

The Cloakroom

— Brendan Murray

A tenner? An old receipt or parking pass? Or just some measly pocket lint fresh from the latest spin cycle? Most people's pockets don't contain much; then again most people aren't the type to dine at *Fredericks*.

On the Southbank of Melbourne's Yarra, *Fredericks* is a well-to-do watering hole. Close enough to see how the other half live, working here is a cruel fate to befall any minimum wage employee. You need to scrub the pan that cooked the forty-eight dollar herb fettuccine if you want your sixteen fifty an hour. It's a waste of your time to get intellectual about it. You occasionally get the walk-in that's dining out for a special occasion, a dinner once a year funded by the jar full of coins above the kitchen sink. But for the most part it's not.

I've recently moved out of the kitchen and into the cloakroom. That's right, this watering hole for the rich and toffee-nosed has a cloakroom. The transition is a move sideways more so than up; Alyce seems to agree. She works in real estate, upscale kind of stuff, showing houses and apartments to the people who eat here probably. She always dresses nice and tells me I need to dress better. We've been distant of late, and I haven't really done anything to try and fix that. She still seems happy, and to be honest, she works so much I doubt she'd have the time to work on our relationship. We've been together since we were both waiting tables in a crummy little dive bar up in Brunswick. I guess nothing much has changed on my part.

Working the cloakroom is better than working the sweaty stainless steel cage that is the kitchen. People want to know their belongings are being kept in a nice secure place, and boy is it nice. Everything has a velvet finish, even the walls. The hangers are embroidered with the *Fredericks* logo in a gold cursive font. People either hand you their jacket like they're giving you the keys to their Merc outside, like Mr. Westhoff.

"This must be hung, it is not to be folded, understood?" he tells me every time, making sure I get a glimpse of his wristwatch that is probably worth twice what my Nissan buzz box would fetch on Carsales. Or they throw hats, scarves and jackets at you like you're the coat rack. I probably prefer the second one to be honest.

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I don't know when it was that I started going through people's pockets. The occasional jacket would be left behind at close and I'd search the pockets with the honest intention of identifying the owner. Although I can't speak so highly of my intentions anymore. A few silver coins to supplement my income, they won't be missed by the owner of the Ralph Lauren admiral wool-blend coat. A ticket stub from a private showing at the NGV, there's one for the scrapbook. I stuff my hand into the inside breast pocket of a black overcoat, the feeling is somewhat similar to the feeling of playing lucky dip at the primary school carnival. Except it wasn't crappy second hand toys wrapped in butcher's paper I was fishing for, it was money. I remove my hand to reveal a few stray business cards and a serviette, not my greatest haul. The serviette is marked however. 'Don't make me wait too long xx' is sprawled across the top followed by a mobile number and sealed with a kiss. The dark red lipstick has seeped into the thin paper. I don't know why but reading it gave me a shiver. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I got a little dry in the mouth. This certainly wasn't for my eyes but here I was, standing in the cloakroom reading it over and over. 'Don't make me wait too long'. How long had she been waiting? The handwriting itself was almost seductive, I imagined a woman's pursed lips speaking the words as she jotted them down on the serviette and left it by the bedside, a night of passion. Whose coat is this?

Ding! The counter bell rang from outside the room, another privileged coot wanting to pick up their belongings. It was a younger man, south of thirty. He was dressed in a pinstripe business shirt, blue with a white collar. He pulled out a small gold case from his breast pocket and removed a cigarette.

"You can't smoke in here," I muttered in a rehearsed kind of way. He proceeded to light up and take a long drag.

"Sir, I'm gonna have to ask you to either put that out or step outside." A thick cloud of smoke was blown into my face for my troubles. It made my eyes water and my throat dry.

"Number 43 Bell Boy," his voice sounded as foul as the cigarette smoke that lingered between us. I snatched his ticket off the counter and walked back into the cloakroom. I searched for a few minutes for his jacket, wondering what was in his pockets, what I could secretly take

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from him to know I had the last laugh. It was only then that I realised, I had already been through his pockets. Number 43 was the black overcoat, the serviette and business cards, the red kiss. I shoved the contents into my own pocket and carried the coat back out to him.

"Thanks Jeeves," he snickered as he snatched the coat from my hands and flung it over his shoulder.

