Open Short Story

Judge's Report – Angela Meyer

It was wonderful to get to judge the My Brother Jack Open Short Story category this year. It's incredible to see that, amid the challenges we've all faced and the time we've had to spend inside, people's imaginations are firing. What's also notable is how many of the stories entered this year had a positive or generally philosophical vibe. Through writing, we can commune with ourselves and the world and all that we are grateful for, and we can wonder, even in difficult times.

Subjects covered this year included gods and spirituality, war and living in wartime, living in extreme environments, grief, family, mental illness, immigration, refugees, feminism, and of course, living in lockdown. There were many missives about aging, often reflecting on the richness of life. Some stories expressed the power of art. Others were concerned with food! There were birds, boats, and parks. And there were stories in many genres, from the apocalyptic to the fantastic, the romantic, and the real.

First Prize

The Edge of the World by Julie Michaelson

The winner is 'The Edge of the World', a story about a woman sent to Tasmania to find out more about the environmental impact of some relocated seals. This story is both vivid and subtle. Its messaging about environmental change, and responsibility, gently seeps in as you take in the sights and small-town comforts of northwest Tasmania. The dialogue and quick connections between the characters makes you feel you know them too.

Second Prize

Paper Trail by Natalie Vella

Second place goes to 'Paper Trail', a story about dementia that has the inspired choice of second-person narration. This choice allows the reader to be inside the mind of the protagonist with dementia. The inner voice of the main character is fully realised, and the story is a true act of empathy and compassion.

Third Prize

The Return by Venetia Kefalianos

Third place goes to 'The Return'. I loved this story that tracks the life of a Greek family in Melbourne, over many years, and how the longing for home is not necessarily shared by the woman, whose experience of the patriarchal village was different to her husband's. It traverses multiple generations. The story is rich, warm, and carries much complexity around culture and ideas of 'home'.

Highly Commended

The Shape of a Wedding Dress by Peter Farrar

A beautiful story that captures a fractured moment in a relationship, with a found wedding dress as a catalyst.

Invisible? Never! by Magda de la Pesca

An inspiring and gorgeous celebration of life and self that truly embodies the fact that 'you are as young as you feel'

Wheatbelt Blues by Douglas Wroe

A well-crafted story about an imperfect family, about effort, love, mistakes and the distances between people

Open Short Story – *First Prize*

The Edge of the World

by Julie Michaelson

Deb parked the white Hyundai sedan and slammed the boot. The thump echoed through the dark, silent streets. *Beep* – the solitary sound pierced the silence as she set the alarm. She turned to look around, pulling her jacket close around her neck to ward off the icy breeze. Across the street, a two-story granite federation style building with the words 'Town Hall' stamped across the portico held court for a strip of ageing wooden bungalows. She opened the front door of the tiny hotel, nearly tripping on a golden retriever lounging on a worn faux sheepskin cushion. A sign read: 'Welcome to The Harwich Hotel – Please collect your keys from The Bistro downstairs'. Deb ducked her head and descended a steep, narrow stairwell that led to a small well-lit dining room.

The seals brought Deb to Northwest Tasmania. Southern elephant seals, larger than the ones Deb was accustomed to in America's Pacific Northwest. Formerly at risk of extinction, elephant seal populations worldwide had rebounded thanks to conservation efforts. Deb reviewed the news stories on the *ABC* describing how the seals -- literally eating up the profits of the Tasmanian salmon fishing industry -- were relocated by the hundreds from the south to the north side of the island. Fishermen claimed that the displaced seals were aggressive, disrupting fishing, and tangling nets.

Deb's Melbourne based firm had been engaged to conduct an environmental assessment for a corporate client. This was a fact-finding trip, intended to scope out the project, take some photos and plan logistics. One of her contacts had suggested staying in Harwich, an historic town not far from the seals' new home.

"Tassie's stunning," her boss had said. "Although you might find the locals interesting." Deb had laughed off the comment. She had lived in Australia long enough to recognise the dual admiration and condescension toward its struggling island neighbour.

Deb approached the bar in The Bistro and reached out to a young woman drying wine glasses.

"Hi there. I've booked a room for two nights," Deb said, leaning on one of the mahogany stained barstools.

The woman pulled a key off a rack. "You must be Deb. Welcome to Harwich. Your room's upstairs to your left. Brekkie starts at 7 tomorrow."

She handed Deb a single key with diamond shaped plastic key ring. "Let me know if you need anything. I'm Angela."

Deb smiled as she took the key and headed for her room. She set down her bags and felt at home in the comfortable, slightly dated décor.

She undressed and got into bed. The sheets were crisp and cool. She clicked on the electric blanket and took out her phone, opening Facebook. The wind outside her window howled and rattled the tin roof and the glass panes on the French doors. The hotel eventually became quiet and she fell into a deep sleep.

When she awoke, the silence of the remote island enveloped her. She picked up her Iphone and clicked on the *New York Times* app. The headline flashed on the screen. "Trump withdraws US support for Paris Climate Accord." Deb was outraged, but not surprised.

She rose and dressed quickly, adding a second layer to her normal winter attire and went outside, lingering on the nearby dock. The cold, salty air stung her eyes, and she turned back toward the hotel, passing the golden retriever on the front porch basking in the morning sunshine and descended the stairs to The Bistro. Sliding glass windows on the far side of the building overlooked the cove, and the morning sun shone brightly into the room. The employee from the previous night was wiping the counter as Deb walked in.

"Good morning, Deb. What can I get you?" the woman asked, setting down a coffee-stained tea towel and adjusting her apron.

Deb ordered, surprised the woman had remembered her name. She chose a seat with a sunny view of the dock. An active looking couple in their 60s came in and sat nearby.

She sipped her latte, scrolling through her morning news feed on her phone.

The server cleared a table nearby. "What brings you to Tassie?" she asked.

"I'm looking into some environmental issues. I have a meeting with a fisherman this morning." Deb said. "Sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"It's Angela. Don't worry about it, Melbourne's only a few hours trip, but transcending the Bass Strait can make you feel like you're on another planet. You must be meeting Nick. That's him coming in now."

Deb saw a man of about 40 with a scruffy beard, rugged up with multiple layers of woollens and a khaki fluoro waterproof jacket and gum boots.

"Mornin' Angela. You're beautiful as ever," then turned toward Deb and sauntered over. He extended his hand, pulled it back to wipe it on his jacket, then finally shook her hand with conviction.

"Nick Yates. You picked a great day for a trip to Tassie," he said.

Nick had a rugged, slightly unkempt and unassuming look, with a smile that emitted both tenderness and humility.

"Have you already come in from your run?" said Deb.

"Not much happening out there today, just taking care of maintenance."

Angela brought Nick a coffee. Deb asked Nick about his business. He confirmed the sharp decrease in scallop stocks in recent months. He hadn't experienced any problems with aggression, he said, but he wasn't sure the decline in stocks was due to their relocation.

"What's your theory?" asked Deb, picking up her pen.

He rubbed his chin. "Some say it's overfishing by the big commercial operators. Personally, I wonder if there is something not right with that dairy farm. There's a creek that runs right down from there."

"Would you be able you show me the place?" Deb's phone beeped and she reached down to mute it.

"Sure thing," he said. He gave the retriever a pat on the head as they walked out.

The site Nick mentioned was about five kilometres out of town. Sitting next to him on the front seat of his ute, she looked out across the Bass Strait, sun glistening on the still water. The road curved downward toward the sea turning inward before heading out of town.

Deb spied seals nestled in a cove on the beach, lazily warming themselves in the bright morning sun. "Can we pull over here?" she asked.

Nick nodded and pulled the 4WD off to the side of the road. She stepped down and gingerly navigated the black volcanic rock for a few metres to get a good view of the seals, wishing she'd worn more appropriate footwear. She pulled out her camera and snapped some photos, then headed back to the ute.

Nick sat listening to the radio. An Australian mining CEO was being interviewed about Trump's announcement that morning, and said he had called the controversial American president to ask him to remain in the international agreement.

They drove on to see the creek in question, where Deb took more photos, and then they headed back to the hotel. The windows of the ute were open, and she pulled her scarf tight around her neck. Nick grabbed a red plaid blanket with one hand and awkwardly spread it over her knees. "Thank you," she said and pulled the blanket up around her shoulders.

"By the way, where are you from, if you don't mind me asking?" Nick asked.

The question was inevitable. Australians seemed to always be curious about a North American accent, sharing stories with her of their family trip to Disneyland or shopping in the Big Apple. Hardly the America she knew.

"I'm from Oregon originally. I've lived in Melbourne for a few years now."

Since her dad's funeral, Deb had been avoiding thinking about home, especially the decisions she had to make about the family property. If she were lucky, she would come out with barely enough to cover the down payment on a small apartment in Melbourne. Keeping the farm would drain her financially over time, and she knew her decision would be needed soon.

"I've always wanted to see America. Beautiful country, from what I understand. No holidays for me, though, the Tasmanian economy is in the toilet. Can't complain though, the farmers have it worse with dairy prices being so low."

Nick seemed genuinely interested to hear about her hometown. She told him how her father had inherited an orchard on the Oregon coast from her grandfather on prime farmland with a view of the ocean. In recent years, commercial growers had been buying up all the land, and her dad had found it hard to break even. Nick listened attentively and nodded occasionally as he drove.

At the hotel, Deb opened the door of the ute to a frosty gust, thanked Nick, and pulled her hood over her ears. The cold wind and gentle rain smacked her face, but she pressed on, intent on getting her appointment with the local tour boat operator out of the way so she could head back to her room and become reacquainted with her electric blanket.

She nearly bumped into Angela as she walked up the steps to the hotel.

"Heading back to Melbourne tomorrow?" said Angela.

"Not yet. I thought I'd stay on for the weekend. Any suggestions?" Deb asked.

"I'm heading south tomorrow to the town of Corby. It's pretty there and gets a bit of tourist traffic because of shipwrecks off the coast. You're welcome to ride down with me to pick up stock from the local producers."

