



# ***PANIC HOUR***

+ other short stories

DANI SPINKS-EARL



# CONTENTS

Panic Hour

Zen & the Art of Washing Dishes

The Fracture

The Storm

Waterstreet

The 45-Minute Chair

The Benley Acquisition

Radiance

About

# Panic Hour

It's eight in the morning. An escalator pulls me down from the street into the intestinal darkness. Streaks of lightning blue rush past my left shoulder, Photoshop motion-blur. Same in orange on the opposite wall, like this is an immersive internet advertisement. This tunnel is the cable. We are the particles. A unitary quantum system with a single wave function. I adjust the weight of my satchel and start plodding into the dim crowd.

On a violin, a G is stroked and resonates through the space. There's a young man like me with a stub of a ponytail. I want to listen but a brush at my back reminds me to keep moving. You cannot be still in the tunnel unless you're begging or performing. I keep pace along the dirty tiles. A synclinal gutter lines the edges like a blood or beer swill recess, metal grates every few metres. The ceiling is low. A line of fluorescent tubes casts an icteric glow. Every fifth one is orange. Is the place mildly radioactive? Is it a warning to proceed with caution? Like cows in an abattoir, docile but hyper-aware, we follow the path laid out.

A teenage girl sits against the orange wall. Her legs are bent; knees up. Her freshly-washed brown hair cascades down her side, pink tips dip-dyed at the ends. A square LP-sized cardboard sign rests against her. There's writing on it — in the ubiquitous black uppercase Beggarscript. It's too small to read. She reminds me of Alex.

\*

Alex was performing when I first saw her. I did the poster design and got a free ticket. She had thick black-rimmed glasses and silky raven hair that captured pools of blue from the theatre lights. She could have been a movie star or the queen of the underworld. During the instrumental, we locked eyes. Her thrumming bass and the keel of her hips were a conversation between the two of us.

I tried to say hello in the after-party. I kept failing. She was magnetic and out of my league. Eventually I gave up and realised I was kidding myself. I drank at the bar alone, chatted with whoever would avail themselves. Then about two in the morning she sidled up to me. Her elbow rested behind her on the bar, a green tumbler in her hand.

"Saw you in the audience." She had a honey gravel voice. She signalled the bar tender for a drink. He poured liquid. I poured compliments. The band was great; she was divine. I didn't feel embarrassed, just honest.

Her eyebrow made a tiny arch, and her hazel rings sharpened. She smiled from a corner of her lip. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

\*

I'm wearing a nice suit for my sentencing. It's high quality and a good fit. I got lucky that day at Vinnies. Any money I once had is long gone. In daylight, the suit is dark green. Down here—treading along the underground cracks of ground-in dirt, like unexpurgated sin—it's black.

There's a photomontage of train tracks and sandstone arches. I hear a jingling rattle from further down the tunnel. Small bells. Shaking rice-filled maraccas and hand drums. Multiple voices. Hare Hare. Hare Rama. Rama Rama. Hare Rama.

Four young women in pastel silk are sitting on a green and scarlet cloth laid out over the dirty floor. They sing and sway in unison, oblivious and euphoric with the accompanying sub-bass drone of an harmonium.

Alex and I went to Govinda's once—a big vegetarian Krishna restaurant and movie house. We were both veg at the time. We did kirtan—the improvised, enduring chant and bell ringing. It wasn't exactly transcendental, but nice, kind of. It was a scene I considered becoming more a part of. Like my design scene, the band scene, and then the natural therapy scene. I remember watching the people in their hemp clothes and long hair, fully-fledged identities. Authentic in every way. On the path.

My heart stops racing. I step out of the main flow, nodding my head with the rhythm, feeling it resonate. I lodge my thumbs under the strap of my satchel; sunglasses bob on the top of my head. It's transportive.

If I abscond, I could stay in the tunnel. I could join this group. Or not. I am the etherised patient on the table. The cow moving to the slicer. Dare I continue to the courthouse? Dare I abscond? Could I shave my head and join them? Turn a remnant of my long hair into a single plaited cord? Disappear into another dimension of joy and praise?

I step away and then turn back. My eyes say Thank you. But they don't engage. They are far away. A paper sign that says 'Street Kirtan' is taped above them on the pointillist panorama of a freight train.

I walk past the Chinese man. I've seen him before in Pitt Street. Is he for real? I could be like him one day. Grow long hair, wear thick coke bottle glasses, play a quivering one-string instrument. Get a cheap ukulele. Regularly change my disguise. Escape up to the platforms for snatches of sunlight and sushi. Live on vending machine orange juice and cashews.

\*

**W**e I fell in love. In autumn we went to an ashram in the mountains. We had our own ceremonies of love and peace. In winter we moved in together. We had a tiny apartment with a rooftop garden. In spring, Alex started studied herbalism. She had more that she wanted to do in life than play bass in a rock band. She inspired me. I thought about setting up my own graphic design business. We could have gone into partnership and been 'Herbal by Design'. Ridiculous. She kept tinctures and started treating our friends. Bruises got arnica; a dead pet meant rescue remedy; shyness meant bushflower essences.

In summer, we hit a series of wild concerts. We did festivals. We took acid, ecstasy, speed, cocaine. We basked in dappled sun at Victoria park. We swam in the ocean. We looked after a stray black cat and called him Vladimir. We bought acid for our friends. Alex had a contact.

"Come in for a second," Alex poked her head around the front door. She knew the contact, I didn't. I was waiting on the veranda. There was trash in the yard. I stepped inside and padded down the dark hall. At the end of the corridor, a small window bled diffuse light, framed by old French lace curtain with nicotine stains around the edges. A table stood beneath, covered with detritus. A pubic mound of tobacco exploded out of a pouch. There were bent spoons. Cigarette lighters. A red-and-green tartan dressing gown belt. Large sheets of patterned paper.

"They're only five dollars each." Alex pointed to some black-and-white chequered cardboard. "How many do you want?"

I was wide-eyed, transfixed by the pattern, computing the profits.

"We would never sell that many."

\*

A tall blonde ponytail sashays past. White cords hang from her ears. Her hips and hair swish from side-to-side. I inhale the confidence. I can do this. Behind her, a woman walks just as fast. She's shorter, teetering on plastic heels. She wears a hot pink jacket with a sharp V cut out of the back — contemporary throwaway fashion. I can't do this.

A guy stands in the torrent of commuters. He wears a black T-shirt with white text, one of the new fonts.

"Good morning." I hate this. "Good morning." Sound happy. "Good morning." This sucks. "Good morning" Take it! "Good morning." TAKE IT! On the tiles around him is an arc of dropped cards.

The wall is covered in diamond-shaped tiles. The pattern is like little flames that leap from a fiery orange bottom to a fast-food yellow sky.

\*

Alex had burst through the door in a black singlet. She wore heavy mascara and the lashes swept up like cattails, tiny balls at their ends. "He's coming." She put a plastic satchel on the table.

"Since that girl died, nobody wants these."

My eyes were like saucers. I'd hardly sold that batch. Her arms were stiff at her sides, fingers splayed. "It's too hot for me. I'm out."

I took rings, my camera, anything I owned of value and the satchels in my backpack. I pushed into Scotty's on King and set off the croaking door frog. The unshaven, malodorous storeman gave me a wary eye. He looked as suspicious as any of the customers. I hated it, every second of that experience. It was all wrong, and at the same time, completely necessary.

"Pawning these?"

"Selling."

"Okay. What have we got?"

I laid out my motley collection. A few old things he picked up and pushed aside — worthless.

He trawled slowly through the rest and finally said, "You got some ID?" I gave him my licence.

"I'll just go out back and prepare you a quote."

He disappeared through the wood veneer door. Five minutes went by. Then seven. I looked at an ugly white clock above a shelf of dead televisions. Something was wrong. He was still out back with my licence. The frog croaked again. And then there were two plainly clothes detectives in their fifties asking to see inside my backpack please.

\*

Billowing steamer emerges from a sepia-tinted wall of the tunnel, with an old handwritten letter blended from a separate layer. Next to it, the gaussian blur of a speeding electric red train. The glorious future. The regrettable past.

A silent and serious-looking woman stands in front of the mural. She wears a long blue cardigan. Her booklet says Watchtower; her resigned eyes say, You will be judged. I know I will. In about twenty minutes.

I'm nearly at the end. Gradually, sounds float my way. A man is standing at an electronic keyboard. Earnest. Asian. His hair is short. He is concentrating on his playing. Soft flutters of precision. I know this one. Philip Glass. I walk towards the music, close my eyes, move through the soundscape. Beautiful shards of breaking glass fall abruptly around me. Clear tears roll along both sides of my face.

## Zen & the Art of Washing Dishes

They say life is a series of imperfect facts with many things we can't control.

But the sequence of washing dishes is not one of them.

Glassware first.

Now this is not an affair devoid of creativity—no.

The number of liquid drops can create a level of foaminess commensurate with your mood.

Use a natural agent if possible, as this will affect the outcome and the pleasure.

Playfulness can be created with extra drops.

This will manifest a thing of awe – a galaxy of frothing and popping little planets.

It takes great maturity to be childlike, so add more drops and make a Grand Meringue or a mousse of suds.

Plunge a saturated cloth into the depths of a drinking glass.

Work along the inner sides and bottom, rub the handle and base.

Under a stream of warm water, employ the Tai-chi of the wrist.

Your grace and efficiency will dislodge any particles of detergent at minimal water expense.

Press the cloth – be gentle but firm – around the rim of a wine glass.

This is a ceremonial circumnavigation that pays respect to an extraordinary vessel of conversation and communion.

When satisfied with its purity, baptise with The Rinsing Act.