It was 10:30pm, two or three patrons still finishing up their desserts and coffee. There weren't any belongings left in the cloakroom other than Mr. Westhoff's coat, I decide to leave it neatly folded for him on the front desk. If I hung around any longer they'd probably ask me to pitch in in the kitchen, scrub the forty-eight dollar fettuccine pans. Before I left I decided to make a call. It was best to use the restaurant phone at the front, no suspicious numbers left on my mobile. My hands were sweaty as I picked up the receiver. I wasn't the type to do this kind of thing. I'd crumpled and smudged the number on the serviette but it was still legible. I think it only rang three maybe four times but it felt like an eternity. With every ring I second-guessed myself.

"Hello," a soft feminine voice answered. I had thought about what to say and how to say it for the better half of my shift. I said the only thing I could say that wouldn't reveal who I was.

"I think I've made you wait long enough," I sounded confident despite being hunched over a restaurant phone sweating bullets. There was a long pause, I wanted to come clean already, end the horrible silence.

"Did I leave you wanting more?" she giggled in an infectious kind of way. "Where are you calling from?"

"*Fredericks*," I replied with an uncertain tone.

"Ohh...I know the place. Fine dining with the wife? I'm at the Hyatt, room 163, fully furnished," her voice a seductive potion that seemed to make my heart race and slow at the same time.

"Come see me," she added before hanging up. It took me a minute to realise I was still listening to the dial tone.

The roads were wet, my wipers squeaked as they desperately tried to keep up with the falling rain. The headlights of oncoming cars thumped against the back of my eyes, my mind lost in thought. The Hyatt wasn't far, and I could just tell Alyce I was working late. Who

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knows, this temptress might take one look at me and slam the door in my face. I actually don't think I'd even care if she did; I just needed to put a face to the voice, to the lipstick.

The doorman let me in without a hassle, first obstacle down. The elevator ride up was slow, sixteen floors to change my mind. I couldn't tell if it was the elevator or my own indecision causing my gut to tighten. I stumbled out on the sixteenth floor and wandered up the hallway lined with wall lamps. It was quiet, I could only just hear the falling rain if I concentrated on it. I lifted the gold doorknocker that hung below the numbers one six three. Dropping it against the door three times before letting it go. I heard footsteps on the other side, the pitter-patter of delicate feet. Fully furnished she had said on the phone, what an odd thing to specify. My heartbeat had slowed; I stuck my hand in my pocket to remove the serviette and fished further to find the business cards. The first two were nothing but the third one was her. As the door swung open I read the card aloud. Alyce Robinson – Metropol Realty.



Brendan Murray is a Melbourne based writer currently studying a Master of Screenwriting at the Victorian College of the Arts (University of Melbourne). His short fiction has been previously published in the Stringybark anthology No Tea Tomorrow as well as in the Questions Journal and Phantasmagoria Magazine. For details visit www.brendanmurray.net or follow him on twitter @BrendanMurrayAU



After the Rain

— Holly Bruce

Always it is expected I will be grateful, *should* be grateful. The colour of my possibilities are stained with blood; a kaleidoscope of alternatives that have faded but will remain into eternity. My expectations, others seem to imply, should be lower than those around me. Would it be so obscure that I — with such horrors imprinted on my field of consciousness — raise my expectation of life; a redressing of the balance perhaps? Yet for years I have been drowning, awash in this external collective attitude — dragged by the current of it — this belief that I should overflow with gratitude at finding myself safe. Safe with a man who rules me — with far less tangible weaponry than I was once exposed to — yet still, always, with the intent to control.

The Australian government opened the gate of opportunity for a new life. For this I am grateful. I studied and practiced the English language with military discipline. I have not been without a job since my arrival. When though, do I stop being grateful? When do I stop being content with anything that is better than what I have endured. On a comparative scale this is better, yes, but does the scale ever change in this lifetime? Am I greedy for wanting more? Or worse still, for expecting it? And conversely why, when mention is made of the crime committed against more than one million Cambodian people, do many listeners appear less shocked than when hearing of a single person being murdered on a First World city street? Is it because they need to identify the individual element to be able to relate to the crime? Or perhaps it is that our minds were never created to stretch to such unfathomable mass barbarity.

