

## **The Naked Truth**

— Julie Bowyer

Dark shadows streak across the fields. The sun is setting fast. A rash of goose pimples creeps up my arms. A shiver snakes down my back. I pull the hood of my jacket firmly onto my head, tuck the legs of my tracksuit pants into my woollen socks and snare the cuffs of my sleeves with a white-knuckled grip. I huddle close to the campfire, the flames rearing in their frenzy to devour, but it does little to ease my discomfort, my back exposed to the creeping chill.

A crunching noise in the bush behind the tent startles me. I grab my flashlight, turn and sweep the beam across a wide arc, hoping to see the red eyes of a possum or kangaroo. Instead it falls upon a boy, one arm raised to shield his eyes against the bright intrusion. I lower the torch and watch him stride into camp.

"Hi," he greets confidently. "I saw your campfire and thought I should come over and introduce myself."

"That's not the best thought you've had all day," I respond drily.

"You're a long way from the other campers," he observes.

"Evidently not far enough," I say.

I glance back at the fields. The dark shadows have almost descended on the fringing karri forest.

"Are you here on your own?" asks the boy as he hunkers down beside me.

"No, despite my best efforts you're still here," I answer.

The boy chuckles and warms his hands over the flames of my fire. Pity, I think to myself, this boy's got grit. We might have been friends.

"Do you like horror movies?" I ask.

"Sure," he says, "but if you're thinking of telling ghost stories by the campfire, I should warn you that I've had plenty of practice."

"That wasn't what I had in mind," I say, tossing a few more logs on the fire. A spray of burning embers forces the boy to withdraw his hands. "You know how the hapless victim is given plenty of opportunity to escape his gruesome fate? You're watching him and screaming at the television, 'NO! NO! Don't open the door! Walk away, you idiot!'"

"Sure," says the boy. "It's a classic tension builder."

“Excellent. Now let me put this to you succinctly. You are the hapless victim and you’re about to open the door. If you’re smarter than your average horror movie corpse you’ll run now!”

“You’re trying to scare me,” said the boy, rubbing his hands together with glee.

“Is it working?” I ask, my eyes scanning the tree line, searching the forest for movement.

“I don’t scare easy. I’ve read every horror book in my school library. So bring it on — night walkers, zombies, werewolves ...”

“Werewolves?” I vent a mocking laugh. “If only there was a werewolf. I would willingly bare my throat, for anything would be more merciful than the horror I will have to witness tonight.”

“You’re really good at this,” says the boy appreciatively. He snatches the torch, turns it on and holds it under his chin so the beam casts a ghostly pallor to his face. “What manner of creature could bring fear to a soul whose earthly attachment has long since decayed?” he wails.

I’m really starting to like this boy. Pity, I think to myself again. I turn to him and fix him with a solemn stare.

“You’re turning the door knob,” I say quietly. “The door is slightly ajar. Malevolent darkness oozes from the crack. Your head cocks slowly to the side. You’re about to put your eye to the crack when ...”

But it is all too late. The fate I try to spare him from emerges from the miasma of the forest. The meagre light of my fire reveals their full horror. The boy lets out a blood-curdling scream and scrambles backwards. In seconds he is crashing through the undergrowth leaving me alone with the dark shadows.

“He looked like a nice young man. Is he coming back?” asks Mum.

“Doubtful,” I say.

“He left in quite a hurry,” observes Dad. “Why is it that you never seem to make friends when we go camping?”

“Next year I think I would like to go on one of those camps for teenagers,” I blurt. Mum’s face sags under the weight of a mournful expression. “So that you guys can go to a nudist camp ... and expose yourselves to like-minded people.”

Dad nods and smiles. He scoops up Mum’s hand and they turn to go into the tent.

“Naturist retreat,” I hear Dad say. “We’re naturists.”

I close my eyes before they bend to enter the tent.

**Julie Bowyer** started writing five years ago with an idea for a children's novel. She joined a writer's group and was soon inspired to write short stories, enjoying the challenge of weaving a story where every word has to earn its place. She is now editing the second draft of her children's novel and writes short stories when the right side of her brain feels neglected and wants a bit of fun.