Place cutlery into the water and let it bathe.

Take a fork.

The spokes of this object, those teeth of utility, can be flossed under a brush.

Use the same delicate attention to a Knife. Then a Spoon.

Cutlery done, it's crockery's turn.

Take a bowl, give it a circular massage, make it beautiful on the inside and then the out.

Finally, the dented body of a fry-pan can get a slow and thorough scrub –

a 'thank you' for wilting spinach, toasting nuts, and the decades of unglamorous, expert service.

With hands wrinkled, warm and pliant, pull the plug and release this galactical microcosm.

Let it flow through the tunnel to the light of the great Wherever.

What for many is a prosaic and disagreeable task can be one of your day's most enjoyable experiences.

It is akin to meditation. A reflection. An expression of gratitude. A wiping of the slate clean for tomorrow.

And I hope, my friend, you can find that your mental drawer of clutter

and daily nonsense has been emptied. ☐

# The Fracture

In the sleepy noon sun I am a little girl about to ride a swing. I tuck some stray carrot hairs, shaking with sunlight and diesel fumes, behind my ear. I wear only one boot, but I will use it skilfully as an instrument to control my speed. I stretch it out to the gravel, and like a lathe, it sands it and slows me.

I am in a field on the outskirts of the carnival. The distant crowds are noisy and confusing, and howling from a light shrill wind. You have made us separate again, mum, and let the crowd digest you. But I will not wait in there, I will ride this swing here until you find me.

I push off with all my leg force. The swing arcs gently. I push my legs out when I go forward and up, up, up, and when I start to swing back I tuck my legs under the plank so I stay fast.

“Watch me” I sing to the crowd, and its swarming reply carries on the warm evening air, to the swing, and spreads around its poles. Planet Jupiter hangs heavy in the twilight.

I woosh past the ground. The force and velocity creates a rhythmic suction. Gravel comes rushing past underneath me and away.

The swing is arcing high, so I stretch out my boot to slow down, but my legs aren't very long and I only manage a light scrape. The swing arcs higher. Something is wrong. I swallow hard and my fat digits grip the poles.

I descend backwards and point my toe as far out as it will go. Timing the natural rhythm of the pendulum, I press it down hard. Big and little rocks slide and roll under the ball of my foot. A few more slowing swings and I'll be able to get off.

Someone else might want a turn. But around the neat square of gravel, framed by thin planks, there is no one.

The sharp angular sun confronts me. I am jarred from my seat, so I grip it with my knees and try not to spill.

I cannot slow down. “Stop,” I plead in a tremulous voice. Instead of swinging on a shorter arc, I go further and higher and faster, as if someone were pushing me from behind. I tuck my head under my armpit to see if someone is there. Upside-down I see there is no one there, and as I bring my head back out from its elbow nook, I am stabbed with fear when I swing up dangerously high... but after a momentary suspension I sink back down again, and I reach out my boot, and my naked foot, to scrape at the earth once more.

“Please slow down” I beg the swing, but the speed becomes even more forceful and I go higher still, and that is higher than I have ever wanted to go. I am lifted from my seat at the point of suspension, where gravity meets the steel construction and challenges it.

I lurch forward on my downward plunge, unable to stay upright, I am scared of both ground and sky, and my boot is not working, and if there were someone on the swing next to me they probably wouldn't even care if they noticed what I was going through, and there'd be no communication anyway, and my dress is riding up the scratchy seat and I am swinging down again in a rushing plummet that matches the blood gushing behind my eyes and the carnival screaming, barely containable, through my veins.

And I suspend. Past the point of balance. The oval smells acid and burnt. A pattern emerges up here from its black markings. Any moment I will fall face forward to the bars.

I shoot out a faint squeal, aware of its futility, not wanting to push out further with my body or my voice, wanting to resist.



Do I ride with it?

I will not.

My heart trip-hammers as I am pushed upward and outward simultaneously. This time I do not stop. My wet eyes widen noiselessly, becoming saucers; deep, terrified saucers. I am receptive to my fate and the knowledge of it. I swing in a loop over the top cross-bar and am released, enveloped in silence.

\*

I am smiling, but it is a cracked veneer. My green eyes are steely and lacklustre. I am faintly aware that I have been vacated by will, and, during flight, sent somewhere. Underwater.

I am sitting on the bottom of the ocean, seeing nothing, but sensing the warm currents and cold currents and the tidal folding and swelling from the depths that plummet upwards. There is plenty of room in the dark, deep, pushing waters. It sings with creatures of scale and tiny micro-organisms and inaudible but palpable pulsations.

Open the beams. Slide the shafts. The dark waters graduate to murky yellow, which means the sun is stretching across this well of origins and it is time to leave this place. The blazing arms stretch and extend their spread, curling on top of the waters and calming, like sedative, its chopping face.

In slow silence I fall past orange streaks like two fingers melting into the sky, past the bloated moon which is planet Jupiter, to land like a dolly on the cross-bar, and smash apart.

The sun is my marquee- its spears fall around me. The sky is a glassy reflection in my blue iris, and the clouds offer little protection to the people below from my naked, omniscient view. Like a sweet translucent vapour, I will inform every crevice of this place...

Mother. Softly spoken benefactress- sometimes.

In the nights you are clothed by Uncle Poseidon's dense shadow. Over your face it is cast. Only the whites are glaring, and as you step into the pool of the streetlight, your triangle wedge nose is spread blankly across one cheek.

His shadow is wrapped around you, like a black satin sash, but as he moves from the dark recess, I see that he is small, with a puffy, flaking face.

You are almost always at the grisly carnival. You are seedy because you have allowed yourself to be tangential. Continuity is a series of side attractions.

He lifts his stubby fingers to your face. A cigarette is smouldering into decline between them, and he flicks it away absently before he touches you. Scrape. You step forward to him with a thin smile- out from your concrete vertex. Harsh angles of light and shadow stripe you, you are marked by the sharp bleak structures, and lit, I see your every reaction.

My lids fall softly. I will put you in darkness again.

In the days, when I am split away, as the sun swings up in a loop around the earth, your sign swings around with it, casting a garish candescence onto your sallow crowd.

You dance with the big cats that move stiffly and roar mechanically, under a pink sign that swings around with the sun. Two wide, flailing oars, joined narrowly in the centre, rotating, flicking gold and spangly bits to entice the freaks, who do not see or smell the sick they wade through and are oblivious to their own automated

retching.

In a world of caring and compassion and the shared condolences of human woe, it will be refreshing to spit vitriol on the misshapen forms that bask in the pink candescence of your sign.

The power of your act is more intense when it is viewed aloof with disgust, and my disgust is spontaneous, a gut reaction, not unlike the propulsions of sick from the uninhabited earthen vessels that swarm in tight currents within a larger stream around your platform.

The big mechanical tiger becomes loosened from its bolts- in the past, in the future, at this moment, and topples onto the sunken crowd... inferno. You may speculate on the nature of the blast.

I roll the fluid eyeball on its axis, illuminating a far corner relegated to heroin and vomit and it falls upon one man that loiters here in petty fury. His nose and cheeks are riddled with burst blood capillaries, engorging these features. He is fat, forty, and incensed by "...that goddamn Flake or Brick or whatever his name is..."

"It's Thorn" and the large woman, on the nod, this man is with, straddles, then slides her abundant leg, dimpling under tight, worn red leggings, over the plaster saddle of the children's ride. She slips a coin into the shape and, be-slotted, the ride shakes into life, bucking gently under her weight, going through the perfunctory motions for her pleasure. With one small, neat slot for insertion, it is receptacle.

I deliver tears, and wet the carnival.

He is looking for three horseheads. The first wheel spins, then the second and third, and now all are spinning. His eyes go into deep focus until the last wheel stops spinning. He registers the symbols, now not so far away. One horsehead. Slam!

He inserts another coin- gold this time, not silver, and hears it slip and rattle down the shape. Slowly and gently, eyes staring intently on the last wheel, visualising, willing its display, he gradually squeezes the lever. It offers no resistance, and the man bends over to the smiling grate anticipating its offering of a spill of gold coins.

"Finger point at you, Skittle, and Claim you."

The little lost girl walks through long shadows cast across the field, the watchers, and heaves herself onto the splintering plank. All is still in the cold confrontation between cloud and daylit moon.

The girl exhales, glassy-eyed, as if in sweet reminiscence, and speaks, "I would like to see stress on the instruments."

She pushes off with all her leg force.

Under the big top, a gangly man with dark whiskers stares entranced by the uniform message of a Soft Machine. Insert coin. A clear drop slides down his nose and his quick tongue laps it up. He snorts- a motor sound, and hits the lever down again. He thumps the machine, and it rattles, but it does not heed his warning, sends its own, as lights flash on the desktop of the warden of machines, who glances over curiously, beaverish and bespectacled, flares one nostril, then looks back down at her flimsy novel. One horsehead flicks up and stares vacantly.

The second wheel spins, stops, and another lands face up. The third and fourth spin with no blessing. And then the last. The last wheel spins as if for an eternity, and the simple man projects every last vestige of his power, extracted from every cell, and shoots it in an invisible trajectory into the singular spinning wheel. It stops. And no horsehead does it display.

Nestled in his pocket he knows is a final gold piece. With much deliberation, he unbuttons the fastener and removes it. His cancelled eyes close slowly, but as they re-open they become filled. His terse body relaxes and he walks languidly, clutching the coin like a remnant of old and new, along the cigarette strewn carpet.

Past the shapes.

Past the unblinking electronic eyes in their endless ritual of seduction.

To the door. He opens it, and leaves. As the door swings and creeps shut, a diminishing wedge of blazing sunlight illuminates the sunken faces that remain. The door nearly closes, but it is re-opened at the last moment, and another walks in.