I am haunted always by the evacuation — the chaos, the choking collective fear, as we surged — under Khmer Rouge rule — from Phnom Penh. In the roiling confusion of violence and terror, I lost myself. I was torn from my beloved parents. I was set to work in a child labour camp. Capitalism, it seemed, was a punishable crime for a bird-boned eight year old. I saw my brother bludgeoned to his death with a spade — he did not work as quickly or as robustly as the soldiers would

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have liked. These soldiers, who were themselves no more than brainwashed peasant boys.

My religion was whipped from me — and I believe that it fled through those tender spaces that were spared between stinging lashes. I have been reacquainted with neither my family nor my faith.

I am alone with my thoughts as I scrub and scour the blue linoleum. The hospital is dim at this hour, many souls suffer in silence; no one escapes in the end. I dip the brush to steaming bleach and continue. I enjoy the industry of cleanliness. Beneath the wash of suds and ammonia is a brighter blue; the flattened bristles strive for a fresh slate. I take my time, my middle-aged knees slide across the damp surface on which I kneel, my shoulder burns. Around and around. I watch my hand; repetitive circular movements, my life continues. I calculate what is left to do; the narrow corridor stretches out before me. The floor covering, a duplicated pattern of spirals, disappears into the dark.

I will return later to a tiny rented flat, which also breathes bleach. My husband, for whose presence I should be grateful, will tell me what he wishes to eat for breakfast. I will produce his meal, wash his clothes, clean his house, and tend to all his needs before I rest. If these tasks are not completed to his satisfaction, or if his mood is dark, I will feel the rain of his fist upon my wilting flesh. Accompanying this assault, the heavy obligation of my gratitude will wrestle wildly with resentment. I am lucky. I am alive. Australia is my saviour.

My entire family lie in a shallow grave, nine hours northwest of all my blessings. I have read it is common for human remains and clothing to surface following heavy rainfall. All those bodies tossed into mass graves of the merest depth. Atrocities always surface — no matter that we wish to bury them. The world would never be deep enough to bury the destruction, the loss, the hurt. After the rain it is not uncommon to come across bones and teeth in Choeung Ek.

The fist slows, weight withdraws. I slink out of the kitchen — where I have been punished for overcooked bacon — and take refuge in the partitioned section of the lounge room where the bed awaits me. The recliner squeals, I see the shadow of my husband descend into his bewildered nest opposite the television; his anger spent in the mushrooming of my bruises.

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I wake to the sound of rain, my heart threatening to smash through my ribs, as bullets of water ricochet off the iron roof. The window reveals furrows of clarity; they streak through the patina of soot thrown from the train line.

Back home the southwest monsoon carries the wet; a lashing of endless tears. I wonder, after the reign of Pol Pot, did the northeast monsoon ever return? Nature dictates that it did, but I cannot imagine my country without visualising it soaked; drenched in blood and tears. Even the northeast monsoon would be unable, I think, to dry the burden of such saturation.

Despite the dividing decades, I long for my family. My father's strong wiry arms as he swung me to his shoulders on market day. My mother, her warm fingers weaving my hair and tying it with string. My brother... Why should I feel that I am lucky in the face of what may have become of me? My life is framed by loss.

My religion taught me, at a young age, that all imprisoning fences exist in the mind. These gates were latched only with fear and doubt, my father told me. I was soon to discover that such gates were transformed under Khmer Rouge, to a grid of blockages locked tight with circumstance. No matter that I tried to practice my faith — regardless of the threat of execution — my mind would not stretch with the elasticity required to accept the loss of my home, my family and eventually my own identity, which came to rest under the collective label of *survivor*.

Some days I am not sure what anything means. For what purpose was I saved? I have tried to help others, believing that perhaps this is my purpose, but how can one successfully save a drowning man when one is unable themselves to swim. I try each day to regain a little of my faith. Many seasons have past yet my mind is reluctant to grab hold of anything, all is slippery and damp, still.

I must be allowed to want more, to expect more. A poor beginning is not reason to settle happily for a less horrifying ending. This commonly held perception is a slurry of delusion. I am not safe, there is no such thing. A different danger perhaps, but still, in my husband, I have a ruler. I am operating, reluctantly, under the regime of someone other than myself. It should be okay for me to want more than this.