## **Light of My Life**

— Emma Ziemer

The back seat still smells like chicken casserole. Adam again curses his failure to use an airtight container and wryly remembers his surprise when the dish slopped everywhere after he stopped suddenly. The chicken has become a part of his car now, like a musty aunt lingering in the family with seemingly no purpose but to ask whether he is seeing anyone and tilt her head quizzically when he murmurs that his love life is “consistent.”

The traffic’s ridiculous. Adam marvels at the way rain sends Sydney commuters into a tailspin of end-of-day proportions. Is displaying any remnant of driver education, such as indicating, a sign of weakness? Only the strong will survive. Well at least long enough to swerve in front of the M50 bus and then have the gall to look astonished that it has evidently materialised out of nowhere.

On his car radio the world’s blokiest announcer speaks jovially to another Aussie stereotype who tells Bruce/Kev/Johnno how much he enjoys his radio station. Fake caller, without a doubt. Adam rolls his eyes in the rear vision mirror and checks whether his hair is receding yet. Immaculate brown hair, without ginger tendencies thanks very much, despite what Musty Auntie says when she thinks she’s paying him a compliment but is actually just highlighting the generation gap. He turns the radio down and stares at the red light.

The foggy windscreen and hypnotic swish of the wipers cocoon Adam and he finds himself hoping that the traffic light will stay red. The smell of chicken is no longer cloying; it has receded into something familiar and almost soothing. He imagines his car as a bubble floating away from all of the chaos of the sodden city streets. Drifting up and over the Anzac Bridge to the magnificent harbour that still makes him catch his breath on a sunny day. Forget about work today, Adam’s riding the bubble.

She stands rigidly in the steady rain staring at Adam. She sees him every morning at this intersection. She’s always liked gingers. He’s her

morning ritual and she can't relax into the day until she's spotted him. She's sure he's looking right at her today but she can't relax her features into a casual smile. She occasionally notices him running in the neighbourhood with an easy loping grace, unusual in a tall man. She envies him, lamenting her own stiffness and aversion to exercise.

She rehearses opening lines she could use.

"Shall we talk or continue flirting from a distance?"

"Hi, I'm doing a survey... What's your name? What's your phone number? Are you free next Saturday?"

"Life without you would be like a broken pencil ... pointless."

She can imagine the type of girls who have the confidence to use lines like that: shiny and brittle with well-tossed hair. She's drab, grey and dripping wet but Adam's slight smile casts a soft glow in her direction and she basks in it.

The light is taking forever to change but Adam hums to himself contentedly. His thoughts are drifting to Sophie in Scheduling: long toffee coloured hair and red glasses framing big brown eyes. He's giving her a lift to work on Friday because her car's being serviced. He resolves to de-casserole the car before then. He's certain the internet will have whole chat forums devoted to the de-casserolisation of cars. Adam holds the net responsible for breeding colonies of smug experts on just about everything: completely annoying unless he's the smug expert of course. The light finally turns green and Adam accelerates, turning his thoughts from girls and casseroles to the workday ahead.

The following day is clear and the wet weather traffic has predictably melted away. Adam feels guilty driving to work, not because of the environment but because this is a fitness-obsessed city where you're not a man unless you arrive at the office marinated in sweat, wearing the T-shirt from your most recent triathlon triumph. Adam only runs sporadically but finds it comes quite easily when he can be bothered. Not being a manly man has its perks though, Adam grins as he remembers Sophie teasing him yesterday about his pink 'party' tie. He fingers today's purple number absently and hopes that his sartorial risk pays dividends.

She stands on the corner trying to get his attention. He's lustrous in the sunlight — delicate features exuding dreamy pleasure. The sound of cars rushing by lulls her. They're bright but insubstantial butterflies; she could bat them away if she just reached out. Only Adam is clear to her, sitting serenely at the intersection with a smile playing on his freckly lips. She wishes she could hold him there a little longer. If she concentrated really hard she could do it. She's made things happen before. An aeroplane roars dully overhead and she loses focus. She's too late and now he's gone, leaving her with butterflies and loneliness.

The day finally arrives with a basketful of promise. Adam glances at the mirror one last time, admiring his casual Friday choice of checked red shirt and dark jeans. Urban hipster cowboy with great hair. She won't know what's hit her. He bounds down the stairs and out the front door before his bravado palls. He's been single far too long for such a handsome man. Time for action. His silver car greets him from its pole position street park and he glides into the driver's seat, barely noticing the harried mother next door ushering her bickering children into their car for the school run.