Deb promised to think about it and returned to her room. She launched into writing up her observations from the day. She had not found anything to counter the fishermen's objections. As the dominant species, transplanted into a new environment, the seals had adapted and survived. Deb thought about the Paris Accord. Unlike humans, those seals don't have the ability to see their impact on the wider ecosystem.

When she finished the report, Deb looked at the digital alarm clock next to the bed. Half past 8. She was hungry, and she made an effort to try the local wine whenever she travelled. She picked up her phone and headed downstairs.

Angela and Nick were in the restaurant and waved to her when she walked in. Nick's fishing attire had been replaced by jeans and a t-shirt. Angela introduced Deb to her mum, who had taken over washing the wine glasses.

They shared stories of country life over fish and chips. Deb told them how, as a kid, the migrant farm workers had been an extension of her family. Like the time a dozen tamales appeared on their doorstep when her mother went to the hospital. Deb told them how she would lose herself in the redwood forests as a kid, dozing on an overturned log, or kicking up the damp peat on the forest floor. She spent hours watching and waiting for the fiddleheads to bloom.

"You know, ferns are one of the most adaptable plants on earth. There are more than 12,000 species in nearly every type of environment." Nick mused.

"Are you sure about that number?" Deb teased. "That sounds like fake news."

They laughed, and Nick opened another bottle of Pinot.

Deb and Angela left mid-morning for Corby after Angela had finished breakfast service, allowing Deb to sleep in. The rocky coastline evolved into dew covered bushland, with yellowing fields revealing the continued toll of the drought. The fields were dotted with Angus cows and matted sheep with thick winter coats. Farmhouses were few and far between, and every once in a while, an amber road sign would mark the imminent appearance of a town, warning travellers to reduce their speed. As the road veered west, the agricultural land dissipated, the Blue Gum trees thickened, and the road narrowed and twisted. In an instant, the ocean revealed itself, emerging from around a bend, and Deb audibly caught her breath when she saw the longest uninterrupted expanse of ocean on the globe. Deb took in the rare beauty of the coast and gazed out onto the water, picturing an imaginary port across the water to its end point in Argentina.

Angela tossed a pebble into the surf. "I always stop here. Something about this place grounds me. They call this place 'The Edge of the World."

Angela and Deb took their time filling the car boot with honey, cheese and produce from local producers. The last stop was a local winery, and the two women wedged a timber wine box on the floor of the passenger seat of the car.

Deb took in the view of the serene beauty of the Tasmanian coastal skies went from blue to grey to black, and the darkness, so far from city lights, gradually enveloped the car like tar. Deb glanced in the back seat at Angela, contently sleeping in her fur-lined parka.
Out of range of the local FM station, the whir of the car heater filled the silence.

Deb thought about what Angela had said earlier. In all her travels, Oregon had always been a place of respite. But something had changed. It was as if the ecosystem had been irrevocably altered, as the occasional outbreaks of bigotry against the migrants had become more frequent, and distrust of government and outsiders had grown.

Deb rubbed her eyes, which were dry from the heat. Looking out into the darkness, she saw a curious wallaby perched on the edge of the road, staring straight into the headlights. Deb slammed her foot on the brakes as the wallaby startled, then ambled blindly onto the road.

She braked too late. The Hyundai struck the helpless creature, propelling it into the opposite lane. The airbag exploded and a shot rang through the night sky. The airbag deployed and Deb felt a searing pain in her neck, then everything became a blur.

Deb awoke to the smell of bacon. The smell reminded her of home, when her dad would call her down just as the crispy edges of the fried potatoes turned golden brown. She closed her eyes and imagined him sitting down and handing her the Sunday comics.

"Hey stranger, good to see you up." Angela smiled and held out her hand, "Panadol?"

Deb took the pain tablets and water and tried to prop herself up on her elbow. She massaged her neck, orienting herself to an unfamiliar bedroom.

"How're you feeling? That airbag tore you up pretty good." Angela said.

"I'm a bit sore. How 'bout you?" she asked, assessing the bruises and abrasions on her arms.

"Yeah, I'm fine, just a few scratches," Angela replied. "Unfortunately, we can't say the same about the *roo* – or the car. Mum and I took you in, you were pretty out of sorts after the accident. Do you remember what happened?"

Deb vaguely visualised the blood-soaked corpse of the wallaby lying in the road and winced.

"Yeah, kind of – poor thing came out of nowhere."

"Those little guys are hard to spot. Hey, breakfast will be ready in a few minutes. You've got time to get some fresh air before we eat. I need to run some errands, but Nick's coming by to pick you up and bring you over to the hotel. You're welcome to come back to stay with us here if you like."

Deb hesitantly descended the stairs and stepped out onto the front porch scanning the vivid blue waters of the Bass Strait that lay before her. She ran her hand on the wooden railing, mottled with mildew and peeling paint. There was a patch of ferns growing to the side of the porch and Deb turned to get a closer look, and gently touched a fiddlehead peering out from under the lush green canopy. She unzipped the neck of her fleece jumper and relished the cool breeze caressing her face.

Angela and her mother chatted over breakfast, talking about a local restoration of the town's main street Deb helped clear the table, then went to her room and picked up her backpack. She turned on her phone and watched as the Apple icon appeared, and entered her

passcode. She clicked on the *ABC News* app: "Australian government reacts to Trump, expresses commitment to Paris Climate Accord."

Deb heard Nick's car pull up on the gravel driveway. She headed cautiously down the stairs, aware of stiffness in her legs and back.

Nick was standing next to the car chatting with Angela. He spotted Deb and smiled warmly, "Angela said you took a hit, but you don't look any worse for wear to me." He reached for her backpack and held out his arm to support her down the stairs.

Deb turned her head awkwardly and irreverently stuck out her tongue. Nick chuckled. Deb's phone vibrated with a news alert. She reached in her pocket and turned off the phone and steadied herself on Nick's arm. As they drove through town, she imagined families busily preparing for another new day in the quaint clapboard houses.

"Are you comfortable? I can recline your seat if you'd like."

As they turned off Angela's street, a "For Sale" sign caught her eye. Deb smiled to herself.

"I'm good, Nick. In fact, I think I'm right where I need to be."

She looked over at Nick and he gave her a smile, accelerating as they headed back to town, leaving the Bass Strait behind them.

Open Short Story – *Second Prize*

Paper Trail

By Natalie Vella

Every day, you follow your wife of forty years around the house. There is nothing to do, you complain as you watch her unload the washing machine. Watch her take out the chicken from the freezer to defrost. Watch her tuck the sheets firmly under your mattress and fluff your pillows. Watch her fry your favourite crumbed fish balls. Watch her carry the heavy tub of washing to the clothesline. When she turns her back to hang your underwear, dripping wet, you pinch her bum.

"Stop it," she hollers. Slaps your hand away.

You laugh until tears squirt from your eyes. The doctor your wife; it's because of dementia that he behaves like this, he says as if you weren't there in the room. So you tell anyone who will listen that the doctor is a quack and doesn't know what he's talking about.

*

The lounge reserved for guests who no longer visit smells of old encyclopaedias and yellowed newspapers. You sit on the stiff leather armchair and flick through a supermarket catalogue. The bold red words and glossy pictures of fruit and vegetables begin to blur, making it difficult to concentrate.

Looking up at a photo of three faces who are probably your grandchildren, it suddenly occurs to you that you don't know where your keys are. Patting down your pockets, all you find is a used hanky folded into a neat square. You call out to your attentive wife. Tick tock,

tick tock, responds the clocks from every room. Your wife is nowhere. *Where are those fuckin' keys?*

You stomp through the house, searching, calling her name. Gritting your teeth, your chipped fingernails scratch-scratch-scratch, inflicting anxiety on the back of your neck, up and down your shins, behind your knees. You stand in the kitchen, tearing the last patch of papery skin on your forearm when you spy her through the glass sliding door watering the lemon tree in the garden.

You slide the door open and call out, "Where did you put my keys?"

"I already told you five minutes ago, men!" she shouts back, her Sri Lankan accent as thick as the day she arrived in Australia fifty years ago. "You don't listen." She slaps her palm on her forehead. "ON THE HALL TABLE."

But I only just asked, you want to shout back.

The heavy bunch of keys is where she said it would be. You could have sworn you checked there five minutes ago. Unlocking the front door, then the heavy security door, you step out onto the porch. Sit on a bench surrounded by your wife's hanging Hoyas and a rusted birdcage stuffed with a plastic galah and a bunch of artificial grapes.

Your wife appears with a sandwich and crumbed fish balls you'd forgotten you'd asked her for ten minutes ago. It comes with hot Nescafé in a stained mug. No sugar on account of your diabetes. She reminds you to take your tablets. She has even popped them out of their blister packs and positioned them next to your plate so that you can't miss them. Lipitor for cholesterol. Arazil for memory. Loxalate for depression. Metex for diabetes. But it doesn't stop the nightmares. Stop the thrashing and the cursing and the choking in your sleep. Because of dementia, everyone harps. I don't have dementia, you tell them. *The doctor is a quack.* One nightmare was so violent you hit the bedside table and gave yourself a black eye.

When your wife disappears inside, your attention drifts to the Maltese Cross fixed to the brick wall and it sparks memories of home. Your young feet's soles searing on hot limestone before you plunge into the lapping Mediterranean waters of Malta's Grand Harbour. Your toes rubbing the soft golden sand as you look out over Golden Bay. Your mother's *hobz biz-zejt* (olive oil rubbed onto freshly baked bread). Your father's 78 records spinning opera through the apartment before the Germans bombed it.

A gust of wind threatens to topple a large crow perched on the next-door neighbour's aerial. To keep balance, it spreads its oily black wings, cawing to its mates, which you barely hear with your hearing aids. Twenty per cent of your hearing remains in your left ear, zero per cent in your right, thanks to forty years of noisy factories without occupational health and safety protection. Sometimes there are strange sounds, even after you've switched off your hearing aids.