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I look to a water stain on the ceiling above the bed. I see the shape of my future. It looks a little like a map of home. I want to return. I need to be wrapped in the dust of a northeast monsoon; hot and dry. I want my family to know I am near. I don't know where my life will end — I am waiting only for it to begin again. 1975 is a long time past. I must rescue myself when I return to Phnom-Penh. Only then will I know what my life will look like after the reign.



Holly Bruce is lucky enough to live and work in Belmont NSW, a lakeside suburb positioned neatly between Lake Macquarie and the Pacific Ocean. She walks for exercise, practices yoga for relaxation, attends Buddhist classes for wisdom and writes for joy. For love, she spends time with family and friends, both human and animal. Her goals in life: limitless love, peace, and publication. Holly has been published in seven Stringybark anthologies, the latest being *No Tea Tomorrow*.



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Harry D

— Chris Hicks

I look to the back of the room; it swells with solemn eyes. Their one silent question burns like a magnifying glass in my mind — *who the fuck are you?* I lower my head, the words on my sheet of paper blur as the page shakes in my hand. The ink disappears into the white. Perhaps that's *my* fate.

I try and wet my lips.

I breathe in. I start.

"Harry was my friend." An incredulous murmur goes through the room. A sad, smiling face in the front row nods at me, it's Mrs D, Harry's mother.

It's funny how you remember some faces but not others. I can't picture my father with a young man's face. I had foster parents for as long as I can remember. I still called them Mum and Dad though. When I think of Harry, I always see the boy's face that I met by the river, free and fearless with a smile bigger than the harbour bridge. Even when I saw him cold and limp in his coffin, the boy at the river looked back at me.

I look at the page, it's still shaking. I take another breath.

"You probably don't know me and I don't know most of you, but I knew Harry. We went to the same school. Hmm... that is, when he was there. The teacher, old Mr Schultz, didn't like Harry much. I will never forget Harry's laugh as old Schultz chased him around the yard with a stick. I thought the old bastard was going to have a heart attack."

I breathe out.

My mind fills with the stone face of Mr Schultz. I remember my father walking me up the gravel path to meet him. That was my fourth primary school in five years. Schultz stood at the front of the tiny school with his arm in the air like one of those war statues riding a horse, sword drawn high, ready for battle. I wondered if he had just come back from Vietnam.

As we got there, he reached out and swallowed my father's hand in his, shaking it up and down. I had a vision of my father's arm suddenly snapping off, leaving a bloodied stump for a wrist. Old Schultz's head turned my way, his granite smile sucked the spit out of me, leaving me nothing but dry rocks to swallow.

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"I'm Mr. Schultz, the headmaster," he said and waved us towards the door. "That's yours." He looked at me and pointed at a desk in the front. "I can keep my eye on you there." I sat down and looked around, I didn't know it then, but Harry's desk was right behind mine. The empty room echoed with whispers and giggles. I wondered if there'd be other kids like me. I hoped there would, we were in the bush and everyone said that's where I came from.

I put my sheet of paper on the pulpit and my eyes meet Mrs D's again, the same friendly, accepting eyes that Harry had. I look up, the murmurs and the coughing subsides and the burning stares start to fade. What to say.

I breathe in.

"Harry and I couldn't be more different. He was a bush kid and I'm from the city. He was afraid of nothing and I was scared of everything. He didn't judge people on how they looked, he judged them for who they were and what they did."

I take another breath.

"Harry, I would have been proud to call you my brother." My hands stop shaking. My lips start to quiver. My eyes close.

Winter was starting to settle in when we moved to the bush, to that school. It tickled the ground with its icy fingers in the mornings, spreading a thin mist over the paddocks. First days were always the same. I stood at the school gate watching the kids playing, there was no one like me. The squeak of the gate's hinges stopped their game, I heard one of them yell out – *it's the new kid* and they came running. As they got closer I could hear someone.

"Say something, say something."

"What? Say what?"

"You speak like us," said one of the boys. "Never seen an abbo before. Bet you can run, c'mon let's have a race." Next thing I was lined up beside three or four of them.

"Ready? OK... Go!" Off they went, straining their necks looking back at me. "GO!" I took off after them. I never could run, not even when my real mother was screaming at me to run. I remember that scream, but her face has gone.

Harry's desk stayed empty that whole term, all Schultz would say is, he's away for a while.

