away from it.

I remained standing over the hands. How can this happen I wonder? Two hands remaining gripped to each other, steadfast through the violent impact, two hands still holding on for dear life while around them the aircraft cabin is obliterated in an instant. The aircraft has hit the ground at a steep angle, as I expected it would. There has been a brief moment of accordion-like deformation as the entire fuselage folded in on itself like a crushed can before the fuel from the ruptured tanks vaporised and exploded. Black smoke still rises from the impact crater even now. In the midst of the devastation a tiny patch of untouched red dirt stands out amongst the wreckage. The two hands cling to each other as they lie on the coloured ground. Their souls have departed for eternity together, while their earthly lives have vanished to dust in the blink of an eye. But the two hands endure as testimony of their thoughts during their last terrifying moments. They have lovingly shared their final living breaths together. Fate has let the evidence remain for those who can read the story. I can read the story, just as I have read the story many times before. I am an air accident investigator after all.

As I look down at the two hands clasped in their tender embrace I pull my foot back and almost kick at the hands. I restrain myself and force my leg to stay still. I raise my head and look around the site, but no one pays any attention to me. Most of the other people are moving slowly,

## Role of a Lifetime

trying not to step on any of the hundreds of fragments of bloodied human remains. They all have a pale death mask look on their faces that I have seen many times before. For the uninitiated the harrowing spectacle of the crash of even a regional aircraft is so intense that their minds retreat into some sort of sanctuary in their heads. I am not affected by the carnage. I am just glad I wasn't on the plane.

As to what has caused the crash? Well that is for me to know. I make a prediction that it will be found to be pilot error unless, of course, I am extremely unlucky. I was at the outback airport in the early hours of the morning. A flick of the switch, the twist of a bulb, and a few other things, and that was it. It was a calculated gamble. But as luck would have it? I feel nothing for Jim, he won't be impressing anyone else with his Rolex or his pilot's wings. He wasn't so smart going around stealing other people's wives. I look around again and check to see that no one is watching. I squat down and with some effort remove the red garnet ring from the finger. I look up to the blue sky above me, holding the ring clenched tightly in the palm of my hand. The ring digs into my skin until it hurts. I loved her once. When I gave the ring to her before we were married, I thought it would be forever, but she didn't deserve it.



**Norm Cowper** is an engineer and father of three adult children who has recently taken a year out of work to sail around Australia with his wife. He would like to make more time available for writing in the future. He is currently based in Perth, Western Australia.



## Peter the Orphan

– Debbie Kaye

I don't want this to seem like a sob story. I'm not trying to reach out for help. I'd just like to tell my story because I'm not like everyone else. Because I *remember*.

I remember being born — my first glimpse of the world, wet and a little sticky, everything glazed and out of focus as my undeveloped eyes took it all in. I mean, I don't remember every second of it, not like it was yesterday, but I do have a memory of it, and that's more than most can say.

I had a relatively normal upbringing. Well, at the start anyway. Mum, Dad, five brothers and sisters. Dad's memory slowly fading, forgetting things easily: what he did this morning or what he did just now. But Mum's was razor sharp and I guess that's where I got it from. None of my brothers and sisters remembered their births, or much at all about their childhoods. I tried to remind them with my stories but they just gazed at me with big eyes and Tad always rolled his slightly before turning away. I knew they made fun of me. I was the smallest one so I got picked on. For being small and for being different.

When I was still quite young, tragedy struck. I awoke one morning to find the family clustered around Dad, his eyes rolled back and his body puffed and swollen. There was much distress and before long his body was taken away. Days of aimless drifting ensued. Mum was taken ill a week later and the rest of us knew what was coming. Now, as orphans, we would be separated.

I wasn't really unhappy at the prospect. I'd always known there was something bigger out there for me and I held no sorrow for my brothers and sisters as they waved goodbye. I *was* sad to see Mum leave my world. She had always been the only one who understood me and I knew that with her gone part of my childhood had gone with her.

Soon enough I was sent to my new home. It was a long journey. From the city where I'd grown up, I'd always been able to see tall buildings and cars going past, horns tooting, the constant noise lulling me. But this car ride was long and silent. Outside the sun was bright, high in the sky.

## Role of a Lifetime

The houses grew smaller, then further apart, then disappeared altogether and there were only fields of wheat and corn and sheep grazing. And then even less, dusty plains, settling deep into the hot glow of the sun.

The house itself seemed pleasant enough. A wooden shack with a fresh coat of paint and a few small trees struggling around it. The environment was arid, dry and though there was some greenery in the distance, most of the land around us was flat, barren and exposed to the elements. It was a different life out here.