And the missing horsehead, like a cataract, sails through the depthless blue in silent endeavour. Eternity sings in the blue of the sky, but as a floating grey particle in my eyeball shimmers past, it quivers, and finally, it falters. The horsehead cloud, having floated from one corner to another of the field, spreads languidly, and separates into blue-ringed tentacles that look as though they are being emanated from the sun. They come crashing through, invited, through gaping, erratic holes, to poke at those who dismantled what they did not create.

The haywire moon hangs heavy with the weight of the cosmos. The inevitable urge of gravity, physics and metaphysics in conflict, the cracking open of breaking ground, equatorial sweats, and confusion in the altitudes, in a calculated combined chaos, place stress upon the atoms which react violently and make the swinging wooden plank ride high.

I swing toward the earth, pressing as lightly as I can on the seat, but gripping as firmly as I can at its poles.

The readings are askew. The ringmaster holds up one machine, as a banner and a shield, and proclaims its objectivity, but all the machines cease function, exhibiting the first signs of intelligence. The pony, the roaring big cats and the velvet machines break down across the carnival, which blinks into darkness.

I let go of the poles. The pendulous swing arcs forcefully, poised to execute a perfect loop. My inert body is released, a silent offering, and I am driven through the blue, and thrown from this whorl. And delicately, with my ruddy brown boot, I step onto the platform, as both guardian and indicter of my species. ☒

# The Storm

Lying on a white bed  
in a wooden room  
listening to the silence  
watching her read  
and there is an inkling of a rumble  
In the distance  
a giant's house is reshuffling furniture  
a crack in the window  
of white on black  
stretched sounds of creaking tables  
tinkling and breakages  
as glasses spill  
and cabinets crack  
and light flickers  
New candles now  
on and off and all around  
There's company!  
A fight!  
It's louder now.  
A deluge.  
A dinner awry  
an insult to the host  
big feet thunder through the cottage  
and a whip of lightning strike. ☒

# Waterstreet

The trick is to be patient. To deeply listen. To ask the right questions. You never know where a conversation will go. There are boxes within boxes. Often the patient doesn't know when they've dropped a little powder keg. They're not conscious of it. Sometimes I don't know until I probe a bit deeper. A new window, a little corridor of memory. If you explore these little windows they offer you, you can find all sorts of rooms—full of junk and treasure. I always look for the treasure. It's buried there if you go far enough, if you are judicious in your hunt.

I think that's the difference between a young psychiatrist and a more senior practitioner: one's ability to sort, purge and categorise memories and impressions—carefully and efficiently.

Addiction medicine was never a choice. But then the '90s came around and the place was on its knees to heroin. I hadn't any interest previously, except for the economics of it—the flow of the global black economy. How what may start as one nation's humanitarian boycott will necessitate innovation in the targeted country and then really bite us on the backside. You could trace it easily with Afghanistan and the poppy fields—it was poverty alleviation!—pure and simple. Look where it got us.

It dried up for a while of course. Now it's oxycodone—the strong painkilling medication—the hillbilly heroin of today. Oxy, they call it. Oxy. Like it were oxygen. A little pre-operative anaesthetic to face the world. Like life itself is about to perform surgery upon you—butcher you—and pain relief is essential.

If there's one thing I know: drugs are not about drugs. They're a symptom of psychological and emotional distress, a silent scream of despair.

I wear camel-coloured pants and keep my keys and swatch cards attached to a belt loop at my side. My shirt is cotton and light blue. The sleeves are rolled twice at the wrist. I am professional but casual in my dress. In the past twelve months, I have been at the Buttery and Freeman House, where they had a piano, although badly out of tune.

A man appears on the other side of the door. He is bald and wears large glasses and a blue, purple and green jumper. Diamonds collide with waves of mauve like a two-dimensional hologram.

“Doctor Waterstreet?”

He has a Scottish accent, soft and hoarse, mellowed after years of living in Sydney.

I extend my hand. “Don.”

“Rawdney. Come on sroo.”

As we move through the door, I feel that uncomfortable energy shift. A linoleum corridor—the smell of antiseptic covering something it will never be able to clean.

“Make yourself a tea or coffee while I get the paperwork.”

On the bench is the instant coffee—an aluminium drum innocuously named something like Caterer's Friend. It's the cremated kind made like it were intended be tossed into the sea from an urn with a eulogy. Everywhere across the benches are the remains: drops of it down the sides of cupboards, large splashes on the red chequerboard floor. I go to the cupboard where I assume the usual chipped mugs will be stored and crunch across a large expanse of sugar crystals.

It's afternoon when I finally visit the patients' veranda. It has a concrete floor, covered in a thick layer of varnish the colour of molten lava. Every surface repels its paint. A giant metal ashtray overflows with cigarette

butts, a banana skin, an empty yoghurt container with a teaspoon still inside. There are five or six chairs of varying description: a leatherette armchair, plastic chairs, all different sizes and colours.

The patients are in a group therapy session, which we have chosen not to interrupt—all patients except for one.

“That’s Zoe,” Rawdney whispers. “I’ll leave you to introduce yourself.” She looks like a teenager—very thin. Her face may once have looked porcelain and ethereal. Instead it’s gaunt, with dark green patches beneath her eyes. Her wavy hair is tied in a loose ponytail.

She sits on a plastic chair, lifts one foot onto her other thigh and begins picking out bits of debris and massaging the sole. We begin the usual sort of introductory conversation.

“Four days,” she says. “Came in last week.”

“How is it?”

She opens easily enough.

“I’m not here for me, I’m here for my kids.” She pulls her knees to her chest.

“Before I can be a good mum, I’ve got to do this. I’ve got to make my life better.”

We both look up as two men walk along the veranda toward us. The big one has a ginger crewcut, wrap around black sunglasses and a leather jacket. A tub of yoghurt is in one hand and a pile of cookies is cradled in his elbow. Alcohol, I surmise. Or amphetamines. The other man is scrawny, perhaps fifty years old. His face is tanned and worn. He looks like someone who’s spent a lot of time by the ocean.

The big one kicks the leg of a plastic chair sending it scuttling out of his way. “G’Day,” he plops beside me and lights the obligatory cigarette.

“That lunch was disgusting, wasn’t it,” says Zoe by way of greeting.

“Filthy!” big one answers.

“Here’s Sass,” We crane our necks to watch the figure emerging through the door at the end of the veranda. She is bent like a ninety-year-old, walking very slowly.

“Yep,” says the scrawny one. “Here she comes.”

The big dyspeptic one says, “She’ll be here in another five minutes,”

“Maybe ten.” Zoe.

The hobbling girl arrives. She is about thirty, I guess. She resembles a rural, Vietnamese peasant. Long hair, long clothes. Everything except the non bai tho. Her teeth have the yellow stain of long-term methadone use.

“Sass, you didn’t shut the door properly!” The three laugh at this.

“Aw. Get. Fucked. You. Guys.” Each syllable elongated; a space between each word like it’s her last dying breath. I can’t help but smile. She’s taken the joke. She collapses into the softest chair, oblivious to my presence.

“This is Don,” says the scrawny one, cocking a thumb at me.

She slowly rolls her head and rheumy eyes my way. “Oh. Yeah. Nice. To. Meet. You. Don.”

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**M**y first wife said I should be a diplomat—my first and only wife—Margot. She said I could tell someone to go to hell and make them look forward to the journey. I think I could have been a good spy—aren’t all

diplomats spies? My skill is in eliciting information. Engendering trust. Plus, I'm grey. My hair, my clothes, my eyes. I'm like a car the colour of the road—not seen but looked through. First class airline stewards yawn while serving my dinner tray. Automatically-opening doors often do not activate for me. I am exceptionally ordinary. Neutral. Threatless.

“What’s the psychiatrists’s definition of empathy?” Margot once asked me one Saturday afternoon. I folded the corner of my newspaper, peered over my bifocals, eyebrow raised.

“When you get tears in your eyes from suppressing a yawn.”

I turned back to my Financial Review and chuckled.

\*

Upstairs in the group room, we are waiting for Grace. We sit on chairs in a circle surrounded by pictures in coloured pencils on the walls. They have rainbows and stars and positive affirmations from those who have been in here before.

It is what we call morning check-in. Patients share their feelings about any issues they are having and how they are travelling with their detox.

Lee—the scrawny one--forces a smile that comes out grim. He fondles a loose thread on his grey school shorts. I adjust the ring of keys by my hip.

I break the silence. “The schedule today looks good. There’s yoga, which is very relaxing, and tonight everyone is going to Narcotics Anonymous.”

“Yippee,” says the big one, flatly.

“Dan, would you like to start?” I ask.

His legs are stretched out and crossed at the ankles. His chin is on his chest.

It occurs to me that you can be as rude as a pig here and get away with it. No one is ever reprimanded for their dress; stench; tardiness; farting; inability to clean a toilet after spraying diarrhoea; dumping yoghurt tubs, chip packets or cutlery in the ashtrays; halitosis, biting fingernails; slouching; swearing; nose picking; belching or arguing. It is a blameless utopia. I briefly consider making an alphabetised notice of Things It’s Okay To Do as a parting gift.

“How are you travelling with your recovery?”

Dan stares sullenly at the carpet. “Okay,” he grunts.

There’s silence as the others wait for him to continue, which he does. “I had a call from my girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend.”

“Oh,” I say. “A difficult call?” There’s a vertical line of concern between my eyes.

“Yep.”

“Well, you don’t have to, but if you want to talk about it, the floor’s open—”

“She’s a bitch.” Dan commences kicking the left heel of his sneakers with his right foot.

“She wants to get back together with me when I get out.”