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My eyes open. I pick up my page.

“The bush is where I first met Harry, at the water hole in the river. It was in the school holidays. Summer was coming, magpies were swooping, wattle was out, the river was still running. I never saw anything like that in the city I came from. There’s no bush; only angry sounds, bad smells, and grey everywhere.”

I breathe out.

I am there, on the river bank, soaking up the sun and watching the clouds drift across the blue canvas, forming and un-forming images of things past, and things to come. Wind caresses the ripening wheat as it sweeps across the paddocks. I know every noise; the splash of a fish taking a dragonfly when it gets too close, the baby magpies, even the distant bellowing bull when a cow is on heat.

I look back at my page.

I breathe in.

“I was lying on the river bank by the water hole, when the sound of a stick breaking behind me caught my ear. I looked around and there was Harry coming towards me, no shoes, no shirt, only jeans — waltzing along without a care in the world. I’d never seen skin so white.

He asked me if I was the new kid that had moved into the Moore’s old place. I looked at him and nodded. He had a fishing rod in his hand, I asked him what he was going to do with it. *Catch some bloody fish, what ya reckon? You bin in the sun too long?* I fired one straight back at him. I said, “Why, you never seen a black fella before?” He told me he’d seen plenty, but he thought if I’ve no idea what a fishin rod’s for, *the sun’s cooked my brain for sure*. I told him I was from the city. He thought that was funny and said — *well I’ll be buggered, someone like me, teaching someone like you to fish*.

Harry taught me a lot that day, how to rip your throat out smoking Mallee root, how to catch and gut fish, how to cook ‘em and best of all, how to do a backflip dive off the tree.”

I pause.

I think back to the last time I saw Harry alive.

It was with a mate, we were in town and went into a pool hall to have a game. We got some change and were putting the balls on the table when a group of half pissed blokes came over.

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“That’s our table mate, you two can fuck off.”

“There was no money on it mate, you blokes were way over there.”
I pointed to where they had come from.

“You fuck off now and you won’t get hurt.” I looked at the bloke behind the counter, he shrugged and turned away. I reached to pick up our coins.

“You leave our fuckin’ money alone.”

“Problem boys?” His voice hadn’t changed in ten years. No shoes, no shirt and covered in tattoos.

“You blokes tryin’ to help me two mates set up the table are ya?”

“They your mates, Harry?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” He didn’t need to say anymore. He told us that he’d just got out. He said he put three blokes in hospital, they had a dark guy half their size against a wall beating the crap out of him, but the cops wouldn’t listen and didn’t care.

That was Harry.

I breathe in.

“I don’t think about Harry as someone who killed himself. He was someone who died standing up for people like me. He wasn’t the sort that looked the other way, but they said he’s a menace to society and they locked him up. That’s what killed him. It wasn’t the belt he hung himself with, it was the bars that he tied it to. I’m sorry Mrs D. They’ve taken Harry from you, but at least he’s finally free.

He was not just my friend. He’s a hero, and the best friend I ever had.”

I breathe out.



***Chris Hicks** is an emerging writer in a not so young body. After roaming Australia for many years, he has settled in the Adelaide Hills with his four boys, one girl, two dogs, six chooks, a cat, two mice and an occasional parrot. He is in the second year of completing an Advanced Diploma of Professional Writing with the Adelaide College of Arts and loving every minute of the journey.*

A Local Newsflash

— Lindsay Martin

All in all, this wasn't how Paul envisioned his photojournalism career.

The young girl excitedly led him through the house, her shoes clacking on the polished wooden floorboards. The pearl white walls were adorned with proudly framed portraits of her drawings of barely increasing ability. "This way," she said, skipping into the playroom where the prize-winning guinea pigs resided.

The hutch was painted brightest pink, and adorned with sparkling love hearts drawn in glitter glue. Streamers billowed atop wooden posts bounding a wire mesh fence, carrot sticks wedged in random holes. It was like Lilliput on mardi gras night.

This was to be the front page story.

Needless to say, a slow week in local community news. Paul wasn't expecting Fairfax or Rupert to be phoning him any time soon. He set down his camera bag and started unpacking his equipment.

The girl's mother followed them in, giving her daughter another congratulatory hug. "We'll go fetch the certificate," she said, beaming with pride. "Best in show," she added. Paul forced a smile.