The sky begins to darken. You blink, unsure if it's a change in weather or a storm inside your head. Memories shatter like shards of glass. You close your eyes. Voices shout at you, echoing, overlapping. *Can anybody hear what I'm hearing?* Your hands shake. Holding your head in your hands, you wait for the shouting to end. Wait for the storm clouds to pass. Wait for your mind to fall apart and come back together with a different version of yourself.

Two minutes ago is becoming

Ten minutes ago is becoming

Four hours ago is becoming

Decades ago.

Your eyes snap open. The clouds have moved on and the sky is clear and blue. *Just a short episode this time*. But it doesn't change the fact that: you can no longer use the phone;

your wife rings or answers it. You can no longer drive the Toyota RAV4 you bought new fifteen years ago. You can no longer fix the broken toasters and vacuums and fridges. They are stacked in the corners of the garage, along with the forgotten tools, providing shelter for the spiders.

You step back inside and close the door. The hallway clock chimes ten o'clock. Followed by the bedroom clock. Followed by the lounge room clock. All chiming, out of sync for one minute and thirty seconds, like the memories you created an hour ago.

It's time for your walk. "I'm off to get the paper," you call out. You like the pictures. It's an easy read. Most of the time you turn straight to the joke section.

"Don't go dawdling, you hear?" your wife shouts. She is busy cleaning the rooms in preparation for the cleaner from aged care. *Yeah yeah.*

When you push the handle of the security door up and down, up and down, the door won't budge. *How do I open the door?* Your eyebrows twist into the creases of your forehead. Scrambling in search of the keys, you are about to shout at your wife when your hand pokes into your pocket and feels the jagged teeth of cool metal. A gush of air escapes you, a sigh of relief. After you lock the door, flicking the handle multiple times, you step out, noticing the pebbles that have come loose on the porch steps. *I will look at that later.* You never do.

The morning is already bright and warm, breaking a patch of sweat under your arms. At the top of the driveway, you stop. *I can't remember if I locked the front door. Somebody might break in and steal my tools.* You turn and head back up the pebbled steps (noting that you will fix the broken pebbles later), to check that the security door is locked, (it is), flipping the metal handle several times, just to be sure (again). Satisfied, you tuck your hands into your pockets and turn, checking for suspicious passers-by before skipping down the steps (noting that you will fix those broken pebbles later).

Tim from across the road, your neighbour for over forty years, waves. He retired at fifty-five with a hefty retirement package from the government and spends all day tending to his David Austin roses in his front garden.

"Hello," you mutter as you charge away, cheeks flushed. You're not in the mood to chat. He's always coming over to borrow things that you forget lending to him. As each step takes you away from home, the wind carries your wife's voice to your good ear:

Take your tablets. Make your bed. Don't make a mess in the bathroom. Brush your teeth. Go to the dentist. Make me a coffee (milk, two sugars). Fix the door. *Nag nag nag.*

A few doors down is the public housing brown brick where single mother Janice lives with her four children. Five years ago, she accidentally left her back door ajar and her two American Pit Bulls escaped. At the time, you were walking past with your miniature Pomeranians, Missy and Kiko, two fudge-coloured fluff balls at the end of long leads who decided to sniff Janice's verge tree. The dogs didn't stand a chance when the pit bulls attacked. One tore the guts out of Kiko, while the fatter one took Missy's head into its mouth. You held onto her lead as your knees were dragged bloody by the pit bull along the bitumen until a passing car honked and the pit bull took off with part of Missy's ear. Five thousand vet bill dollars later, the dogs recovered. But you could never bring yourself to walk those dogs again. They died of old age. Eventually, you forgot about the incident, and when walking past the house, you finally stopped flinching.

You tuck your hands into the leather jacket you've owned for forty years, pounding the footpath in your favourite loafers. Sure, your knees creak. But you are a fighting fit eighty-two-year-old with fewer wrinkles than a bloodhound. You no longer care about your unkempt eyebrows or the unwieldy hair that sprouts from your nose and ears, or the original teeth you haven't brushed in over twenty years.

At the same junction you cross every day, you stop in front of the Greek's house – bright orange brick, broken by lines of horizontal brown, an unusual-looking house in these parts. A real estate sign in the front blazes with a sold sticker. The windows are shuttered and there's no sign of the Greek man – *what's his name, again?* – waving from his concrete white balustrade porch that screams ethnic, or his Valiant, usually parked at the top of the driveway. *He must have died. Or they put him into a home.*

But it's the decrepit cream weatherboard next door that catches your eye and suddenly it's 1981. The Slug who lives there is following you in his police car on your walk as he does so often. He corners you and steps out of his car, his potbelly stretching the buttons of his police uniform. He threatens to arrest you for something you didn't do because that's how it rolls back then. He will get away with it, too, because his mates are in on the take. He tells you he doesn't want migrants moving in, changing his neighbourhood.

But one day you get him back, but you can't remember how…

The summer sun is growing hotter as you run, shaking. *What did I do?* Melts the landscape into a soft haze as the brisk pace causes sweat patches under your arms to spread across your chest and back. *Something bad happened.*

Along a wide avenue, you pass the kindergarten, pass a small park filled with wildflowers and discarded plastic and pass a tight row of brown houses with trimmed lawns, still looking over your shoulder as you arrive at the milk bar.

You grab the newspaper, pay the man with the spiky beard behind the counter with the gold from your pocket, and step outside. A gust of air conditioning cools the back of your neck before the door slams behind you. You can't shake the feeling that someone is watching. A bus pulls in front of you. The doors swing open and the bus empties. The twinkle of the chrome badge glints. You remember having built these buses in a factory on an industrial estate. Those were the days when working with your hands gave you a sense of pride as did

the sight of the cattle yards before sunrise on the way to work. Back then your days had structure. You knew when to sleep. When to wake. When to eat. When to fuck. You had a schedule. But that dissolved the day after you retired.

While reminiscing, it comes to you in a flash. *Someone died at that house.*

*

The vinyl seat of the 709 bus is stiff against your bum as you bounce over a speed bump. You grab the chrome bar in front as the bus swings wide, along with you.

Where am I going?

You don't remember getting on the bus.

Did I pay?

The parked cars blur as the driver presses the pedal.

Where am I going?

A lanky kid is standing in the aisle, jeans worn low to show off his Calvin's when a man stands up and pushes the kid out of the way with his bulging stomach to reach the back door. He turns and stares at you and in a panic you pull the buzzer, pull the buzzer. *It's him. It's the Slug.*

You swing from the pole as the bus jerks to a stop and you jump out from the front door.

*

The bus is gone. The bus stop is empty. You don't know how long you've been standing there but it's quiet and peaceful and the world has slowed to a crawl. There is no

sign of the Slug, only the lines in the concrete footpath that come and go as you feel calm for the first time in so long.

At the intersection, you turn onto the main road. Take a different way home for a change. Another intersection passes by. Then another. And another. You stop. *Where am I?* You look up at the sky bathed in the deepest blue with a hint of white cloud. The sun beats down from the west, cooking your head and fattening your tongue. *Water. I need a sip of water.* Trickles of sweat turn to rivers down your face, blurring another set of traffic lights up ahead as you walk.

Someone is following. Their footsteps thud behind but it's not the Slug but the lanky boy from the bus. *He knows*. A police car flies by and you tremble. *Something horrible happened at that house. Left or right? Right or left? Which way is home?*

A line of sand-coloured houses blurs into yellow. If you keep walking you can lose him. Turning left, you find more unfamiliar houses. Front gardens filled with pretty daisies that look as if sprayed on with paint. You look down at your watch. *Three o'clock.* It feels like you'd only left home ten minutes ago. You run your tongue over your dry lips to moisten them. Take off your winter jacket, sour sweat and Old Spice shooting up your nose. But the jacket is too cumbersome to carry so you put it back on.

I'll turn here. This is the right street. Your footsteps quicken. Then your eyes blur.

*

You pick yourself off the ground, dazed. Someone's arm links into yours and you look up to see the lanky boy from the bus with a chin dimple helping you up.

"Are you okay?" He hands you the scattered pages of your newspaper.

A sharp pain throbs the side of your head. But you remain cheery. You don't remember the trip. Or the fall. Or hitting your head.

"I take you home?" The boy is still holding your arm.

He knows. He's trying to rob me. Leave me alone. Go away.

"I'm okay," you reply, your voice shaking.

Another man in the distance approaches. Dark spiral curls like fusilli pasta. You know him from somewhere. He might be going your way, going towards your house. A semitrailer, laden with wood, grunts through the intersection, its engine piercing the hot air. You reach for your hearing aids to turn down the volume. When you look up, the lanky boy with the dimple is halfway down the road. The traffic lights glow orange, then red. It's not the same traffic lights you were standing at a moment ago.

You suddenly remember your father in charge of the bread lines at the Victory Kitchen as neighbours and cousins and friends line up for a morsel of food

– it's not the same set of traffic lights…

You remember the limestone streets, the smell of baking bread, the box-shaped windows

– I should turn right. No. Turn left…

You remember the Slug, frothing at the mouth on his front lawn. Your empty container of fish balls safely tucked under your arm

– "John?"

You turn towards the voice, to the person calling your name. Joe. It's Joe. Your neighbour, all mouth with that toothy smile. He wheels his bike up to you. Puts his hand on your shoulder. You feel its weight, its familiarity, its comfort. Its connection.

"We've been looking for you." The minutes pass as he calls your wife on his mobile phone and tells her he's found you. "Your wife was so worried, John, she called everyone. Your daughter, your brother. The neighbours. The police, too. She's frantic."

“Not the police. Are they going to arrest me?” Your heart pounds.

“For what, John?”

“For that cop. The Slug. I killed him.”

“That was decades ago, John. Don’t you remember? You found him in his vomit on his front lawn during your morning walk. It wasn’t your fault.”