“But she’s a bitch?”

“Yeah, a lot of the time.” Tap tap tap.

"Is she using?"

"No. But she makes me use."

"How does she make you use?"

"She drives me crazy. She won't work. She won't go to TAFE and learn anything. She's lazy as and she nags me."

"What does she nag you about?"

"Everything?"

"Like what?"

"You name it!" His hands fly up.

"How does that make you feel?"

"Like flying off the handle."

"Does she nag you about your using?"

"Everything."

"So, she nags you about your using and how does that make you feel?"

"Like using."

"Interesting cycle, hey?"

He doesn't respond.

"Do you think your relationship has got a future if you're clean?"

"I think the only way I could be with her was if I was using."

"So what's the dilemma?"

"Well, I don't have many options, do I? I'm gonna be homeless when I get out of here otherwise."

"You're on the rehab waiting list, aren't you?" says Zoe.

"I'll be homeless for a month before I get in."

"Maybe the social worker can help you get a place until you do get in," says Lee.

"It's just easier if I move in with her. I don't want to, that's all."

Grace enters the room. "Morning everyone. Sorry I'm late." Tiny elephants dangle from her earrings. She sits on a chair, judders it across the floor into the circle.

"I was listening as I came up the stairs," says Grace. "Before we get started, I just want to say this. If you do use, Dan, you can't have healthy, functional relationships with anybody. Not with parents, family, friends, co-workers, or partners."

"That's true, mate," says Lee, soft and assertive. "It's true."

Grace looks at them, the collective.

"Addictions get worse as they continue," she says. "I know it's a bit of a joke being here and it's good to have a laugh, but you're here to get clean. This isn't a halfway house. If you continue to use, your life will continue to deteriorate until you end up in an institution, in gaol or dead." She says it in a way that's both kind and firm, which I admire.

"It's dirty, I know. It's badly funded. It's got terrible food. But this place has saved many peoples lives."

"Show us how then," says Lee.

"What do you mean?"

"I know that stayin' in here for a few days isn't gonna get me clean. I've been hearin' the same things for



years. I just want someone to tell me what to do.”

“Well once you’ve made the decision to stop using—”

“I have made the decision!”

She turned to Lee. “I’d recommend that you get yourself a sponsor, Lee. The people at NA will—”

He shakes his head, disgusted. “When I get out of here, I’m alone again. I live in men’s homes with different strangers. When I can get a bed. Otherwise I sleep on the sand. My family are long gone.” Beads of sweat gather on his silver whiskers.

“I’m trying but I CAN’T DO IT by me self.”

The room recoils in the silence. Zoe picks at a scab on her elbow.

“There is always medication,” Grace looks at me. I wonder if it’s a cue, but I can’t it would be grossly unethical. That is not the capacity in which I am here.

“There are a few options,” I weakly suggest.

Saskia raises her slumberous head. “Don’t. Take. Methadone.”

\*

For many of the people I’ve met on my professional journey, there is not a person in the world who loves them. Seeing this is deeply sad. There are no words of sympathy, no condolence that can make up for this hard truth. For that person, carrying all the suffering that led them to their drug of addiction, asking them to give up their only friend – that drug – is akin to self-immolation. The strength to go through a detoxification and recovery requires rock-solid self-belief and a deep sense of personal worth. These two attributes are the things they have the least. Clearly, it’s no easy task. The job of this place is to ‘rub the sticks together’ – to kindle the flame. But the patient needs to create the fire.

Margot and I met later in life, well past any best-before date for having children. We had no qualms or regrets about that. We relished our freedom—time and money to travel—and silence to read together and indulge our mutual love of literature. She introduced me to New Journalism and the works of Joan Didion and Michael Herr’s Dispatches. I was greatly enriched by these writings. I hope I opened a few small windows for her also. She was more extraverted than me, although neither of us was very gregarious. I remember her sharing a cartoon she had found that said INTROVERTS: UNITE! SEPARATELY.

When Margot died, I was bereft. Breast cancer. My identity wasn’t tied to my career, like many men my age. It was tied to her. I had to learn how to sleep alone; what to do with my arms when I lay in bed; how to brush my teeth and look into a mirror without gripping the basin and crashing into the sink. I was reading her EM Forster when she died, A Passage To India.

“Go there,” I believe she said. Perhaps it was so I had a mission to complete when she had departed. She gave me a list of places she wanted to visit and told me to undertake a Hindu pilgrimage. So, at 62, I did. I went to India to explore temples and ritual. Then to Pakistan, then Nepal, and then Indonesia. I spoke to her the whole way. I did it for her.

I loved Margot for her humour and her Goodness. The way she held herself; the way she wore her straight hair in a neat bun; her mottled blue eyes, the only thing you could ever read into her was sincerity. From that trip, I learnt the stark difference between the western and the eastern ways of dealing with death. I wanted a cremation for Margot and a street procession in jubilant celebration of her goodness. I followed

one in Indonesia, right toward the end of my trip, just a few months ago. There was over one hundred people, a palanquin of sorts; orange and yellow streamers and high parasols, drums and small clanging gongs, and dancing. I pretended it was for Margot.

Would the patients here benefit from religion? It's impossible to say. Would God help? I'm afraid even the faiths more familiar to my culture contain both the Sekala and the Niskala—the occult and the darkness: The Book of Revelation. The Mark of the Beast. The Great Tribulation. Every civilisation has had images of extinction. I'm afraid religion is not for me, not beyond an intellectual curiosity.

But if there is a God, a benevolent higher power behind the cosmos, then God is here, in these rooms. It never fails to move me. One has to surrender to that higher power before one intellectualises it and sabotages their recovery.

What a lot of people in therapy don't realise is that constantly talking—always going over the pain and its causes—is helpful to a point, but only to a point. At some stage, it's more helpful to listen. That's why the Twelve Step groups are so effective. One learns that it is not all about you, even as unique and isolated as your case may be, there are always others like you. Listening to others with calmness and empathy is part of the healing process.

For me, I think I'm in the reverse situation. I listen professionally. It's my job and my nature. I am always listening. So here, it will be best for me to talk.

Eventually, I clear my throat. My stomach flutters. "My name is Donald," I say to the group sitting around me. "I am addicted to oxycodone. I have been clean for three days." ☒

# The 45-Minute Chair

The chair's bamboo legs slide across the thin carpet. Henry pushes his thick, rose-tinted spectacles up his nose and lays a hand across his groaning abdomen. A slim, dark-haired waiter emerges through the Staff Only door and begins collecting Henry's plates. A silver badge embossed with black letters spelling TIMOTHY hangs above the pocket of his white, crisply ironed shirt. "I hope you enjoyed your first As Much As You Like Meal, sir. P-please come again."

Henry gives him a perfunctory nod and dons a tweed jacket and hat to brave the cold. He slips his hardcover into a side pocket. He moves through the potted waxy plants that have shielded the non-smokers from the fruity blue smoke of his cigar—his legitimate cigar—and strides past the three glass food domes, framed by brass tubes, to the exit door.

The sky is clear and star-packed. Henry walks along the footpath that snakes along the front of the restaurant to the carpark. Its huge glass face flanks the walk like an open mint-green mouth. Henry looks in at the relaxed, pastel interior and hears the softened, ambient sounds of chatter and dining music float through the pane. "As much as you like," Henry says, as if the words don't quite make sense. Even on leaving the place looks enticing. He walks to his car, exhaling a mixture of cigar smoke and frost.

The mid-morning sun beats onto the glass entry door, and Henry sees a reflection of his freshly shaven face. The heavy door scrapes as he pushes it open, marking the terracotta tile on a well-established neat black arc. He steps into the empty corridor lined with blackboard menus. At the end is the cash register and the waxen faced waitperson. Henry removes his hat, and glances perfunctorily over the menu. A slight swinging motion catches the corner of his eye. Below the menu, a small wooden sign, hung by two brass hooks swinging in the breath of outside air. He bends down to it, squinting, and holds it delicately in one hand. It reads:

## **FOLKS DAY! TODAY!**

His face becomes pasted with the look of someone who has smelt something foul. Henry removes the little sign from its hooks. Mentally, he tries to locate a place for it among one of many pockets but the object is too large. He imagines kicking it so the nasty little sign scrapes across the tiles and into oblivion.

"I'll take the As Much As You Like Deal. Smoking section."

He takes a seat in the smoking corner, marked by a row of plants. The restaurant is empty, lending it an extra spaciousness. He smiles, contented. The waiter from last night approaches.

"Hi! My name is Timothy. I'll be your waiter. Have you dined here before, sir? "

The glass domes housing the first courses cast a sallow glare over Henry's face. He smiles, bowl poised, and ladles precisely one serve of steaming, thick, pumpkin soup, and then sprinkles on a light tong-ful of crusty croutons. They slip under the orange surface and rise again.

Onto his plate he heaps a pile of hot fettuccine, pouring a rich pool of Napolitana sauce on top with a heated silver spoon. The soup rests in the nook of his elbow, the fettuccine further down his forearm. With the third plate Henry arranges his main course. An array of mango, kiwi fruit, rock and honeydew melon pieces emit sweet, ripe, flesh smells. Each slice cut from the original fruit with sharp, neat incisions, making the peaks of the wedges, too, look tantalisingly sharp. "Sharp and sweet."

Henry perfectly accommodates the most amount of food onto the plate in the most attractive manner possible. He considers it with a pause of satisfaction, contemplating the menu's inferior Serving Suggestion.

He inhales abruptly. All his courses so far are balanced precariously along one tweed sleeve. His pupils dilate. It is time.

The third dome, the dessert dome, rushes to him by several feet, although the rest of the restaurant remains unchanged. Tiny jets squirt saliva under his tongue. He moves toward it, as if magnetically drawn.