Whispering eagerly between themselves, mother and daughter departed hand in hand back down into the house towards the stairs, the girl's shoes clacking as she skipped. Paul checked his light meter. The room was a little dark. In the enclosure, the two animals eyed him warily, nibbling at some cabbage, unaware of their imminent fame. Overgrown rodents, Paul thought. He clicked the flash module onto the camera, then took the opportunity to snap a test picture.

The pair froze with a squeak, dazzled by the flash, then keeled over, dead.

Paul slowly gazed over his camera at the two prone animals. He hoped they were just stunned.

They remained immobile, legs upright.

They weren't stunned.

Footsteps clumped about on the floor above. Muffled voices bickered. "Where did you put it last?"

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“It was here!” the girl insisted.

Paul dipped to his haunches. “Hey,” he whispered with a voice as soft as flower petals. “Upsy daisy.” He wiggled a carrot stick in the wire.

The bodies still lay prone. No response.

More footsteps upstairs.

He made kissy noises. Nothing.

“Wake up,” Paul urged. He prodded the nearest with a piece of celery.

“Found it!” The daughter cheered above.

Paul’s stomach plummeted, his mind plagued with a vision of a headline: *Photographer kills Prize Guinea Pigs — Little Girl Emotionally Scarred for Life*, with a small position vacant advertisement for a photojournalist discreetly positioned on the bottom of the page. His heart pounded, urging him into action. Paul leaned over the wire mesh and pushed rhythmically on the nearest guinea pig’s chest. Its legs splayed with each thrust. “Ah, ah, ah, ah, staying alive, staying alive,” Paul sang to himself, pressing in time, willing a miracle.

Footsteps clattered down the stairs.

CPR a failure, Paul lifted the animal to his mouth and blew. Its belly expanded in his grip, then deflated without pulse.

Clack, clack. The girl’s shoes on the polished wood floors.

Another puff of air. Another swelling, near to burst. Another lack of heartbeat.

Clack, skip. Clack, skip. Giddy voices nearing.

Paul tossed the bodies through the hutch door, turning just in time to greet their owners’ return to the playroom. “They’ve gone all shy,” he chuckled.

The mother moved to assist. Paul blocked her way.

“Best not disturb them,” he said. “Believe me, I have years of animal picture experience. A grumpy animal is an unphotogenic animal.”

On the wall behind the frowning mother, Paul spied a framed portrait of the two guinea pigs, hair in ribbons. “Tell you what,” he said, pointing. “I’ll use that picture and just Photoshop them in with a shot of you two. Standard practice with difficult animals. Say cheese,” he said, pointing the camera.

The mother continued frowning.

“Big smile,” Paul suggested weakly. He felt a tug at his shirt.

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"They always come out when I sing," said the young girl.

"Oh, ... lovely."

The girl kneeled by the enclosure then crooned a lullaby of love and devotion. Paul felt like the ogre in a fairytale. The one a mob of villagers usually slew with fire and pitchforks, wearing much the same expression the girl's mother still continued to wear.

"Oh," he interrupted. "That's put them to sleep. I hear them snoring."

"Why won't you photograph my daughter with her guinea pigs?"

Paul turned at the terse, clipped words. The mother's hands were welded to her hips. "I just thought..."

"They're not coming out," the daughter said, crestfallen.

"It's her front teeth, isn't it," the mother deduced. "You think she'll look like them when she smiles."

"Eh?"

"We've paid a fortune correcting those teeth!"

"They're not moving," the girl cried, peering anxiously through the hutch door.

"An absolute, bloody fortune."

"Let's photograph you both now!" Paul primed his camera's flash module. It whined, charging. "Up you get. Please..."

The young girl backed away from the hutch and stood. Her bottom lip quivered, tears welling in her eyes. "Mum. I think they're dead."

The mother pushed past Paul, and swung the hutch roof open on its hinges.

The two victims lay revealed, lifeless.

"Oh my god," the mother gasped, hands covering her mouth. The young girl wavered on the precipice of utter desolation.

"Clear!" Paul shouted, unscrewing the charged flash module, then applying its terminal to the nearest guinea pig.

A spark and zap, a twitch, then the animal sprang to life and scampered under a lettuce leaf. Its partner was resuscitated just thirty capacitance charging seconds later.