The sky darkens and you fall apart. When (another) version of you emerges, the memory of the Greek man in his Greek house will become a fog. So, too, will the memory of the Slug, snatching your favourite crumbed fish balls from your hands (laced with rat poison).

“I just went for a walk.”

“You were gone four hours, John.”

“Naaaaah.” You laugh. The hands on your watch look the same. Time has stood still. Joe’s gentle hand guides your sweat-soaked back down a side street.

Open Short Story – *Third Prize*

The Return

By Venetia Kefalianos

The butcher's family lived in the simple Victorian two up two down terrace in Caulfield. It was a small home, the middle one of three, that leaked with heavy rain. The short, plump triangular butcher perilously climbed the flimsy ladder that he had found on a nearby nature strip. Up, up, up he climbed onto the roof to fix his precious home. Although old and run down it was his kingdom. Only here could he reign supreme. The physical confines of the terrace marked the start and end of what he loved and understood, outside the world remained unknown and hard to decipher. The stocky friendly pink faced Greek called Nick lived in the front room with his little family and rented out the two bedrooms above to recently arrived horianoi (fellow villagers) who somehow managed to squeeze their families into one bedroom. Migration's long chain of links was continually elongating and spreading its little shoots of vine like links out and around the main chain. When Nick first moved into the area, he lived in his brother's home, which was up the street from another relation of a relation. This pattern of migration repeated itself innumerable times in many households.

Once a week, when the factory work ended, they met in alternate homes to discuss, decipher, to vent, to celebrate but also to mourn the loss of their identity. When it was Nick's turn to gather the horianoi and any other Greek stragglers that tagged along, they would meet in the kitchen. The men sat on mismatched chairs with their hands crossed around the old warn second hand green Formica chrome-edged table. In winter, the black socketed light globe hung above them providing a luminous foggy light as they smoked and drank aromatic coffee. Nick's wife Marigoula dutifully and quietly made the thick Greek coffee followed by a small saucer of exceptionally sweet thick preserve and a glass of water. Conversations always followed an anticipated pattern, a carbon copy of each previous one. They began with a lamentation of their present predicament, with how hard they worked in the factory. Then they gained momentum with who had recently bought a home and how close it was to such and such a relative's house and then slid into the mesmerizing news of Samos. You see they were all Samian, recent inhabitants of that little Greek island of Samos on the coast of Anatolia. It was their fervent plan to *return* to their village as quickly as possible.

Each guest brought the latest Samian news. The list always included who had died, who had married, who had bought the house near the centre of town? Then there were the nitty gritty of how much was a loaf of bread? Did the locals produce quality wine for the Samian co-op? How much did the land next kafenion (café) cost? Their current life seemed bitterly unsatisfying and tasteless as they announced, "better bread, tomato and olives than this life!" Letters from home were often read aloud and the tantalizing news evoked such animated reactions. Some of gathered males smoked nervously, some shed a tear, others tapped and hit the table with enthusiasm and glazed eyes. The present did not exist; their mind's eye was focused on the lusciously green vine-covered island. Life in Melbourne was a passing phase that had to be endured. They would soon *return* to Samos, so they needed to be up to date.

Women figured little in these conversations. Some of the men brought their wives, the unmarried came on their own. If a few women gathered, they would move to the corner to discuss their news but if none arrived Marigoula would quickly tidy up and go to the front room to quietly digest what had been said. Although a newcomer to Melbourne, she did not want to return to Samos. She watched over her two sleeping little girls and shuddered at the thought of *return. Return* though seemed inevitable. A large blue tin covered wooden glory box was filling with the essentials and Nick was going to buy another one. But a *return* to what? To life in the village? She desperately wanted to create a new life for her girls, a life that included education and an opportunity to grow and bloom without the constraints of old ways. She hated her previous life; she hated the fact that as a woman she came second. She hated the gossip, the division between poor and rich, the small mindedness of village existence, she did not want to *return*, she wanted to offer so much more to her little girls. Melbourne was mysteriously enticing. Venturing into the city and its stores was exhilarating - it provided such promise.

Previously life was constrained and suffocating. Although Karlovasi was a largish town on the island of Samos, Marigoula knew everyone and everyone knew her. At 35 she was past her use by date. Her father had passed during the war and her younger brother relegated to the role of head of the family gave up his responsibilities and married, something that was frowned on, as brothers had to marry after their sisters were settled. However, at 33 year he just could not wait any longer. The neighbors eyed her curiously. Marigoula did not fit the designated female role model. She wore make up, dressed smartly and scorned the marriage proxenia (recommendations). As she went about sewing for a living she dared not walk alone to her clients' homes! She felt protected when accompanied by her windowed black clad mother. The horianoi loved rumors in fact they lived for them! "Where are you going so early in the morning?" "Who are you meeting?", "what are you making for them, can we see the dress,

blouse, coat you are making?" "Is it true that such and such a family are having trouble with……" The response was always the same "kalimera (good day to you) oh, I really don't know, must be off, see you again Kira (Mrs)……" Life was unbearable. Even in her own little home, her hum drum life became everyone's business. With much sadness she remembered the bitter turning point. She was combing her hair one morning and applying a sliver of lipstick and some pencil on her eyebrows near the sunlit windowsill, the passing observant neighbor mockingly scoffed, "why are you doing that, who will notice you Marigoula?" She had to get out.

Married life in Melbourne was bliss, she had married a good man, managed to have two children and had a happy life. She strolled her neighborhood with precious anonymity. Later, as she walked through Myer, Buckley's and Foy's she deconstructed each dress design with meticulous precision and made copies for the neighbors. Had the owners of those emporiums known of her abilities, she would have been banned from entry! Sewing was tiresome, but it provided her with her own pocket money as well as an opportunity to improve her English. In turn, the kindly neighbors spread the word to their friends and delighted in her skills. She had the talent of making the plump look leaner and the thin underdeveloped look smart and well dressed. Marigoula had the knack of making people feel at ease. The policeman's wife shyly revealed that one of her arms was shorter than the other, whilst Mrs. Sander's niece was decidedly flat chested. These little imperfections were no trouble at all; a dart here, some interfacing strategically placed there, dresses cut on the bias wondrously transformed the simple uninspiring functional cloth into eye-catching creations.

As time passed, the family's relationship with the neighbors grew from distant wariness to warmth. A cheery hello and tar-ra followed their steps outside the confines of the little home. The girls went to the local Catholic school and adopted more pronounceable English names. Vernoniki became Vicky and Hrysafenia became Chrissy. Nick dearly loved the girls' baptismal names, they belonged to his mother and mother-in-law, but he accepted the situation. It was easier that way explained Mother Joseph at St Anthony's Primary school. Going to a Catholic school challenged the traditional Greek Orthodox Nick, but he wanted to educate his girls and the nuns who were Marigoula's regular clients filled him with confidence that he was making the right decision. To balance the Catholic education and encourage religious respect Sundays were devoted to going to the Greek church in South Melbourne.

It was so odd though, every Sunday all the neighbors were out working in the front of their homes. Were they being watched? There is an old Greek saying that goes something like this-

"*you learn the truth from the drunkard or the child".* It was the later that provided the answer. Sixties Melbourne fashion was decidedly dull and functional. If Marigoula worked small miracles with the neighbors' clothing, she excelled with her family. She scoured the local markets for inexpensive remnant material that was sewn into "one of kind creations". The neighbors were captivated and could not wait to see what the girls would be wearing next Sunday! Yet they dared not reveal it to each other as they put on the charade of home maintenance.

The delighted Marigoula grew even bolder with her creations. Visits to Ball and Welch and the purchase of her precious Simplicity, Style and Vogue pattern books fueled her creativity. She was aware that "clothes maketh the man" and to her way of thinking you could look more impressive than you were. No, Marigoula was not pretentious, she remained humble, God fearing and accepting. But for the first time she felt that she had an identity, a purpose and the ability to provide social, educational as well as personal growth to her family's new life. She didn't realize it then, but she and Nick and probably many other migrants were initiating the process of social mobility. Previously once a peasant always a peasant, but Australia seemed free from social constraints. She was defying socio-economic predictions concerning her predetermined cultural role as a woman. Marigoula would have been shocked to know that she was liberating not only her life but her daughters'. Previously the old maid was relegated to being a financial and social burden, she was a frozen asset. Unwed and unlikely to be wed at 35 she was treated as a foolish oddity, to be ridiculed, a lesson to other young women. In Melbourne however she was content with her evolving cultural identity and the ability to provide her daughters an education and social standing.

Nick on the other hand lived and worked for the dream of *the return* and this ached in his heart. Like Odysseus of old, it little mattered that he took his time to *return*. His sails were open, and his course was set. After all the others were doing the same. The initial gathering of men round the table set a limit of 2 years for *return,* this was extending to 5,6,7,10…….. Comfort relaxes the best intentions and unpicks the threads of the most rigorous plans. They were unaware that the longer it took, the more difficult it would be *to return*. Their Samian vines took hold of the rich Melbournian land, the vines grew plump, glossy, hardy and they bore fruit in the fullness of new life. The Sunday best was being worn to marriages and baptisms. The young men who routinely frequented Nick's home had their own families and their status was formalized as they became a koumbaro (best man) or a nouno (God father). These family extensions strengthened the core of each family and provided for a duplication of the village they had left behind. Unknowingly they were recreating Greece in Melbourne, making life bearable and comfortable. In time little Greek

schools were established by the Greek Churches that flourished near central Melbourne and Nick's daughters were relegated in getting a good Greek education, in readiness for *the return*.

Nick's walking bus to Greek school left promptly at 4.30. Holding his precious daughters tight besides him, he picked up neighboring Greek children as they wound through local streets to school. The girls loved and respected their parents. It was not an overt showy love, in fact, unusual as it seems the girls were not kissed and cuddled but they knew that they were treasured more than words could describe. Nick and Marigoula were children born just after the Spanish flu a time of death and disaster. Even on the tiny island a kiss could trigger a death sentence. Marigoula had suffered Typhus and Nick Malaria. How odd that Covid has set similar rules. Vicky and Chrissy held tight and the others formed a neat little line to and from the makeshift Greek school taught by an assortment of high school graduates. As they stepped indoors the girls shed their Australian identity in the pursuit of becoming future Greek citizens.