Seated on his bamboo chair, on the thin green vinyl cushion, Henry looks momentarily past the splendour of colours laid out before him, and peers down into the window of the fast food chain beginning its day's operations next door. A line of identical cash registers activate simultaneously, and the first automated patron in each long queue approaches.

Henry chuckles down at them, thinking of their noise, their greasy square-inch hamburgers, the squabbling children, and frightful music, and then gazes languidly at the tranquillity and ambiance of his own surroundings. The classical music seems to pick up a notch. Grace over, he begins to eat, and relishes every mouthful.

\*

Two thirty-seven. Outside in the noon sun, a white minibus rolls over the carpark's warming asphalt, making a light squeal of tyres as it comes to a handbrake stop. It is emblazoned with a cowboy hat and red letters that spell The Folks Community Bus. The engine switches off and the sliding side door peels back, and a dozen senior citizens, clutching handbags and cardigans, scramble out, and swarm up the steps and into the entry corridor. After some genial arguments they huddle around the domes, where the food is immaculately laid out in stainless steel tubs, except for one scoop already carved from each.

Henry, chin jutting out, peers through the separation in the leaves. The corner of his bottom lip curls up. "Swarm, buzzards, and then fly away." He smiles, mockingly. "The temps. No sustenance."

He pulls out his hardcover novel. *Men Under Water*. Short stories by Ralph Lombreglia. He places the bookmark neatly behind the fold of the dustjacket.

Henry shifts his weight from one buttock to the other, crossing his legs. His back is stiff, and his legs as leaden and unfeeling as the bamboo. *Men Under Water*. Short stories by Ralph Lombreglia...

The lunch plates and soup-encrusted bowl are piled on the edge of the table. The sickly sweet residue in his icecream bowl wafts relentlessly into both nasal cavities. In the corner of his eye, mango peel and melon skins grin at him, marred by a succession of small neat teeth marks.

*Men Under Water*. Short stories by Ralph Lombreglia... He tries to read, but glances up sharply from the line of tall plants. "Will somebody collect my refuse?!"

The mid-afternoon sun begins its silent penetration through the restaurant's glass face. Harsh yellow bands stripe the carpet, tables and chairs. Only the domes remain untouched. Outside, magpies swoop upon a cluster of schoolkids running across four lanes of freeway to pad the fast food queues next door.

\*

Four forty-eight. The restaurant is quiet and deserted. Henry is reading a book. He is shuffling. He has changed positions three times, sitting in each of the four chairs once. Clockwise. He looks up from his book and exhales a long deep breath. His hawkish eyes are hardened. The classical music station becomes interrupted with successions of static, until an abrasive youth announcer's voice is channelled along the airways and blares

into the room.

“Yoohoo!” a screech from behind the Staff Only door.

Henry gets up out of his chair. “This has gone too far.” He walks on his cramping, terse legs to the Staff Only door. He pauses for a moment, and with a huff, raps sharply.

Nobody answers.

He raps again.

Nobody opens the door or says come in. He walks around to the entry corridor where the register is displayed.

“I’d like to speak to the manager please,” he says to Timothy’s acned, intimidated face.

“Yes, sir. I’ll get her.” Timothy and a brunette re-emerge. Her hair is pegged up in a neat bun. How attractive she must look with her hair down, he thinks.

“I’d like to register a complaint,” says Henry.

“Oh, right. Well, what’s the matter?” she asks.

“I am reading,” Henry replies, trying to retain his composure. “There are only certain types of music that can provide a suitable backdrop, and none of them resemble the cacophony you are tuning this room into now by way of those sets.” He points to the unassuming black circles in the ceiling, covered with thin mesh netting.

“There. And there. My table is located directly under one of those speakers. See! There. And one over there. I know where all of them are. I could map them out for you and teach you something—”

“That’s not necessary, sir,” she interrupts coldly. “I’m aware of where the speakers are. Do you want to change tables?”

“I do not wish to change tables. I wish you to change the station!”

“Okay, sir,” the woman says, in one long, slow movement of her head. “We weren’t aware that there was anyone in the restaurant.”

“Obviously. I heard one of your employees express considerable joy over that fact.”

“That was me, actually, I apologise.” She hesitates. Her eyes narrow somewhat. “Didn’t you arrive hours ago?”

“Yes,” Henry says with forced dignity, jutting his chin toward a speaker, rapaciously perched black crow. “At 11 this morning. And I intend to eat As Much As I Like so I’ll be in the smoking corner, reading, until I am appetised for my evening meal.”

He senses that manageress is about to argue. “And another thing,” he interjects, “those bloody bamboo chairs are totally unsuitable for the duration of my visit. You can’t rest your back properly because there is no backrest. My legs feel heavy, stiff; those damned chair legs.”

“They haven’t been designed for lengthy visits,” she states.

“Forty-five minutes I was here and already I was uncomfortable. I’m going to write that on the comments card, you know. That the chairs are completely useless.”

Henry turns, his back to the bemused manageress and embarrassed waiter, and smiles.

“Deceptive marketing...” he mutters under his breath for extra effect. He shuffles past the entree dome and plants his tweed hat over his balding, itchy pate.

Before he gets past the brass-bound construct, the manageress calls out.

“The Folks bus has left, sir. You didn’t happen to have a nap by any chance and not realise, did you?” she

asks, her allure ever-diminishing.

“The Folks bus!” he cries, incredulous. “I am no member of that party of bickering old fools. I take offence!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she says. But in her blue retina he reads a subtle mocking.

“Tart.”

MEN UNDER WATER. SHORT STORIES BY RALPH LOMBREGLIA. He turns a page that swims with words, creases it down, and rushes to scan the text.

At five o’clock a foursome wearing tennis whites arrive in the entry corridor and begin perusing the blackboard menu. Henry peers through the gap in the plants to watch them. A slim blonde of about thirty-five looks sharply toward the smoking section, waving her hand aggravatedly as if to move away smoke. She loudly informs the others that “...somebody’s been smoking a rotten cigar.” They give a collective sigh of dismay.

“It smells like a Hamlet. My father used to smoke them, and God, do they stink.” Henry decides not to let the poor group suffer with the dead smoke smell of his last cigar, so he luxuriously slides another Hamlet from its silky packet, and lights up.

“Ha ha,” He realises, a little startled, that he must go to the domes now before the group clutters them up. He gets up, leaving his cigar smouldering in the glass ashtray.

Entree. Two choices of soup, pumpkin again. Stick with what you know. One serve. Croutons. Pasta. Fettuccine. They haven’t changed it over yet. It doesn’t steam and slip through the tongs, it sticks to them. Rubbery. He tastes a strand from the messy squiggles heaped on his plate. This time it has the semblance and taste of elastic bands.

Napolitana sauce. Tepid. Watery now. Why?! “Is this the same food?” Henry asks an empty space a few feet from him. “You..” he shoots a poisoned look at the Staff Only door, searching for an insult. “... plebeians.”

Mains; fetid mango. He sniffs a melon and concludes – sour. Improportionate slices. A pea rests on the best looking chunk. With two fingers he flicks it off as if it were a cockroach. It scuttles away. Potato skins. Sodden. A pool of milky fluid rests at the bottom of the coleslaw. One serve. Slop.

Dessert. He approaches the appropriate dome, balancing his courses. It is grim so far, but he will compensate. “I will remove the whole tub of chocky mousse and take it to my table. I am going to eat As Much As I Like.”

He corners the dome, anticipation rising in the pit of his stomach once again. The tub is slowly revealed. A soft indentation from a finger protrudes through the gluggy, wet sludge, or, what is left of it.

“Those bloody invalids,” he says, fuming.

“Damn it, I’ll have icecream. All of it.” He pulls on the firm lever. He waits. “Come on,” mutters Henry impatiently through barred teeth. He looks up to take note of the machine’s inferior brand name. A white piece of paper, sticky taped on each corner spells OUT OF ORDER, and in little letters underneath; we apologise for any disappointment- management. He knees the machine in its probable groin and strides back to his table. His cigar is a grey column of ash. Henry lifts the butt for the last drag, and it crumbles, and falls over his jacket. He places the soup bowl to his lips, and begins to slurp the tepid ooze as noisily as he can.

\*

Six: twelve. Timothy emerges through the Staff Only door. The young man’s eyes appear tired, his face is red and drawn and he moves slightly hunched as if from age. Henry spies him as he steps through the gap between the plants, furtive as a deer. “How was your meal, sir?” he asks and begins to stack crockery on his

rolled shirtsleeve, avoiding eye contact.

“Less than satisfactory,” Henry replies.

“Oh,” Timothy pauses. “I’m sorry,” He looks down at the plates and their coloured stains. He can smell the lingering pangs of the youth’s underarms.

“Wait here one moment,” Timothy says, and disappears between the potted trees. Henry waits, preparing another wretched, but satisfying confrontation with the icy manageress. He looks around. The entry corridor is filling up now. An expression of dismay passes over Henry’s face at the thought of sharing company with lots of hungry, stupid folk and their cretinous children.

He shifts his weight from one buttock to the other. “Well... come on, boy” he says uneasily. Timothy emerges from the plants again, into the secluded section.

“Here you are, sir,” he says, presenting a small, plain pillow in trembling hands. “I know the chairs are very uncomfortable. They are 45 minute chairs in fact.” He hesitates. He still avoids eye contact, staring instead at the back of Henry’s chair.

Then he leans forward to adjust the pillow. “No one else has ever stayed the whole day before. It’s not expected.” Timothy repositions it to fill the bamboo gaps.

“But you’re perfectly entitled to stay and eat As Much As You Like, sir, and I hope this makes you a little more comfortable.”