Paul sat, the mother and daughter hugging the hero of their day tightly. The photographer told them to bunch closer together for the

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shot, while the reporter continued to question and prompt from the sidelines. Paul remained reticent on details of his side of the story. The mother and daughter hugged their humble hero all the tighter as a result. The reporter mentioned potential of a front page in all the big syndicated papers — *The Herald*, *The Age*, *The Mail*, *The West*. Apparently it was slow news week.

On his lap, the guinea pigs nibbled carrot sticks from his fingers, their silence bought.

For now.

They continued munching. Paul still thought them overgrown rodents.

“And ... smile!”



Martin Lindsay is a Western Australian writer based in Perth, author of four plays, several short stories, and wantonly procrastinating over some novels. He is the organiser of the Perth Writers Forum writing group who regularly meet in odd places to write odd things. He divides writing time with portraying entire casts of Disney films for his daughter, and breaking things for a living as a software tester. Martin has previously been published in the *Stringybark* anthologies, *The Very End of the Affair* and *Behind the Wattles*.



Balance Sheet

— Holly Bruce

I've never had a head for business, finance is a mystery to me. Talk of investment dances like a foreign language through my wrinkled Broca's and Wernicke's centres, and beyond, registering nothing more than confusion. At this stage of my life I'm in receipt of a pension, worked bloody hard since I was a boy of fourteen, so I accept the fortnightly government deposit in my account gracefully and without shame. This morning I open the paper and read of my marginalised pensioner position, of my statistical scrape with poverty and loneliness as I skid, helter-skelter, toward my demise. I don't doubt for a minute that the paper heralds fact. What I do doubt, at times, is the benefit of reading it.

My days, during the summer months, begin the minute the sun slips through the splice of horizon between sea and sky. Up she comes like a poached egg — on one of Dulcie's prized Wedgewood plates — quivering and golden. I still have those plates. I haven't the heart to use them since Dulcie passed, but I like to know they're tucked, like precious memories, in soft folds of tissue. There's comfort in knowing I can unwrap the cool blue past from its protective shroud, and hold it, whenever I want to.

I toast the sun — with a hot cup of tea — and watch, from the front step of the van, as she paints the park with light. Once I've downed my cuppa I creak through the grid of vans toward the beach access; an old relic in faded stubbies, singlet and bare feet. If I were a man of religious beliefs I would say that this is the time of day when I feel God. But more accurately, or perhaps honestly, I would say it is this hour of the morning, without fail, that I crest the rise of the back dune and tremor with a vast energy of spirit; mine and the world's. I understand what others feel in prayer, of a more conventional church-bound variety. Here, now, I commune with a spirit, which both rocks and grounds me. A paradox; everything zooming in while simultaneously falling away. I hobble at speed toward the shore and print my presence in the sand, heading toward the break wall.

I return, an hour later, instilled with the perfect partnership of invigoration and ache. My lungs scoured with sea air, my brain

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sparkling. The promise of toast and coffee lure me back through the park to my van where I scramble a mess of egg and mushroom, snatch some parsley from the scrubbed concrete pot beneath the nasturtium-tangled tap, and voila! Breakfast of kings.

I browse further through the paper as I eat. Apparently pensioners are barely surviving and are dying like flies, socially and financially withering in dingy digs. God rest their souls. I close the paper; enough. Both knowledge and money can be pointless if they can't be put to good use. These days I travel more freely with less of both. With enough encouragement we can talk ourselves into, or out of, anything. I drop another slice of bread in the toaster.

Breakfast things rattle around the sink and I give the falsies a good scrub before considering a walk down to the laundry to get some washing on. Sensing the sun's hotly determined crawl toward its peak, I peel sheets away from my mattress and add them to my washing basket along with a towel and a fistful of shorts and shirts. I slide my hooves into rubber thongs. Leila C beat me to the prize machine today, so I take the next one on the rank and drop the items in one by one. I add soap, switch her on, and she's up and running.

Leila sits outside the communal laundry block, pink floral scarf wrapping her tender skull, she sucks the life out of a rollie. The air reeks of weed. She offers me a toke.

"Strictly medicinal" she assures me.

Never having tried the stuff, and with nothing short of mild arthritis to claim as an ailment — blessed bugger I am — I decline the offer.