The years till return became decades. Within 15 years most of the horianoi and koubaroi had *returned*. Nick and Marigoula found themselves alone. Their evolving lives however were complete and joyful. The local church parishioners, neighbors and school friends filled the void. The *returned* left with enviable dreams and for a time everyone was buoyed with these luminous expectations. Back in the Samian life they yearned for, to the land they revered, they followed a life cycle that revolved around a social, cultural calendar dissimilar from the work driven life of Melbourne. Life was marked with seasonal celebrations, paniyiria (religious feasts), not an unending work life dotted with pay dates. Their children unrestricted by their parents' fear of the unknown, grew happily in this unexpected freedom. The luminous anticipations settled. In Melbourne Nick grew plump and comfortable. Marigoula breathed a sigh of relief. The big blue tin covered wooden glory boxes of *return* were occasionally opened, their contents examined, but little was used.

Promising prospects of *return* steadily revealed a new reality. The *returned,* content with life on the island couldn't always secure the prospects available in Melbourne. Nick and Marigoula's girls received a good education that provided for exciting opportunities. The couple found themselves growing and evolving with every forward step. With high school complete, university became a viable option, and they grew teary with pride. So much had been accomplished in one generation. There was a buzz of anticipation and energy. School friends energized the little household with ideas initially confronting, idealistic but so logical. There were no barriers to girls. This Veroniki and Hrysafenia were unlike their namesakes whose lives were controlled and predetermined. The couple followed each assignment, each exam, each step with

care and interest. The little two up two down terrace was a quiet oasis of study that erupted with buzzing conversations of future plans, the parents watched with dizzy pride, a *return* was out of the question.

The ensuing years were dotted with graduations, careers, marriages, births of grandchildren which by the way were appropriately named Nick and Marigoula. Veroniki and Hrysafenia somehow held responsible positions and reared their growing families with their parents' daily support. The little two up two down terrace underwent a few improvements to make life a little more comfortable for the middle-aged couple who finally decided to *return*. The holiday had been booked and the oddly impressively attired pair were driven to Tullamarine for their trip of rediscovery. *Return* though was confronting, and the adjustment to contemporary Greek life difficult. Strangers in their birthplace they felt odd amongst their kin. Samos was beautiful but it wasn't as they remembered it and they found themselves yearning for the Melbourne that was home. Melbourne seemed more Greek than Greece!

In turn the middle aged Veroniki and Hrysafenia made the pilgrimage of *return* with their husbands. Interested to see where they hailed from, they left cold grey Melbourne to visit Greece, Samos and relatives. Their parents' negative memories of return echoed as they landed in Athens. Was the Melbournian Greek experience like the Greek reality? The twelve-hour ferry ride from Athens found them weary and unimpressed. Samos wasn't a glitzy tourist destination. But as they wandered in the hot August sun drifting echoes of their parents' dialect awakened the sense of déjà vu and heightened their experience of this island. The golden sunshine caressed them, as a heavy aroma of oregano, pine and wild herbs energized the tired travelers who wandered through the village paths and meandered through dark green hilly countryside. The land heavy with vines, olive groves and tall pines seemed to acknowledge their presence. Gurgling crystal springs, loud cicadas and an orchestra of twittering birds overwhelmed their sense of sound and silenced them. They had never experienced the sensual explosion of earth. Samos wove its magic spell. As they moved to Karlovasi they realized that there was no rush of cars, bustling public transport, no black clad office workers in a coffee fueled frenzy rushing to meet deadlines. Their relatives were remarkably similar to them and they shared common family stories. Veroniki, Hrysafenia and their husbands joined this communal life and joyfully celebrated the seasonal paniyiria. They danced, ate, laughed and immersed themselves in the richness of communal village life. To their amazement those early migrants were correct, even food tasted different on the island. The simple taste of bread, cheese, tomatoes and olives spoken off so longingly by those early migrants, burst with tantalizing freshness. Veroniki and Hrysafenia discovered their roots as they were absorbed within this island. They found

themselves, hidden by time and another life and they felt guilty knowing the sacrifices that were made for them. Why did their parents ever leave this green intoxicating paradise? Nick and his contemporaries spent years planning for a return that was flawed as they wanted to return to what they had left behind, in a timeline that no longer existed. Life evolves in a continuum that changes accordingly. Nick's daughters were not *returning*, it was a trip of discovery, for this return was wondrously beautiful and guiltily satisfying.

Open Short Story – *Highly Commended*

The Shape of a Wedding Dress

By Peter Farrar

Melanie's voice lifted higher than the car radio, talking over a throb of bass guitar. At first I thought she'd drawn breath to sing, her voice two octaves above Kenny Rogers. She asked how much further. I kept my eyes on the road. I'd driven it dozens of times, dust twirling over bitumen in summer, during winter sluicing through black ice, car veering slightly as if pulled by an undertow.

"These farms all look the same," she said.

I nearly disagreed. Almost said out here the countryside could be rust brown after harvesting, or tinged faint green following planting. The colour of hope my father once called it. Before heatwaves rolled dust, drought and despair through.

"An hour or so yet. Maybe next time we'll drive by night. I'll navigate by the stars so the GPS doesn't keep you awake."

Melanie stared ahead. In my corner vision paddocks lay empty, wheat harvested, blunted down to stalks and tyre tracks. Leaves shredded faintly under the car as we rounded a corner.

"Why do your parents live out here? Don't they get bored?"

I shrugged, saying they were content, aside from needing an occasional skin cancer burnt off.

Melanie sat up.

"What's that?" she asked. I noticed it too, white and heaped, draped over a table at a truck stop.

I braked, pitching us slightly forward. Eased the car off asphalt, thudding over corrugations left by downpours. Gravel sprayed as I parked. Melanie vaulted out. I marvelled at her running barefoot over the angles and edges of gravel. She moved with an agility as if her colour blurred in

the spaces behind her. Melanie picked up the dress and material seemed to unravel, tumbling from her hands as she lifted it.

"A wedding dress!" she said, calling back to me. "Can you believe it? Just dumped here!"

I left the car, standing next to her. A van swept by, faces craning at windows towards us.

"Not what you'd expect. Polystyrene cups and people taking power naps are all you see out here."

"Who would leave a wedding dress behind?" Melanie said, inspecting it. "Forgot it? Left in anger? Divorce party held here?"

"Somewhere there's an unhappy couple," I said.

"It's beautiful," Melanie said. She touched it gently, flicking a leaf off. "I'm taking it."

"What for?"

"Don't know yet," she said quietly. Melanie shook it slightly and a haze of dust floated off. She laid it carefully in the back seat. I stood behind her, watching her shoulders bend and flex as she arranged it into place. "There," she said. I looked doubtfully at the dress.

"The owner may be coming back for it," I said.

"No." Melanie shook her head. "Don't think they ever wanted to see it again."

We drove. Melanie sat transfixed, staring into the backseat. The dress lay like someone sleeping

The driveway to my parent's home was fringed with apple trees. My father rarely picked them now, occasionally walking out to yank one off a tree and bite through the spaces where it wasn't

infected or chewed by possums. I'd made previous trips where they lay half brown and rotting. Now a plume of dust trailed us as we approached.

My father hobbled out as we parked. He waved lethargically.

"We're on water rations," he said as we climbed out. "Can only brush one tooth a day."

He kissed Melanie, once on each cheek, drawing back rigidly. My mother pushed out through the screen door, smiling shyly. She looked into the back seat.

"Oh. Have you something to tell us?"

I explained we'd found the dress. For some reason Melanie kept it.

"Look," Melanie said. She drew it out, material sliding over the seat with a sound like exhaling. Melanie tentatively slapped a couple of sections and dust billowed off. She held it up. I noticed it was cut low, the bride's curving back down to her waist would be visible. Diamantes gathered like rain drops across the front. My mother asked if we'd found it just lying there. Was there anything else?

"Like what?" I said. "Should we've searched for matching shoes?"

My father signalled us inside. He grumbled about the drought, a pine tree that'd blown over and my mother slowing down. Football would be brought up next and after that we'd have nothing to talk about.

Melanie draped the dress over a chair.

"There's a couple of loose threads," she said. My mother came up behind her, examining them. She walked away stiffly, as if made of something harder than skin and bone. Then she returned with small scissors, slipping on glasses and snipping at the threads.

"Unusual," she murmured. "As if wasn't quite finished. Maybe never worn."

"Been no weddings called off around here far as I know," my father said. "News travels fast in our town. If someone drops a glass it's gossiped about before its shattered."

"Lunch!" my mother said after we unpacked. She carried out a roast, steam licking from it. She told my father to carve.

"Anyone would think I'm the only person capable of cutting meat," he said. I went to pick up the serrated knife but he snatched it. "I'll do it. Like everything else."

We ate silently. Melanie kept glancing over at the dress, now sweeping down from a hanger. Sunshine angled through a window behind as if the material radiated its own light.

After the meal I thanked my mother.

"Who made the gravy?" my father said. "The invisible man? You can send me a thank you card."

Melanie asked if they might know someone worth enquiring to about the dress.

"Sure. Talk to the publican. He's more gossip column than flesh and blood," my father said. "Must spend his life eavesdropping to know so much about everyone's business."

During late afternoon my father sat outside. He was the last person I knew who smoked a pipe. He tapped it on a railing and a clump of burnt tobacco dropped out. Meticulously he then packed it, pressing a fresh clump of tobacco down. He held the hissing flame of a lighter into the bowl, puffing deeply. Its arid smell clung to curtains, pungent when passing their yellowing material.

"Your mother snores," he said. "She wakes up people three towns away. Probably set off that earthquake in Iran."