Timothy’s face colours and he quickly picks up the remaining cutlery and glances at the title of the book on the table. “I don’t read much. I should.” He lifts Henry’s ice-cream dish and moves away.

Henry looks fixedly through the glass plate window that exposes the street on one wide stretch. A spectre of nakedness flicks across his eye. Outside, as stars begin peering through the red sunset, a woman is sitting on a bench, drawing a 1950s car parked under a plane tree. He stares at her, unblinking.

He twitches. One of those tiny, spasmodic motions, the ones that others have to strain to see, erupts and like a heavy, random pulse, begins beating in his eyelid. Henry lifts his hat from the seat of a chair, puts it on with focused deliberation. The woman is colouring with quick, neat, pencil strokes. He picks up his novel and slides it into his tweed pocket. He stands.

For a moment it is as if he is vertiginous, dizzying from an extraordinary height. Then he regains composure, and walks through the gap in the potted tree line, past the noisy tables, past befuddled waiters and waitresses stressed at the onslaught of diners, to the clear door.

But here Henry pauses. He turns his head in the direction of the Staff Only door. He thinks through his plan, breathing uneasily, and then moves toward the door like an obsolete automaton.

He knocks.

No answer.

Henry pushes the door open just a crack, his heart welling up almost to his mouth. “Hello?” he calls in, and the sound echoes and bounces as if down a long dark duct in a spaceship.

“Hello,” manageress. Henry opens the door another inch and sees her seated at the far end of the room, a sandwich and a generic brand juice in front of her.

“Everything okay?” she asks, hesitantly.

“Yes,” Henry slowly pats down the front of his jacket. “Thank you.” He tries to smile but succeeds only in inverting his lips, and embarrassed, Henry makes his retreat.

He reaches the clear exit door again. He pushes it. The door doesn't budge. Henry takes a frightened breath. He gives another gentle shove, again to no avail. He heaves himself upon it. No easy swinging motion, no scrape along the terracotta tile. He shoves it.

Then he sees the white letters – PULL. So he does. As the door swings inwards, a hand-sized autumn leaf lifts up, swirls in the gust of twilight and floats down. Henry steps back outside again, under the pink fingers of sunset and enveloped in the breeze. ☒



# The Benley Acquisition

I'm at the bar, chugging orange juice with my mates, and we're laughing at each other's pov jokes. Nuns Frightened by Change. That's the name of Friday night's band at the Landula Criterion. Our band, as it happens. It's our first gig. 'The Nuns' are two mates in my year and me. I'm called the percussionist. That means I play drums and, occasionally, I whack a thong on a bongo.

Next week we start work experience. That means no school for two weeks. I was one of the lucky ones who found a placement. Gareth had to go to the meat packers and so did Kev. So it's kind of a celebration gig. For me, anyway. Without the alcohol.

We're up next, straight after Gordon Finney. He's the Mayor. He's having an Extraordinary General Meeting. The mike squeals. "Hiya!" Donny says. He is our resident monobrow.

"Top to see ya all. Tonight's gunna be a great night. We've got The Nuns Frightened By Change, a local act, all Landula boys, born and bred, barely outta their nappies..." He looks over at Gareth who likes to wear his jeans low. I don't get why he likes to flash the top of his Y fronts. He's a mate, but he ain't no Justin Bieber or anything.

"No, maybe not quite out of the nappies..." Blah blah blah. Donny's a dickhead.

Here comes Mr Finney. He looks like he wears women's foundation of the orange kind—the stuff seen on Days of Our Lives.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Landula." He's got a new microphone ring. A great big chunky one that flashes out to the crowd. It flashes into my eye. Geez, Finney. Ya bling could blind a man.

"I told the wife this evening to shut the bloody door. 'Why?' she says. 'Coz I caught five flies in here already this evening. Three of them were male and two were female', I say. 'How the bloody hell d'ya know that?' she says. I say, 'Coz three of them were on the beer and two of them were on the phone.'"

I've heard him tell that one three times now. And I don't even make it a habit of listening to his speeches. If anything I try to avoid them. But they're unavoidable. He pops up everywhere. Someone opens a cake shop—there's Finney to cut the ribbon. A new house gets started, there he is with his gleaming shovel. The town donates ten bucks to the midgets of Miffaworfoo, there he'll be with the big fake cheque.

A few guffaws from the audience, and an especially loud one from Shirley Mason. Fiona Cassidy is up the back. She looks like she's smelled something foul. She's wearing a hot pink business suit with black edges around the lapels. 'The Nuns' have our own secret awards. We call them 'The Landies'. Even though she's really pretty, Fiona wins the Landie for 'Filthiest Fashion Sense'. Finney ties with Farmer Kelly for 'Ugliest Man'. Shirley Mason? If you saw her you wouldn't be asking. 'Most inaccurate lipstick applier? / Most gargantuan blonde in the over 50s category?' She's be a contender for both.

"Ladies and gentlemen, now Let's Get Serious!" Finney thrusts out two open hands either side of the mike. Open hands. Sign of sincerity.

"Landula is facing a crisis. This year, Landula Primary School has held a fete, half a dozen chook raffles, a cake stall, and a dance contest."

There's a round of applause. So many fond memories, I guess.

"But why, people? Why?" Finney's an ace public speaker. He lets the tension build up when no one answers. It's an awesome technique. Makes tingles go over you. It's like advertising. It's all Sell Sell Sell.

“What? For the tuck shop? For gucci new sports equipment? Well, where are they? Bring it on!”

People are ordering beers but other than that, it’s quiet. “I’ll tell you why then. I’ll tell you why they’re expending so much energy and time on these kinds of events. I’ll tell you why, people. They’re having to fundraise for their most basic expenses: Chalk. Paper. Wages.”

He’ll just let that land for a minute.

“Landula Public Library. Same situation. It’s bought no new books for nearly eight months. No new books! What’s a library without books! The only new books have come from personal donations and bequests, and if it keeps going like this and any more Fletcher sisters fall off the perch it’ll be all Mills’n Boon and no natural history.”

A greater silence. Until Shirley Mason knocks over a beer at her table.

“Why? Because the State Government doesn’t care about little places like Landula. It’d rather see us disappear.”

“Benley Shire’s got it worse than us,” Roger McElroy calls out from the bar. Ever seen Star Wars? Remember Jabba the Hut? I’ll say no more.

“They do. But you know what they’ve done about it? They’re expanding their copper mine.”

“Well good luck to ‘em!” Roger says into his beer. “Yeah.” Finney takes off his spectacles and looks at them as if he’s deciding whether he wants them or not.

“Yeah, good luck to ‘em.” They’re brown transition lenses. With the spotlight on him, they’re practically sunglasses. He starts wiping them on his tie.

“Do you know what will happen a year or two from now? When Benley is pulsing with change and new growth and Landula continues to slowly starve on its paltry funding?”

He puts his glasses back on, hands on hips. “It’s goodnight Alice! Landula will be subsumed by Benley.”

It takes a few moments for this to sink in, because the beers are doing that. Then people charge to their feet and beers are knocked over left, right and centre. There’s disbelief. Shock. Indignation. That’s because Landula people hate Benley people. It’s nothing personal. No one throws eggs or anything. It’s just a Shire thing. And as far as we know, Benley people feel the same way. So the idea of having Landula become a part of Benley is pretty bad to us.

“So here’s what we’re gonna do.” Finney interrupts the racket, both hands jutting out as if he’s measuring the one that got away. “We’re gonna do our own acquisition. We’re gonna make a PR pitch so effective that even Benley people will vote for it. Benley Shire will become Landula Shire. And I’ve hired our very own, very impressive Entice Events to do it for us.”

Fiona Cassidy stands up and starts applauding. Oh God. Suddenly my glass feels very heavy.

That’s the firm I’m doing work experience with.

## **Monday 8.50am**

Fiona is at work first. Then me.

Mum made me arrive at 8.45, not 9.00, in order to make a positive impression.

It’s a two-room office with mushroom pink walls. It’s a bit on the crappy side.

“It’s a dump, isn’t it.” Fiona is jiggling a tea bag for me in the little kitchenette. I’m close enough to pash her.

My face is red and, because my hair is on the reddish side, it isn't a good look.

"No. Not really."

"Used to be a massage parlour."

"Did it?" She steps on the bin's foot pedal and dumps the sodden tea bag in, then hands me a mug which reads Entice Events and with a drawing of a swoosh and a shooting star on it.

"Thanks." I take the mug.

"Did you work here then?" She lifts a nostril at me, an open gesture of hostility. Why did I say that?

My cheeks are burning so I go to the dunny to check them in the little mirror. I'm a beacon.

## 9.20am

German Karl arrives. Then Boyd, the league player. He's the manager. He's wearing a nice suit, but with basketball shoes. No jacket. Mental note – trainers are okay.

## 10.00am

We have a meeting at the wooden conference table. We all bring our teas. Fiona brings the bikkies.

"How are we gonna convince Benley people that they want to be Landula people?" Boyd.

"We've got to make them want to." Karl.

"Oh, DER!" Fiona opens her notebook.

"Let's make a mind map of options. We'll have a brainstorm." In the centre of the page she writes 'Landula Job'. Boyd leans over and draws a circle around it.

"Okay, brainstorm," he says. "The floor is open. Pump 'em out."

I feel like I'm the new boy on the stock exchange floor and I'm supposed to jump up and down yelling out prices. But I'm embarrassed. And I don't know what any of the prices are.

"Make Benley jealous of Landula," I submit.

"Tarnish the town's reputation so that they'd rather not be associated with Benley anymore." Boyd.

"I'm not puttin' that down."