"Never took you for the unadventurous type Archie Sanders."

"Well you read me all wrong then Leila. I'm boring as they come; never ventured far, haven't been anywhere, not going anywhere."

"That's nothing to do with adventure you silly man. It's not about geography it's about the horizons in your head. Living without limits, I think the young ones call it. But as usual they take everything literally. It's not about where you go outside the body, it's about where you go *within* it."

"You're one wise women Leila C." I tell her, as I leave her to her joint and head for the garden beds that line the back fence between the vans and dunes. Swollen arteries of beach- buffalo snake through organic

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soil and mulch, curling menacingly toward alert little lettuce heads and lazy spineless vine-tomatoes. I select my weapons from the colour-bond tool shed and drag out a couple of stakes. Jim shuffles up half an hour later, shovel in hand, and begins to cut deep circular moats in the soil surrounding the citrus. The surfs sings to us as we work, cool breath rolling off her back on incoming sets.

Nearing midday, I'm collecting up tools and shaking earth from my thongs, as Tom jogs, nimble and brown, down the timbered beach track.

"Either of you old mates want a lift up the street?"

"No *old* mates here boyo," Jim flashes in return.

Tom ignores him. "Gotta head up to work and get some wax. Youse want to come?"

"Drop us at the hardware?" Jim eyes his mornings handy work. "We could get us some citrus food, Arch."

"Too right." I agree. "Just got to grab the sheets out of the machine and throw them on the line."

Tommy guffaws. "Ya right Jimbo! Old *mate* isn't fitting for Archie. *Old girl* sits better."

He spins the tap of the beach shower and jumps beneath the flow, drowning out my response. Cheeky bugger.

I trundle around the outer path of the park, back toward the laundry. The walkway is thick with shade; cool and green. I slow my pace. Bougainvillea is tangled with orange trumpet vine in an escalating war of dominance. A drunken line-up of coral trees umbrella the walkway, hugging the curve of the fence and up past my van. I pull the sheets, sweet smelling and fresh as joy, from the machine and hurl them toward the line. They land askew and then settle, like a blessing on a baby.

To the far side of the trees I see Leila stretched out, supine and still, on a pink plastic banana lounge shaded by long-limbed ginger shrubs. The sun must have torched her away from her post by the laundry door, I guess. Betsy Reid, sits upright by her side. The click of her plastic knitting needles a coded lullaby.

The run up the street in the Kombi tends, often, to morph into a *boys own adventure*. We find the citrus food at the hardware store and, with Tom's help, we load it. Next, the surf wax. We linger and study the

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merchandise while Tom exchanges surf statistics with his workmates. Lastly Jim buys his paper and lotto ticket.

“Waste of time man.” Tom advises him.

“It could be the winner.” Jim tells him, pocketing the ticket.

“But you don’t need anything you don’t already have.”

“Who’s for a burger boys?” I ask. “My shout, as a thanks for all the lifts you give us Tommy.”

Jim nods his assent.

“Yeah, Cool.” Tom forges ahead, through the fluorescent plastic fly strips.

Jim leafs through his paper as we wait at the chippy. I watch him stop and study page three; the article about the loneliness and poverty of pensioners.

“Prescription for depression you got there, Jimbo.” Tom leans past him to the fridge and grabs a drink. “Anything uplifting in it?”

Jim looks up blankly.

“Nah, didn’t think so.”

We leave the Kombi outside the fish and chippy and walk through the eucalypts to a bleached timber table above the beach.

“Surf’s picked up.” Tom observes biting into his burger. “Check out the swell comin’ in from the point. Gonna be a pearler out there this arvo.”

Conversation ceases while we chew our way through the works.

Tom finishes first and sighs with contentment. “I tell ya, it doesn’t take much to make a beaut life, hey lads!”



Holly Bruce is lucky enough to live and work in Belmont NSW, a lakeside suburb positioned neatly between Lake Macquarie and the Pacific Ocean. She walks for exercise, practices yoga for relaxation, attends Buddhist classes for wisdom and writes for joy. For love, she spends time with family and friends, both human and animal. Her goals in life: limitless love, peace, and publication. Holly has been published in seven Stringybark anthologies, the latest being *No Tea Tomorrow*.