Adam drives the short distance to Sophie's house flicking impatiently through radio stations. An unfamiliar feeling nests in his stomach and he clears his throat twice. Jangly guitar pop plays him into Sophie's narrow street. Lilac Jacaranda trees border the street, welcoming him with an effusion of colour. The 'rear to curb' parking signs make him smile as he recalls a friend who dared disobey this order and was issued with a fine on which the offence 'inappropriately placed rear' was neatly typed. The mind boggles.

Adam taps the horn outside Sophie's house and instantly regrets it. Of course he should have made a little effort to park the car and walk to her door. He's dithering over whether it's too late to park when he sees her door open and there she is, bouncing down the path towards him, hair cascading caramel over her shoulders. She's wearing something blue; Adam only registers her even white teeth as she smiles at him. She opens the car door and slides in gracefully beside him.

"I thought redheads shouldn't wear red."

Adam doesn't take the bait. He feels a goofy grin splitting his face.

It feels so right to have Sophie in the car beside him. Once she's shut the door he drives on and turns out of her street.

"Well you look lovely. Hope you don't mind my car's Cologne de Casserole."

"Do I want to know this story?"

"Yes you do, it shows what an all-round great guy I am because I can cook and I help my sister out when she's swamped by the kids." Adam's blue eyes are wide and sincere and he can feel his perfectly shaped eyebrows arch charmingly.

"I knew you were domesticated. I like guys who cook — but a casserole? Really? Hello 1973 called. It wants its dinner back," Sophie chuckles, narrows her eyes and plays with a strand of her hair.

"A casserole is classic. Never goes out of style. You can have all your fancy fusion but what do you actually want to curl up with at the end of a hard day? A casserole. Satisfies every time."

Sophie's laughter embraces him and Adam can feel the current between them as he waits at the junction for the light to change. He wonders if soon he may even have something positive to report to Musty Auntie about his love life.

She stands erect on the corner and watches them smiling at each other in the car, anger rising. Who is that bitch? This cannot be happening again. Why do they never notice her? No-one ever notices her. She'll make them notice. Here, today, now. She concentrates fiercely and the sick feeling slowly rises to her head. The traffic fades to a barely discernible hum around her. She's hot and shaky and feels like she might explode but she keeps concentrating, knowing what she has to do. She turns green.

Adam notices the light change to green and, still half smiling in Sophie's direction, pulls out directly into the oncoming traffic. He hears Sophie's gasp of horror before a sickening crash rips the steering wheel out of his hands. He's spinning, falling amid a cacophony of blaring car horns and screeching tyres. He smells burning rubber and ammonia and feels warmth rushing from his bowels. The last sound he hears is that of the pedestrian crossing alert, "oh ho oh ho." It sounds like laughter.

***Emma Ziemer** is a lawyer who is currently on a career break, allowing her to indulge her passion for second-hand bookshops and writing strange short stories. She does not have children or any cats (yet). Her stories often turn the ordinary world on its head and are inspired by the authors she loved as a child such as C.S. Lewis and Susan Cooper.*





## **You Want to Go Crazy**

— Valerie Volk

We can organise that for you without any difficulty. Just sign here on the bottom line. No pen? Here, take this; use my pen.

No, not there. Didn't you see the word 'witness'? You think you're the witness? Well, you're not. You're the one who wants to convince us you're crazy. You sign where it says 'signature'!

What? You've forgotten your name?

Pretty good. That's really quite convincing. If I didn't know you better, I'd really believe that. You're getting the hang of this now. If you can make me believe you don't know your own name, you've achieved something worthwhile.

Goes well with the dishevelled look. I'm quite impressed by your attention to detail. The hair is excellent — though how you got all those top bits to stand on end in a series of coxcombs quite defies the imagination. Did you use gel?

Okay — I didn't really expect you to answer me. That might break the illusion. You do manage the wild-eyed stare particularly well, though. For a second there I thought you couldn't even understand what I was asking you. Watch that flicker of the right eyelid though. For a brief flash it gave you away. Well, almost. It had an unnerving alertness about it. That doesn't fit the image you're projecting. Very important to be consistent, you know. Of course you know. That's one of the most impressive things about you.

I felt that the moment you walked into my office. I think it was the way you just gazed ahead with such a vacant stare, and ignored all the rest of us. Hello! I thought. The lights are on, but there's no one home in there. It was quite a production. We all felt that right away.