"It's a brainstorm. You're supposed to put everything down!"

Fiona, in capital letters, writes 'EMBARRASS – THE SHIT – OUT OF BENLEY'.

Boyd leans over and draws a star around it.

Fiona's fringe is shaped like a flower.

"What else?" she looks at me. Her skin is tanned from years of holidaying in Bali and Surfer's Paradise.

"One suggestion isn't a brainstorm."

Her suit today is yellow and covered in large magnolias.

"Haven't heard from you yet, Karl." Boyd picks up an iced vo-vo.

"Make them fear not merging with us," I put in. "We'll become a big town and they'll be the little backwater."

Boyd clicks his fingers at me. "Good one, Jace. Write that down, Fi."

"I'm writin' it!" "Except that, really, they'll become the big town and we'll become the backwash."

"Stuff 'em. They don't know that." Boyd, licking the pink crap of his bikkie.

“Everyone knows that.” Fiona throws a bit of paper at him. “Stop that. It’s disgusting.”

Boyd reclines all the way back in his chair. “Let’s just have a public boxing match between the two mayors. Gordon Finney versus Gerald Whittaker. Winner gets both shires.”

“May I ask, why do we need to join the shires anyway?” asks Karl. “Coz if we don’t one of us is going under. Weren’t you at the meeting, Karl?”

Karl shakes his head. “I don’t like rock music.”

“We could dig up some dirt on Whittaker and get him to convince his people. Maybe he’s a homo or something.” Boyd. I think he’s serious.

“Wait a second,” Fiona drops her pen. “Before we go any further, we need some research. Otherwise we’re just gonna go round in circles. We need to know who our target is, how they think and what it’ll take to make ‘em vote for it.”

“Well Benley Shire is our target, ya fool.”

“Well when we find the rest out, that’ll determine our approach.”

Boyd crosses his feet on the table. “That’s a good point, Fi” He sucks on his pencil. Not just the end of it. A good inch or so.

“We should get a person from Benley on board. Someone who knows them, trusts them.” Karl.

“Like who?”

“Monica Metherin. The Natural Therapist.” It’s Gordon Finney, standing in the doorway, a half-eaten hamburger in his hands.

“Monica’d be perfect. She knows the place, she’s lived there all her life, and she’s short of cash.”

“Great idea, Mr Finney.” Boyd jumps to his feet, shakes Finney’s hand and starts circling the table.

“How about a television ad?” Finney throws in.

“Do we have the budget for that?” Karl.

Finney looks like he’s about to toss us his hamburger to us like he’s feeding pigeons. “Sure.”

“We’ve never had the budget for a television ad before,” Karl again.

“If Mr Finney wants a television ad we’ll give ‘im a good quality one,” Fiona.

“I don’t want to tell you guys how to suck eggs, it’s your show. But if ya ask me I reckon Monica is just the ticket.”

## 1.20pm

Fiona phones Monica, gets her in and we start discussing the script.

“People need a spiritual underpinning for their decisions. They have to agree with the acquisition.”

It’s not what Fiona wants to hear.

Monica quickly proves to be another pain in the arse. And she’s a large woman. Very large. Elephantine, really. She’s the Shirley Mason of Benley but with redder, straighter hair and without the beer burps.

“Jase!”

“Yeah?”

“Whadda you think?”

“I think...” I think her knockers must reach her knees when they’re not all bunched up like that. Loose

pandas.

"I think we need to just find one thing that's good about it. Then talk about that. So... I think the acquisition is the right thing because we can share resources and it'll be, you know, less stressful."

"Good point, Jason, I'd like to flag that," Monica. "Benley people, like Landula people, want simplicity and grace back in their lives. The merging of the two shires will be a mechanism, a catalyst, for that return to spirit."

"God, Ms Metherin, we're not killing anyone," Boyd.

"Exterminate Benley. There's another option," Karl.

"Would you guys shut up!" Fiona unscrews the lid of her water bottle.

"How do we link acquiring the shire with, you know, being spiritual?"

"Well, it's like a brotherhood, isn't it, darling?" Monica's words are like warm caramel off a spoon. They're long and syrupy and they land on you.

"For so long there has been this sibling rivalry. Now it's become unhealthy. It's time to put our pitchforks down and come together – arm in arm."

"That'll look good," chortles Boyd. "Imagine Farmer Kelly and Big Ross." "Errr." Even Monica can't help but quiver. She's grossed out to the max. It makes me laugh. She recovers herself.

"But symbolically, darling. Symbolically."

"Maybe we need a bush dance." Time for me to make another suggestion. "You know, we give away a few lucky door prizes, get everyone dancin' with each other, everyone gets pissed."

"Not bad, mate. Not bad." Boyd. But he's not into it.

"I could get The Nuns to play." Struggling now. The Nuns doing Strip The Willow. That'll be the day.

"If you need a fiddler, Mary Allan is wonderful. Wonderful." Monica.

Mary Allan is a 55-year-old depressive.

"Oh. No thanks."

"A bush dance, yeah. Not a bad idea." Fiona likes it!

"We'll have to write a speech for Gordie."

#### **4.10pm**

Meeting's over. Finally.

Monica makes the 'closing ceremony' remarks. "I think we've come together beautifully today and now we will simply massage the differences."

The calendar falls off the wall.

#### **Wednesday 5.30pm**

We're filming the ad. Monica's doing the voice-over, on location, at Farmer Kelly's.

"For a hundred years, Benley and Landula Shires have co-existed, side by side, through drought, flood and war."

Long shot. Late afternoon. Two farmers are hoeing in their neighbouring paddocks.

A chalk line on the tarmac between them symbolises their separation.

"And not always without some sibling rivalry."

Farmer Benley throws something at Farmer Landula. Landula picks it up. It's a dirty apple core. Focus pull

to Farmer Benley pretending not to notice.

“But now, the state coffers have tightened the purse strings and there’s no relief in sight. And it’s likely that one, or both of our shires, will disappear. Our small, close-knit community will be split, with many of our members travelling to the city for work that leaves us unsatisfied and homesick.”

The music, an austere banjo, crescendos, and a drum-kit kicks in, played by none other than yours truly.

“So, now more than ever before, it’s time to extend the hand of friendship and unity.”

Long shot. Farmer Landula throws something at Benley who catches it. It’s a shiny green apple. Benley lifts it in acknowledgment of his neighbour, smiles and takes a bite.

They drop their hoes and each walk to the road between them. The divisive chalk mark is inadvertently scuffed by their boots, and begins to disappear.

Monica steps into the medium long shot. She’s wearing beads and an orange and purple caftan thing, like Mama Cass.

“Let’s save our precious shires, our lifestyle, our community. Join with us by voting for Gordon Finney’s ‘Union of Neighbours’”.

Camera pulls back. Sun melts into the horizon.

The waning sun shoots a star-shaped flash from the corner paddock. Beauty. End of ad.

The bit about the new shire being called Landula Shire and the fact that Landula was acquiring Benley to keep itself afloat, not to save both of them, well, we all agreed that was better in the ‘round file’.

## **Friday 4.20pm**

“I’m lovin’ it. I’m lovin’ it!” Finney’s pours himself a whiskey in the dark.

The curtains are closed. We’ve wheeled the telly into the office for the sneak preview screening.

## **Tuesday 9.16am**

I’m at Landula Railway Station.

We have a big mediation meeting in Sydney. Evidently, I’m two hours early for my Sydney train. Stupid Landula phone service. They’ve given me the Saturday timetable.

## **Tuesday 3pm**

At another big conference table, but this office is swish. I mean, fully swish.

Gerald Whittaker, Mayor of Benley, is here. He isn’t happy about our proposal. Or the ad, which aired over the weekend.

“Now hold on Gerry. You’re getting ahead of yourself!” Finney—always the height of diplomacy.

“You haven’t even secured my consent yet alone that of the State Government or the Australian Electoral Commission. What on earth are you trying to achieve?”

“Now settle down Gerry.”

“I beg your pardon!”

“Just take a breath. Look, I understand there’s nothing in concrete. We are just keeping on top of things, okay. We simply want to send out a feeler, if you will, gauge the vibe of the kind folks of Benley.”

“Are you suggesting that television ad is a piece of legitimate market research?”

Finney looks like he has tasted something sour while he thinks it over.

“It’s a bloody propaganda piece!” Whittaker snaps. He pushes his swivel chair back from the table.

“I’ll be obtaining advice on this matter, Mr Finney. But I’d imagine you’re too intelligent to do the same.”

Fiona makes an ‘ooh’ face as Mr Whittaker storms out.

Boyd slaps a hand down on the glass table.

“Well.”

“Well indeed,” says Finney.

He turns to us with disgust. “See the shoes that guy was wearing? Got to be worth two hundred quid. Now who’s ripping off the people of Benley? Is it really us or him?”

“Mr Finney, when Mr Whittaker said you were too intelligent to get advice, I think he was doing some reverse psychology.”

“You don’t say.”

“So that’s why we’re here.” She looks around at all of us. “We are here for you.”

No one is saying anything. I look back at Fiona. “Do we have a legal advisor?”

“He’s our legal advice man,” says Boyd and slaps Karl on the back.

That doesn’t quite make sense to me so I look back at Karl. “I thought you left Landula High in Year 10.”

Karl is a beacon but Fiona snaps, “Karl is very knowledgeable about the law. Aren’t ya, Karl.”

Karl’s all hunched forward. He only lifts his eyes.

“Yes.”

“Well,” with my point won, I raise a single eyebrow. I’ve been practising in the bathroom mirror and have pretty much nailed it. “Aren’t we lucky.”

## **Tuesday 4.15pm**

Despite Karl’s fantastic legal background and obvious skill and knowledge, Finney makes the surprising decision to see a solicitor.