The children, three of them, were loud and unsettling. They ran around, stopped to stare at me and ran away again. I kept to myself and most of the time they left me alone. Though one of the children, Betsy, in particular didn't like me. She would come and stare at me for hours, it seemed. I tried to match her stare but eventually I'd grow anxious and turn away, hiding, only to peer out and see her wicked grin as she realised she'd frightened me. Kids can be so cruel.

My new Mum was a lot nicer. She ensured I was fed and cleaned, which is more than someone in my position can usually hope for. Though I lived a relatively lonely existence, I amused myself by inventing games and telling an invisible audience stories of my childhood. Remembering was indeed a blessing for someone like me. I remembered the stories Mum would tell, the way I would always be up front, in rapt attention, as she focused solely on me. My brothers and sisters held little interest.

Betsy continued to taunt me. She would play near me, but never with me, all the while smirking and glaring as if to say *ha, you can't play with me*. After some time her behaviour took its toll and I found myself slowly sinking into loneliness. The hope that one day I would make it out of here was fading and all I could see was the glee on Betsy's face and the worry etched on Mum's.

One night, while the family was asleep and I tossed and turned restlessly, I realised that it was time to do something about my situation. It was time to stand up to my bully, regardless of the consequences.

The next morning, Mum was busy and so eventually Betsy drifted over to stare and make faces at me. I had prepared myself for this and had gobbled all the food I'd been given that morning for extra strength.

## Role of a Lifetime

I waited until Betsy was right close to me, her face almost touching mine, and I *jumped*.

I used all my strength and I absolutely flew into the air and hit her smack in the face. She squealed and took a few steps back, staring at me in shock, her expression a mask of horror. I lay on the ground, momentarily stunned, struggling to breathe. Perhaps, I thought, this wasn't such a great idea. But as I looked up and saw Betsy's face and how she trembled and struggled to regain composure I knew that it was worth it. I had stood up to my bully.

Then the tears started and Betsy backed further into the corner, while I lay, slowly losing energy. She was crying and screaming now, her face wet. My eyes began to close and my breathing shallowed, but it was an overwhelming feeling of pride and satisfaction I remember the most.

Mum came into the room and saw what had happened. Before I knew it I had been sent back and Betsy was being comforted, sobbing in huge heaves. All the while Mum was looking toward me, a curious expression on her face.

I wondered what the backlash would be. Would I be punished? Would I be sent away? A few days went by and Betsy kept her distance — victory. I jumped and leaped around, doing somersaults in happy arcs. Whenever Mum saw me her face held a serious expression and I knew she was contemplating what to do with me. For the moment though, I didn't care. I felt like I'd achieved something for the first time in my life, something all of my own.

But then a surprising thing happened. I was not sent away as I'd expected, in fact, quite the opposite. One morning I woke up to a loud noise and found someone staring at me. She was beautiful. The most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. A golden colour emanated around her and her eyes were deep and pure black. Her body was lithe and fit. I stared at her and she stared back. Within hours we were fast friends and I hoped liked nothing I'd ever hoped before, that this was just the beginning. I found myself pouring my heart out to her, telling her the stories of my childhood I'd practised alone for so long. I watched her laugh in pleasure and she herself told me a few of her own. Because it seemed, she too was a *rememberer*.

## Role of a Lifetime

The next day Mum brought Betsy over. I could see that Betsy was struggling but Mum cajoled her closer until they sat nearby. I had told Amber (that was her beautiful name) about the Betsy incident and she had laughed with me and also looked at me with a newfound respect that stirred something deep inside me. I felt like I had finally taken the leap from childhood to adulthood.

Mum was hugging Betsy on her lap and pointed at the two of us.

“See,” Mum told Betsy. “Peter’s happy now. Look how they like each other. I think that perhaps before he was just lonely.”

Betsy had nervous tears in her eyes and I knew that she would never bother me again. She was nodding but desperate to get away. Before they left the room Mum turned around and gave me a reassuring smile.

In response I did a backflip and swam over to Amber, my eyes goggling in happiness. And I knew that life had changed for the better. My life was with Amber, in the country, in our happy little goldfish home with our happy little goldfish memories. Because we didn’t have seven second memories like the others... we were different. We remembered the good and the bad, and we’ll keep our stories alive, passing them onto future generations to come.



**Debbie Kaye** grew up in Melbourne and has been living in Austria with her partner since November. Her love of writing fiction started at a very young age and she studied Professional Writing and Editing following high school. Although her usual occupation is marketing she is currently unemployed, giving her the time to reignite her passion for writing.