I looked out into emptiness through curling tobacco smoke. My father used to blow smoke rings when I was a child. Dangling softly in mid-air, propelled from his pouting lips. Sometimes I poked my finger through them so smoke turned in on itself. Occasionally he spoke when exhaling smoke and it spirited away in the shapes of his words. Now I stared off in silence, feeling heat off the plains like radiation.

At dinner my mother spooned out puddles of leftovers. I wiped crusty bread around the edges of the meal. Afterwards my parents fell asleep in their lounge chairs. Through a window stars glistened as if we were closer to them. I said to Melanie let's go to our room. She stopped by the dress, unhitching it from the hanger. I asked what she was doing.

"You'll see." The dress folded over her elbow, like a person balancing in the arms of a dance partner at the end of a performance. Its hem swayed slightly through rooms as Melanie carried it. I looked out the window of our room, light of the next town faint as sunrise. I undressed, entering the cold spaces of our bed.

Melanie threaded herself into the wedding dress.

"What're you putting that on for?" I said.

"Seeing how I look as a bride," she said. She patted down sections, adjusted others. The dress moulded around her. The familiar sights of her hips, shoulders and arch of her back began to merge.

"Need shoes," Melanie said. She thrust out a bare foot, pink nails against the white of the dress. "If I was married in this do you think I'd need to cover my tattoos?" She turned side on.

"Can we get some sleep?"

Melanie sat on the bed, dress ruffling around her.

"You know what happens when a wedding dress comes off?"

I said it wasn't a wedding dress. There may not have even been a marriage. And there wasn't one planned in this room. I was tired, having no interest in intimacy with my parents sleeping two doors away.

Melanie dragged the dress over her, material working its way up her body until it swept over her head, hair dishevelling and falling into eyes.

"Does the dress frighten you? Remind you that one day you might have to commit to something beyond doing the shopping together? That you may have to talk about a future with someone else, rather than everything being about your career, your next car, your future visit to Rome, your architecture degree."

I burrowed into sheets, the top one sweeping over my face like tide. Listened to Melanie squirm into the bed, louder than she needed to. She spread out but kept to her side so only warmth told me she was there.

During the night I padded through the house to pour a glass of water. Cold lifted from floorboards through socks, numbing feet. Groped my way around the sink. Moonlight pooled across paddocks the way phosphorous glows from waves. Water spattered against the metal sink and I positioned a glass under the tap. Water flowed over the side and I tipped out a small amount. When sipping I faintly tasted metals. As I returned heard my parents arguing, voices muted but rising. Crept to their door, listening in, speech fuzzy through walls.

"They won't stay together," my father said heatedly. "Probably break up before arriving home."

"What would you know? Stick to weather patterns."

Melanie and I rushed through slices of toast before driving to Rutherglen. I crammed the last portion into my mouth to leave before my parents woke. Trees lined the road, remnants of bush that once covered the stretching distance. We stopped at the bakery, buying desserts for later. At lunch we called into the hotel. 'Parma and a pot' scrawled across a blackboard outside.

I asked the publican as he poured our beers. Explained we'd found the dress a few kilometres back at the truck stop. I glanced at Melanie.

"I think it cast a spell over my girlfriend. An evil one."

"No one been in here looking for a wedding dress," he said. "Or trying to lose one. First I've heard of it. Hear about guns being found buried. Rain seen at one end of town and not the other. But no talk of an abandoned wedding dress."

We drank our beers by the window.

"Do you see a future for us?" Melanie said.

"Up to yesterday we were happy just being together. I haven't thought beyond that. I'm not going to start because a wedding dress turns up."

Melanie drained her glass, head tilted back, slender lines of her neck moving with swallows.

"Wait for you in the car," she said.

We drove to my parent's home in silence. It was built on a slight hill. So my father could see the weather changes and his wife's mood swings coming he said. In the lounge room the wedding dress lay slung over the back of the couch. My mother smoothed it here and there. Small ripples moved with her hand passing over it.

"Didn't realise how beautiful it was," she said. My father stood next to her. "Who would throw something so lovely away?" She looked at her husband. "Mind you we did. From the day we came here we threw everything away. Happiness, fun, love. All gone."

My father left the room. He'd be packing his pipe outside. Smoke listless around the porch, drifting into the hallway. I'd smell its waft so that the next time I picked up my shirt it'd be there, alongside my musk after shave. Smells layered through this house the way seams lay through rock faces. Odours of pork roasts, scrub fires, cough medicines and downpours sweeping in.

Melanie went to the dress. She stood motionless, only the small heaving of shoulders in breath. Finally she touched the waist delicately, tracing it as if finger painting.

"We'll be on our way tomorrow," I said. "In the morning."

The sun set, shades of ochre I'd pointed out to Melanie the day we arrived. Now we looked straight through it. My mother prepared a dinner. I offered to help but she shook her head. Heard my father rapping his pipe on an outside wall before clomping through rooms. His steps strained with limping rhythm. Melanie packed, clothes strewn across the bed. Started folding my clothes.

"We can lie the dress in the backseat again," Melanie said.

"What for? Can't we donate it? Hang it up in a tree so it can wreak havoc in someone else's life?"

"While you wreak havoc in mine?"

I crossed the room. Patted down coat pockets until I felt the bulge of keys. Dragged them out tinkling. Selected the one to our house and strode to the dress. I stabbed so hard into the material felt the bed mattress bend back under it. Then I sliced down, whipping the key along the length of the dress.

"What's wrong with you?" Melanie shrieked. My parents came thumping through the house, crowding into the doorway. I looked from Melanie to them, then the dress. It was unaffected. Not even a line where I'd cut at it. It lay majestically, gleaming under the ceiling light.

We left early in the morning. After a hurried instant coffee. No one asked when will we see you again. I carried the bag wobbling in my hand down to the car. Grunted as I heaved it into the boot. Stood with my parents while we waited for Melanie. Looked off towards the low slung hills one rounded behind another, like vertebras.

Melanie came outside. She descended steps, walking measured and carefully towards us along a grey gravel path. I watched her concentrating, elevating the dress a particular way so its hemline wouldn't drag through the dirt.

Open Short Story – *Highly Commended*

Invisible? Never!

by Magda de la Pesca

You will see me in bright colours, hear my chortles of laughter, wonder what wild, wacky words are going to come out of my mouth.

I love people and stories. You may find me dipping beneath your black, white and every other hued skins, unlocking your stories, sharing mine. You may have been an adult migrant or refugee in my English class. An Afghani Uber driver. A Maori woman at a tram stop. Someone I met overseas in Europe, Asia, Africa, America. Heart to heart, we share our stories, our common humanity.

I can play all day like a five year-old with my young grandson - joyfully romping, exploring, creating, giggling, pretending to be surprised. What a tonic! Grandchild glow saturates my solitary existence for weeks.

My shego is stroked when people under-guess my age. " No!" they exclaim, "You're not really 75, are you? I would've taken you for no more than 60, maybe less."

I might live alone, be no longer in the workforce, but you will know I exist. I will not be imprisoned within the walls of a lonely brick box, to dwindle, lose interest in life in ever decreasing circles. Down the track, I will not become a pale grey ghost of my former self, lingering in God's Waiting Room. No, I will not die of loneliness.

Even though my hearing and sight are not what they used to be, my body begs for a daily siesta, my overloaded mind loses memories through its sieve holes, you will see me out and about. With the aid of my beautiful bionic hip, I can still walk, dance and make love.

Red Hats. I'm still a gal who likes to vant! With my red hat, purple clothes and overload of bling, I will gallivant with other similarly attired ladies. Ranging from 50 to 93, the dazzling Red

Hatters of our group are mostly single, divorced, widowed women. Sure, we want caring companionship, but we also insist on having fun, growing old outrageously.

You may have seen us at theatre performances, art shows, cafes, films, Oktoberfest, Caulfield Cup celebrations, dog shows....

Yvonne, 84 year old leader of our group, has beautiful, wrinkle-free , porcelain skin. She is stylishly elegant in her own unique way. Gentle. Refined. Wise. Compassionate. A super creative who paints like the old masters, loves and collects things of beauty.

Once or twice a year, she organises specially themed luncheons in her home for us. Last Easter, it was a fairy tale tableau of an Easter bunnies' picnic - a miniature 3D depiction of an illustration from a children's book. On the life-like grass was a blue and white checked tablecloth, laden with perfectly crafted cups, teapots, plates cutlery, bowls of colourful food and a breadboard with cheese and pate on it. Larger rabbits, in colourful clothes, gathered around celebrating with other animal friends. Everything totally realistic and to scale. But ever so tiny. Intricate. Delicate.

Months and months of preparing this visual magic for the two hours of our Easter get together.

Yvonne has creativity oozing out of every pore. Unfortunately, she was unable to fully explore it until recently. Having survived a tyrannical husband and years of life-threatening illnesses, she is a walking miracle who is *loving* her late life freedom. Totally inspirational to all of us.

You may have spied us in full Red Hat regalia, lunching at the local RSL. But even though we keep an eye on needy members in between get togethers, when in a group we waste no time discussing the 'ah,me's'. (*Ah, me arthritis, ah me operation, ah me aches and pains….)*

We're too interested in exchanging intriguing stories from our varied pasts. Discussions range from floristry to incest. Most of us have tales from the less politically correct Swinging Sixties and Seventies. We share and revel in memories from pre-computer, pre-mobile , pre-TV times. We met our men in person - at dances, bars, parties, church groups. Not on Tinder. Ways of life unbelievable to the modern millennials - if they even cared enough to drag themselves from selfies, Facebook, Tik Tok long enough to listen.

We also discuss newfound interests in U3A courses -painting, creative writing, choirs, mastering IT devices, learning languages, dancing, exercise.