I used to see people like you in the States quite often. Careful now! There was almost a gleam of awareness in your eyes. Don't give the game away by showing any understanding. In all my years in Australia I haven't seen anyone put on an act like yours. Generally I've found the Aussies are too easy-going; they're willing to put up with what life throws at them rather than work as hard as you're doing to get an effect.

But then, I've just had a look at your papers. You're not Australian, are you? Maybe that explains a lot about you. No real Australian would get himself up the way you have. They don't like to make idiots of themselves. They just don't have that get up and go that you're showing; it's a pity you're not using it for something more worthwhile.

The clothes help quite a lot. It takes real artistry — a positive sense of the fitness of things — to put together that very large winter coat with a flowery swimsuit — and then to add the Stetson. That really is a crowning glory. Though an Aussie hat with corks around the brim — a swaggie's hat — might have been even better, come to think of it.

Aha! That nearly got you, didn't it? You almost started to debate that point, I suspect. But you managed to get back to the vacant look again pretty fast. Well done! I've seen a lot of people try to pull your trick, and not too many can keep it up as well as you.

Not too sure about the Wellingtons, though. Though I'd have to admit that insisting on taking them off at the door before you'd come right in was good. Especially when we saw the way your big toe thrust itself through the woollen bed sock underneath. Oh, and I did like the way you'd mismatched the gumboots — one black and one purple was an inspired combination. Inspiration also to insist on putting them on the top shelf of the bookcase. Pity about the way all the books are scattered over the floor now. I guess my secretary can always pick them up after you've gone.

I think it was when you tried to kiss her that she ran from the room. Probably it wasn't so much that you tried to kiss her — it was where you were trying to kiss her. A bit over the top perhaps. It takes quite a bit to faze her, but you managed it. I think she's stopped crying; it's gone quiet in the outer office, and there's nothing much that a cup of tea won't fix with her, so we don't need to worry about that. She's had some pretty rum experiences in here, after all. One day she'll write her memoirs, and no one will believe them.

I'd really prefer it if you came in from the balcony, though. That railing wasn't designed to take someone of your weight, and it's a five-storey drop to the street. Traffic's quite heavy down there, and it's a busy thoroughway. I don't think they'd appreciate having to close it off for a few hours.

Just checking out the drop, were you? Well, now that you know perhaps you'd like to sit down on the couch over there and we can get to business. No, try the couch instead. Honestly, my desk isn't all that comfortable to sit on, and I would have preferred to leave those papers uncrumpled for the day. That's a good fellow.

You can come out from under the desk now — I'm not really angry about the papers. They were just business documents — you know, like the one I wanted you to sign. We didn't quite get round to discussing it, but I know you'll be quite pleased with what I have in mind.

Oh, for heaven's sake please don't start the barking again. Pets aren't allowed in this office block, and that's a very loud bark you've perfected. Must have taken a lot of practice. It speaks volumes for your lungs. Quite important in this line of business, so I'm relieved to know that you can project well. But enough barking now, there's a good dog — I mean, there's a good chap. Just shows how convincing you are. You can get up from the floor now. And if you don't mind, I'd much prefer you not to cock your leg against the desk. That's taking things too far even for me.

Better!

Much better to have you on two legs again. I need to talk to you sensibly if we're going to get anywhere in this relationship. It's time for some serious stuff now, old fellow. Don't bare your teeth at me like that! This has gone on long enough.

I'm convinced.

You're going to be perfect for the role. The money's not great, but I can just see you making a hit as one of the crazies in the asylum. In fact, if we don't watch it, you'll steal the show. The Marquis de Sade himself will have to put on a fine turn to out do you. Welcome to the cast! We start rehearsals next week.

***Valerie Volk** is a former teacher, lecturer and international education program director. With a busy professional life, four children and six grandchildren, and a lot of living, writing has been a closet activity until now. Her first two books of poetry, *In Due Season* (2009) and *A Promise of Peaches* — a verse novel (2011), will be joined this year by *Even Grimmer Tales*, a collection of outrageous stories. While she publishes mainly poetry, her short stories have appeared in magazines and collections. Valerie's story, *New World*, was published in the *Stringybark Stories* anthology, Marngrook. She finds her inspiration in the fascinating question: What if?*