“You can organise an election to ‘merge’ the shires if your constituents so choose, but you cannot ‘take over’ a shire. Benley is not a ‘fish-and-chip shop’, if you will,” says the suit. His jewels are bobbing over his too-tight white tie. He does the finger thing for inverted commas, which I personally hate.

“I’m not suggesting Benley’s a bloody fish-and-chip shop.”

“Analogously, you are.”

“No I’m not.”

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s unworkable.”

“How bloody ridiculous. It’s a vote, not a massive drama. Unity of Neighbours. Shirley’s designing the voting form right now. It’ll be letterbox dropped tomorrow.”

“I don’t think I’d recommend proceeding.”

“Oh, well. That’s your opinion, isn’t it.”

“Yes, sir. Yes it is.” Mr Finney stands up and walks over to the window.

We can all feel he’s out of his league. Legal advice. Electoral commission. Gees. It’s more complicated than any of us thought. He stares ahead, back to all of us.

“What’s the objective of what you’re trying to achieve?” ask the suit. He pulls his jacket sleeves and discreetly checks the time, but I catch him.

“Things are going under, mate. Things are going under.”

“The hospital had additional funding this year, did it not? The school. It had a new teacher. The government noted it in its rural and regional economic impact report. It was a case study, was it not? Things are going relatively well, aren’t they?”

“No. No they’re not.” Finney sounds like a broken man. Or a broken record. Not going well. Not going well.

“Well what’s not going well? Essential services are in the clear, are they not?”

“Oh, bloody essential—” Finney waves a hand behind him as if swatting some imaginary fly pestering his back.

“Well what’s not going well?” Finney’s staring intently at the grassy area below. A dog squats down and a turd arcs out of its behind.

“It’s the bowlo.”

“It’s the what?”

“It’s the bowlo. The bowlo’s not doing well.”

“The bowlo’s not going well.”

“It’s not just any Bowlo.” He’s annoyed. “It’s the centerpiece of our community. It’s the linchpin. It’s the whole town. It’s the meeting place, the esprit de corps. It’s everything to Landula. Everything.”

“Right.”

Mr Finney turns back to us. “That Bowlo goes under, we go under.”

“I see.” The solicitor shuffles papers and closes a manila folder.

He clasps his hands together. Nobody moves so he stands up and puts the file in the filing cabinet. Then he closes it resolutely.

He faces us and lifts his eyebrows like it’s our move now. Our time to move. To move out of his office. We don’t.

“May I suggest a fundraiser, then. A cake stall. No, they don’t do that anymore, I know. You’re right. Something else. A table tennis tournament? No. You probably know what will work best in your town. Why don’t you think about it.”

### **Wednesday 8.30am**

“Why didn’t you bloody suggest that in the first place? What do ya think I’m paying you for?” Finney is jiggling his tea bag like a madman and throws the sodden wad into the bin. The white flap doesn’t open to receive it though, so it just slides down and onto the floor. I get up and put it in, wiping my hands on the tea towel afterwards.

“With all due respect Mr Finney,” says Fiona. She’s wearing a black suit today. Stylish. Except for the white polka dots all over it. “We’ve spent two thousand dollars filming a TV commercial, another \$500 screening it,



had legal advice, designed a flyer, got it printed. And you're suggesting we should have organised a cake stall."

"Well it makes sense, doesn't it. Who doesn't like a bit of cake?"

"A diabetic?" says Karl. God, he's a nonger. Hasn't he heard of saccharine. Or carcinogenic aspartame, everyone's favourite for diet battery acid soft drinks.

I suddenly realise the intricate design over his tie is little batmen.

Finney scrapes a chair out fromk the table and plonks into it.

"Food allergies aside, it'd bring us all together, wouldn't it."

Boyd throws his pen onto the table and swivels his beer bulk to one side. "Great idea, Mr Finney! Simplicity. It's a great place to start. How much money are we looking at raising? What's the damage?"

"Fifty thousand, at least."

"Fifty thousand from a cake stall?" Fiona does that I've-smelt-a-fart look.

"It's a start!"

"Why kind of cakes would people buy for fifty thousand dollars?"

"Perhaps ones with illicit substances," says Karl, deadpan.

My eyes roll involuntarily at Karl. No wonder he was a high school drop out. He's just an idiot.

Finney's lip twitches. He pouts. He blinks. The man's face is a sea bed of moving parts.

"Well... one wouldn't... make it... obvious." When his face moves like that, it must mean that he's thinking.

"What did ya say the name of that band'o yours was young Jason?"

"Um. It's the Nuns Frightened By Change, sir."

"Nuns Frightened By Change, huh? He." He almost chuckles. More like a smile with a hiccup at the same time. Finally. Someone almost chuckles at the name of our band. Especially neat coming from a person high up in the government. Gareth'll be stoked.

Finney gets up and walks to the door. His slow and his eyes look like they're in deep focus.

"Organise me a cake stall, people. You know what to do. The targets fifty gees." Finney turns back to look at me. "Get that band'o yours on board son." He winks at me. I feel a bit slimed, to tell the truth. A bit like an odd uncle has said something... odd to me.

Finney leaves and closes the door. Boyd swivels back around, intent on the surface of the table with all its splashes of Lipton and red pen marks.

"Well," he slaps his hand lightly on it. "You heard the man. Who are we gonna get for a big stash of pot. Anyone know?"

It was silent. No one was prepared to say anyone's name. Not for a second anyway.

Then, "Monica." Karl.

I have to second him, but feel bad. "Monica."

Fiona is just nodding. She pushes her teeth together and kind of smiles in a grimacing sort of way.

"I think that's where Stevie gets his from." Stevie's her boyfriend.

"Monica it is then." A smile and one more Boyd-slap for luck. Then he chuckles and rubs his hands together.

As always after victory, the basketball bullfrog trainers shovel their way on top of the table. They stink.

“Only because...” she sighs. A long drawn-out sigh and no one cares to hear the answer. We just want to get inside and have a look.

“Mr Finney has been very good to me. Pivotal, really. Pivotal. Life changing. And I would require a small commission to cover basic costs.”

“Monica,” Fiona steps closer and whispers, “It’s okay. You’re amongst friends. We just need to raise fifty grand. Can we have a look see?”

Monica nods, turns and from the massive chain of keys around her neck and caftan, inserts one into the padlock and opens up the double garage doors at her property.

“Wait a moment, while I get the light.” Then she switches the lights on—a whole shopping mall of them.

The garage is like a cross between a nursery and DJs. It’s one memory I won’t be forgetting in a hurry.

This is not good, is all I remember Boyd saying as he walks between the aisles of the greenery and the fountains and the lights. His face is almost horrified. But kind of titillated as well.

This is not good. But after a minute he must have changed his tune. He swings toward Monica, grabs both of her shoulders and kisses her fair and square on the lips. A pash, really. Joy and repulsion in one.

“It’s PERFECT!”

### **Friday a week later – 6pm**

People have started arriving and the hot cakes are selling like, well, hot cakes.

“They sell themselves,” says Finney, stuffing another \$15 muffin between his fat cheeks, hands flapping around.

“I’m lovin’ it.” Finney walks off. “Lovin’ it!”

Gareth and Kev and I start up our set. We play covers. We start with Stairway. It’s a classic. People love it, people hate it. But it makes them laugh, cry, dance. Most importantly, open their wallets.

In the corner is the black-and-white photo from 1973. Finney’s in it, holding the trophy. Best Team. Best under twenties footy team in the shire. Benley came second that year. But half of Benley’s here so they don’t notice enough to care. When they found out Monica was catering and it was a cake stall with a twist, thanks to Shirley’s nice little flyer, they came in droves.

And it appears they are stocking up the larder for later. At nine, the charity muggers come out in droves as well. All the buckets get passed around, full as a goog. The chuggers don’t have to harass for it even. The coin is still getting spilled by the volunteers from the TAFE hospitality department into the Save Landula glass box. It’s piled pretty high. So is everyone else.

At eleven, Finney takes the stage. He’s got a new microphone ring. Right now I like it a lot. It’s one of the most beautiful pieces of bling I’ve seen.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Landula and Benley. Tonight we’ve come together. We’re saving our shires by uniting. We are uniting in fun, friendship, and food. Thanks so much to Monica.”

I roll the drums; Kev smashes the cymbal.

“Thanks to gorgeous Monica Metherin and the Whole Damn Collective Shire that we are. We may live in different towns, but we live as one. A name just isn’t a difference. This Bowlo, thanks to your generosity of spirit and willingness to have a good time for a good cause, isn’t gonna go away. It’ll live on. Just like the photos on

# Radiance

In the park on the terrace,

at the southern border of the city,

there's a stream

and a footbridge

and a mother duck

with her seven, eight, no nine

little ducklings,

brown and fuzzy,

nascent and cranky

old men in new waddling feet.

It's so sunny and

so peaceful.

I am so relaxed.

"I am on holidays!"

in a new and gentle city and I'm

far away from home and very happy.

I get up from taking my pictures on the grass

and walk along the stream through the park.

There are a group of men enjoying a liquid picnic.

The sun is on my hair and on my back,

warming the jeans in front of my thighs

from the dampness of the earth.

I beam a smile and a grey-haired, yellow shirted

member of the drink picnic smiles at me back.

I raise an open hand, a motionless wave,

and he walks over.

“You are so beautiful,” he says.

“and God bless you.

You have a beautiful personality.

Thank you for being you.”

I thank him too.

I thank him for thanking me

and for being so kind.

It is all invisible matter

but not to him.

He sees it.

I feel it.

It’s real.

I am radiating.

I have so much love to give today. ☺