The 93 year old matriarch, wheelchair bound Suzanna, always arrives late. She is larger than life, with mini plastic red hats dangling from her ears, fingers festooned in chunky red hat rings. She doesn't wear the obligatory purple clothes. A large tiger motif on her black top leaps across her ample bosom. The rest of us would be threatened with expulsion if we didn't stick to the "code". But she is the grand dame of our cohort. Sometimes reminiscent of over-the-top Dame Edna Everage. Other times, more like a female version of Les Patterson (Humphries' other alter-ego), spitting food far and wide, eyes gleaming wickedly as she challenges the listener with her outrageous, provocative statements. I wonder what she has done in her life, but, so far, have been unable to get in a question edgewise!

As a colourful clutch of "old chooks" seated at one end of the RSL restaurant, we make a dramatic splash of red, purple and sparkling jewellery. Invariably, we attract the attention of other diners. Younger women, smiling delightedly in appreciation of our wonderful spectacle, come up to us, asking who we are. We explain that we are a group of women who wish to grow old disgracefully... and refuse to be invisible. "Good on you," they reply. Do we perhaps serve as a little inspiration for them when they reach our age?

This was our life pre- 2020 lockdowns in Melbourne. Now, just very occasionally, we celebrate together in the interludes. Ease-ups knees-ups! Like rare flowers which bloom overnight then disappear , we venture forth in our costumes and camaraderie. Laughter. Joy of reconnection. We celebrate the NOW and the blessings we still have.

In 2020, the COVID pandemic lead to an unprecedented level of invisibility. The strictest and lengthiest Australian lockdowns were in Melbourne where I lived.

Empty streets, shops, playgrounds. One could have dissolved in a whirlpool of loneliness, but for the telephone, computer, TV and other electronic devices. On Zoom, people became little 2-D rectangles on a screen, boxed in, regulated by mute buttons. Still visible, but shrunken snippets of their real life selves.

So much of our familiar was becoming unseen. Workplaces and schools empty while people worked from home. What went on behind closed doors lead to both creativity and destruction, made and broke relationships. Aged care became synonymous with heart-break as relatives were unable to be with their old and dying. Families, stranded overseas or interstate, were unable to reunite.

Cars disappeared from roads. Aeroplanes from the skies. Grandparents and grandchildren pined for each other. We were either unseen or only partially seen when venturing out in our masks. In the park next door, each piece of playground equipment was bound mummy-like, but with bright red and white plastic tape. Bandaged beyond recognition, the park felt forlorn, eerily empty, missing the excited voices and laughter of its children. As did I.

I thought was better prepared than many others for ISO. I'd been a sole parent, then lived alone as an empty nester for many years, had the financial security of the Age Pension. But initially, my gut, like so many others, was gripped with fear of the unknown. I could feel it in the streets, see it in the body language of others. There was terror in the air. It was a Twilight Zone. Suddenly, there were near-deserted shopping centres, with familiar shops locked up and sad notices on their doors. Nobody knew if the shopkeepers would return.

Supermarket staff took the health risks. They were essential services. Witnesses to frenzied toilet paper battles, rapacious shelf strippers. One day, as I stood at the checkout, my local supermarket manager, bellowed at a new employee as he handed me the paper receipt. " You mustn't hold it with your whole hand. Just hold it by the tip to give to the customer!"

"Oh, my God," I blurted out without thinking, " you won't have to worry about dying of COVID, 'cause the stress is going to get you first!" The poor man turned to me, tears welling, and eyes pleading "I need help with all this. It's just too much". I felt the colossus on his shoulders. I wanted to give him a huge hug, but of course, we had to practise safe distancing. Walking away, I wished I had a magic wand to make it all alright.

For many, screens were the only unmasked key to visibility. Smartphones, computers. There was a Zoom Boom.

Now, on choir nights, we were comforted to see the familiar faces on screens, but we sang *alone* in our rooms. Seen but not heard. Technology was not good enough for us to synchronise and harmonise like we did in the local hall each week. Our choir leader and his wife bravely duetted on as our guides and inspiration. But…

My iPad became my sanity saver. I even wrote an ode to it: *Love in Lockdown*…

Hot and responsive to my touch
I love my companion oh so much
In ISO, he feeds my mind and soul
While outside Covid 19 takes its toll…

In a random cyber drop in, my screen introduced me to "The Centre for Optimism" . It was anchored by a smiling, moon-faced man in a bright orange jacket. ***"What makes you optimistic?"*** he beamed and boomed at me, as he did to all newcomers. All I could think to stammer was "Well, optimism fills you with better energy than pessimism!"

On our Zoom get togethers, people worldwide spoke of the positive differences they were making in their jobs, lives and their "pivots" into helping communities around them. People speaking and acting from their hearts. *It was all good news.* Especially compared with our main media newsfeeds.

I always emerged uplifted, grateful and connected. I determined that I would interact positively with all I met, not get dragged down by the doom and gloom. I smiled, said hallo to passersby, cracked jokes at the checkout counters. Photographed the glories of autumn with a passion. Sent beautiful images to friends. I acknowledged them, by phone and email, made single friends feel loved and less alone. Legally, I could still visit my "intimate partner" - my sexy 84-year old darling who lived over a hundred kms away. We had had a very romantic "living apart together" relationship for ten years.

There was still much to enjoy for many in Australia compared with overseas. Not all, I realized. Some were doing it very tough, but really, personally, I had so much to be grateful for.

At the end of 2020, as we emerged from lockdowns, our hearts began to glow with hope. But with the advent of the Delta strain of virus, things dimmed in 2021. Not only worldwide, but in

Australia. The reins were insufficiently tightened in Sydney and regions and the Covid horse bolted. Seemingly uncontrollable. Like acne on an adolescent face, hot spots erupted all over Melbourne and into country Victoria. The unseen stalker, the boogey man can lurk anywhere we were told. Exhausted premiers were beginning to snap . Inconsiderate people were accused of making "shitty decisions" as they openly flaunted the congregating rules and spread the virus. Some of these people came from my suburb. Maybe they lived around the corner from me. Passed me on the street. Went to the same local supermarket as me.

In August 2021, I began to feel my optimism being replaced by paranoia every time I walked around the local streets in my 5km radius. I wanted to kill all those people who wandered around chatting maskless and carrying empty take-away coffee containers in their hands as if that validated them breathing potentially deadly globules in my direction. And what was it about most men that relegated mask-wearing to under the nose or chin – if at all? I was doggedly persevering with the semi-suffocation, not only for myself, but to protect them. How come they couldn't care about me?

Now, radio announcers began to cry on air, spread gloom on our toast each morning. Fear - driven rioters took violently to the streets, protesting about *masks, lockdowns, fabricated pandemics .The greatest conspiracy the world has ever known.*

I was Hug Hungry. I'd always believed a good hug and a belly laugh could get you through most adversity. My gentleman and I were too scared to visit each other lest Delta might be clinging to our shirt tails. Now it was Facetime kisses. Dis-embodied love.

Claustrophobia, lockdown fatigue was driving even the most stable people a little barmy. I, the great socializer, was becoming agoraphobic.

For anxiety attacks, I was advised by a psychologist:

- Breathe in for 3 seconds, then out for 3 for 10 minutes".
- Meditate
- "Don't waste your energy on the irresponsible. You can't change others. Just protect yourself the best you can."
- Keep a gratitude diary at the end of each day.
- Limit exposure to the news.

- Walk, exercise daily. Enjoy Nature. Get fresh air. *In a mask*, *breathing in what you've just breathed out is hardly fresh!*

How could I resuscitate the colourful gallivanter who loved Life and people?

Only a year or so ago, I was celebrating how I had come through the other side of many hardships in my life: a violent father, rape, near murder, retrenchment, heartbreaks, single motherhood, the "Black Dog.". I had come to terms with everything and forgiven everybody-including myself.

On my birthday, I'd written joyfully, "*Instead of grovelling in victimhood, I now choose to walk lightly on this earth. I am 74. My parents died in their seventies. Who knows how much longer this body will serve me? I have earned the right to live in my own reality. I AM FREE TO BE ME.*

Now, at 75, I must renew my vows to myself.

I *will*

- Focus on the magic and joy of each day.
- Luxuriate in the glories of Nature.
- Choose love over hate.
- Continue to wear colourful clothes,
- Shock people out of their seriousness with my sense of absurdity.
- Sing, smile, chat, dance, play.
- Count my blessings daily.
- Keep listening to other people's stories.
- Share my stories in the hope that some may cause you to crack up with laughter and others may inspire you, despite growing old, to remain forever young inside.

Be heard. Be seen. Invisible? Never!

2,435 words

Open Short Story – *Highly Commended*

Wheatbelt Blues

by Douglas Wroe

The cheap digital alarm threw a weak light across the room as it heralded in the cold 5.30am morning. Toby Watson, already awake, let it ring out desperate for the diversion. Another early start in a motel room, kilometers away from all he held dear. Family, friends, a life were on the other side of a big empty land. The night had been spent in a non-descript small town held together with heartache, debt, and limited choices.

As he rose, he caught his reflection in the closet mirror, a middle-aged man now stooped with a paunch staring back. 'Bugger me,' is all he could muster, but it said it all.

A body started to stir beside him weathered and coughing with the fervor of a lifetime smoker. Brown greying hair falling over a once attractive face that was now worldly and knowing.

'Morning' said Toby trying to remember her name.

'Not going to leave me are you like the rest of the men I have met,' she protested.

'You're not waiting for Prince Charming, are you?' asked Toby, electric razor in hand working overtime.

'My first husband punched that dream out of me. Got any ciggies?'

'Fairytales are not for people like us,' replied Toby throwing her a packet of Winfield.

This was the awkward time the night after a casual encounter. Trying not to overly engage in the partner's back story. Everyone had one but the common thread was loneliness.

'I'll leave something for the taxi fare,' said Toby hoping for the end of it.

'Last of the big-time spenders' chided his bed partner.

'Not interested in something for the road?' tossing back the sheets exposing a flabby thigh.

'Got a load I have to get to Broken Hill' replied Toby, happy to have an excuse.

The outside car park now sounded like a hive of early morning activity with other asphalt gypsies, travelling tradesman and insomniacs starting to hit the road.

The prime mover spluttered into life as Toby pumped diesel into its thirsty V8 motor with his right foot. Black smoke belched from the rusted exhaust stacks as he worked through the gears

and crept onto the deserted highway. In frustration Toby was tempted to give the town a farewell blast on his dual air horns but knew this would wake everybody in a 100m radius. He did it anyway.

'Farewell pox-hole,' he mouthed as he sighted his side mirrors with rickety houses morphing into scrubby bush behind the truck.

The road from Cobar to Broken Hill was gun-barrel straight and flat as his father's dinnertime jokes. Toby reluctantly turned on his mobile phone as a bunch of missed calls vied for attention. All the same number and spaced worryingly close together. He responded with apprehension.

'Is that you?' the distant voice of his wife Ruby Roberts demanded 'I've been trying to get you for hours'.

'Good morning to you too' replied Toby immediately regretting the smart reply. Life was no joy for anybody stuck on the family farm fighting a drought and foreclosure.

'I'm travelling to Horsham Hospital with Mitch as he is having an asthma attack and starting to gasp.'

'What happened to our local doctor?' asked Toby.

'If you were home more often you would know he left nearly three months ago and yet to be replaced'. replied an exasperated Ruby driving at the only speed she knew on country roads. Breakneck!

'Chemist shut up shop two weeks ago so can't even buy a puffer. Christ! It's getting too much Toby. I'm hanging by a thread'.

'I hope to be home in a week or two. The mining company pays good money, but they want you to jump when they say jump. How's Mitch now?'

'Asleep and wondering when his dad will be around again.' came the answer down a line of faltering reception as the phone went dead. Neither caller getting a chance to say goodbye or lie about wavering affections.

Toby worked the truck through the range of gears as he built-up speed entering a slight rise in the road. Traffic was light but his biggest concern was the herds of feral goats who had a habit of grazing near the road during early morning and sunset. The goats, though small, were a problem, as they could delay your trip if they were accidently wrapped around a wheel or chassis. Having to stop and put the poor beasts out of their misery was no joy and upsetting for Toby who had

younger dreams of becoming a vet. That all came to nothing as his older brother, Ray's death and call of the family farm delivered a dose of grief and unplanned responsibility.

Driving down a dirt road in a battered Holden 800kms away in Northern Victoria Ruby started to cry. Fate could throw any challenge it wanted in her direction but leave her kids out of it. Mitch, breathing labored but dozing, was her rock, shouldering more responsibility than any fourteen-year-old should have to bear. With Toby's increasing absences her son, Mitch had become a confident, the anchor who tried hard to make everything alright. For families like the Roberts, stuck on farms well out of the wheatbelt town of Rainbow, it was a lesson in living with endless disappointments. From the fickle seasons to damaged family holding on for all their worth to a lifestyle that was being swallowed up by corporate farming. Generational family runs like theirs, that kept communities afloat were becoming scarce.

'I want so much more for you.' said Ruby to her sleeping son. 'You don't deserve this.'

Mitch looking angelic, slumped against the passenger door with his fair hair and complexion so opposed to the family line of sunburned arms and dark features, started to snore. Ruby tried to relax as now quite alone with the only distraction roadside gumtrees full of white cockatoos getting ready for a feed off maturing wheat. The area a hive of around the clock efforts to get the harvest in while there was no rain. There never was any rain, not anymore. The river hadn't had water for three years, Ruby not remembering when she last had grass outside their farmhouse kitchen.

The truck labored through the gears as Toby negotiated the only bend in the highway driving through the desperate hamlet of Wilcannia on the Barrier Highway in deep NSW. Boarded up businesses, graffiti and rubbish littering the main street were a sign that the first Australians were struggling more than most. Toby didn't stop, as its reputation preceded it as a place to avoid. Toby found it hard to believe it once was a prosperous town of note and a port for paddle steamers that used to trade high up into NSW.

On the wrapper laden dashboard his phone started to vibrate bringing him back into the here and now. It could only mean trouble as his sister Linda was on the line.

'Toby, you need to come home. Dad's in a bad way.'

'What do you mean 'bad way'?' asked Toby.

‘He had a turn last night and can’t get out of bed. I tried to contact Ruby, but she is not picking up. What do I do?’

Toby thought of his sister marooned on the family farm 3km from his own. After trying for a better life in the city, domestic abuse forced her back home with her two children. Caring for her recently widowed dad was her penance for wanting more than a life of unfulfilled dreams.

‘Phone Johnno at the stock agents. He owes me some favors so ask him to come out. At least he can help you carry dad to the car if he needs to go to hospital.’ instructed Toby.

‘I’m scared Toby. What if something happens to dad? What will happen to us all?’ replied Linda

‘Worry about that later, now make that call.’ was the reply as he pressed the end call button.

With the sun now at full height it created a heat haze across the band of asphalt snaking into the distance of moonscape rocks and zero vegetation. Even here he was still part of the real world. Mobile phones and satellite navigation made it impossible to disappear from an unkind reality. Toby could hide in his truck cabin with his country and western music, but the real world always found a way back in.

Ruby’s car had once featured AC and a working CD player but both options were now defunct and beyond repair. Her fingers bounced around the dials trying to find a diversion in the guise of a local radio station pumping out hits and memories, a release from thinking. As the tunes weaved out of the speakers, she was instantly transported to her high school graduation ceremony. Big hair, big ambition.

The Dux of the school and riding the crest of a wave of optimism is how Ruby had entered the Eighties.

‘You’re so lucky’ said Principal Marsden at her graduation.

‘So many choices, we have great hopes of what you can achieve!’

His remote high school desperate for some student success.

Three children in five years had put a big deflating hole in her ambition. That and Ruby’s inability to prosper far from the vine had her and Toby married far too young, locked into a life that was not of their choosing. Her exercise in regret was broken when Mitch started to stir.

‘Mum I don’t feel so good.’

Ruby's foot unconsciously pressed harder on the accelerator, her goal the sealed bitumen of an approaching main road.

'We are getting closer, just breathe deeply and relax like you have been shown.'

Slumped across the seat, Mitch's breathing started to labor. His face pale and clammy with the fatigue of trying to stay alive. Ruby grabbed the phone and punched in a pre-set number for the Emergency at Horsham Base Hospital. A female voice answered with a tired greeting, Ruby cutting her off with express orders.

'I have a son having an asthma attack fifteen minutes away. Can you please help?'

The tired voice now animated. 'Can you make it in, or do we need to send assistance?'

'I can make it in but will need urgent help as my son is starting to go blue.' pleaded Ruby.

'Sweet mother of Jesus, help me here. Not Mitch not him.' Ruby began to pray. Her hand pressed hard on the horn which thankfully worked as she ran two sets of lights on Baker Street so tantalizingly close to the hospital entrance. Now flashing her lights, cars started to give way wondering if a bank hold up was in progress. A sharp turn into the emergency car park still with a blaring horn had a porter investigate and punch in a code that opened a door to the reception and a line of people who had a look of boredom as a common bond.

'My son can't breathe. Please come quickly,' plea from Ruby was enough to have a hive of activity directed towards her and the battered Holden.

'Code Blue in emergency! Code Blue in emergency!' resounded around the hospital with two staff racing towards the car and a now gasping Mitch.

'He is here,' yelled Ruby opening the passenger door as he was scooped up by a burly porter. Two staff with stethoscopes joined the porter and checked his vitals, fitting an oxygen mask over the face of a now grey Mitch. A shot of a steroid was injected into a vein as a gurgle and a cough signaled, he had returned to the living. Ruby started to shake, as her legs turned to jelly, collapsing onto a nearby wooden bench.

Ruby, now in a plastic chair in recovery, hunched over a sleeping Mitch transfixed by how much he was beginning to resemble his uncle Ray. His manner and nature so different from her husband Toby. A moment of madness for some was a lifetime of regret, but not Ruby. Suddenly the green curtain swept back, and she was being addressed by a doctor who looked as though he was not much older than her eldest daughter who was eighteen.

In a monotone, she was told, 'Mitch's lung capacity test is fine, you can go. Just please sign this release.' Twenty minutes later she was back in the Holden heading north for the drive back home. Ruby checked her phone and noticed the missed call from Toby.

I'd better call your dad' remarked Ruby. 'He will be worried about us.' wishing it was true.

'Do you reckon he would care? asked Mitch slurping a thick shake. 'Sometimes dad makes me feel like I am not there'.

'Don't think like that ever. You're always there.' countered Ruby.

'Sometimes I wish I wasn't. Some of the crew in town call us names at school. They call us Wheatbelt Bogans. Look at us, everything we have is old.'

'Would some of those people be Jack Riley's kids?' asked Ruby

'Maybe. Maybe not' replied Mitch evasive.

'The bastards' yelled Ruby. Angry that the owner of the Co-op would share details of their extensive debt to his family circle. The time-honored tradition of living on credit between harvests being used against her family only made Ruby drive faster.

'Hold up mum or we will both be back in hospital.'

Ruby backed off the speed but was still angry at the world knowing Mitch was right.

Toby, needing a break, parked the truck on a siding at the top of a rise in the road on the Barren Highway 200kms from today's destination of Broken Hill. He slumped across the steering wheel looking out at the vast expanses of nothing.

'About sums up where I am going in this life' he whispered to himself. Holding it all together was not working. The family fortunes were dependent on him 'knuckling down and delivering' remembering an overused quote from a junior football coach. If only his older brother, Ray who was everything and more to Toby, could have knuckled down and delivered. Toby would have been clear of this mountain of responsibility. He could have become something other than being a beast of burden, working for the man, any man who would pay a good rate to get goods carted. Of one thing he was certain, unlike Ray he would not be going for long lonely walks in the top paddocks and not returning. He would always return no matter how hard it got. He reached for his phone to call Ruby and check on Mitch.