

Walker Street

It's early Sunday morning on Walker Street. The magpies warble gently. The possums and the clubbers return home to sleep. As the sun makes its way above the neat row of plane trees, Harold and Edith survey their patch, sitting side by side, just as they always have. They arrived on Walker at the same time — give or take a few months — neither can quite remember who was first. But what's never been questioned is their firm friendship, right from the start.

They've seen plenty of changes. New apartments, a new train station, a buzzy little cafe where the milk bar used to be, filling the narrow footpath with toy-festooned prams and impatient cavoodles.

They've changed too. Edith has settled into herself, finally at ease with her generous proportions and manicured garden. She drinks in the joyful squeals of grandchildren, loving clinks of glassware, the ever-whistling kettle. Harold and Edith's Walker Street stories started much the same — happy young couples, then came children. But as Edith's bounty grew richer, Harold's had withered. Now he was alone. Now he was empty.

'I miss her, Edith.'

'Of course you do, Harold.'

'She stopped eating after Snowflake died. Then she stopped getting out of bed. I knew it was coming, I knew it was her time, but I can't believe she's really gone.'

A faint rumble, whirr, *whoosh* punctuates the still air. The first train of the morning. They sit.

'Nicholas came over last week, picking through the last of her things. '*Nothing much of value here,*' he said. The cheek. What will become of me, Edith? I'm a creaky old lump with no family. I'm on the way out.'

'Nonsense. You're a lovely old lump, Harold. But you need someone to look after you. Bit of a spit, bit of a polish and you'll be good as new. You really do have enormous potential. Plus you're charming. Look! It says so right here on your sign!' Edith giggled.

The For Sale sign was nailed onto Harold yesterday evening. The street hadn't much noticed, but as the new day took shape, neighbours dawdled by the old house, peering through the fence and taking in the place for the first time in years. Harold, dilapidated yet decently sized, felt exposed, but also noted a frisson of pleasure. He was truly being seen again.

'A Rare Opportunity' proclaimed the sign, displaying a carefully cropped shot of his sunroom and the overgrown backyard. '*Offered for the first time in 80 years, this charming Californian bungalow retains original timber floors, ceiling roses and leadlight windows. A perfect opportunity to develop your dream home or construct a multi-dwelling project (STCA). Enviably situated in the coveted Fraser Grammar zone, and just steps to the station. A new lifestyle awaits!*

The estate agent visits had been a new humiliation. Officious men and women in tailored suits had arrived in smart cars and marched down his hallway, opening and shutting his private cupboards. Their eyes shone, lit up by glowing phone screens —and dollar signs — as they typed notes describing his many faults, and a few redeemable quirks. One slick-haired chap had picked plaster from his living room wall as he crowed about damp ceilings, rotten windows and *hilarious* carpets.

‘Morning, Harold!’ sang the twins. Cath and Clare were a pigeon pair of cream-brick single-storey units. *Neat as a pin!* Clare’s recent rental listing had declared. ‘We’re excited for you,’ bubbled front unit, Cath. ‘A lovely family will fall head over heels for you! A lick of paint, a tidy-up of your front area and you’ll be good as new.’

‘Maybe they’ll knock you down and build new apartments,’ chuckled the new apartments. Three doors down from Harold, they’d been completed just a few months earlier. And already, the landscaped rooftop of The Edge Residences pulsed happily with two am electrofunk, small balconies heaving with twenty-somethings vaping and laughing and keeping neighbours awake. Not that they cared. ‘Did you hear us last night? It was sick! I think there’s something still stuck in my garbage chute. Hahaha.’

‘Don’t be so cruel,’ Edith snapped.

The units joined in. ‘You won’t always be trendy little flats, you know. Edith, remember our crazy parties in the seventies? All those nursing students from St Elizabeth’s crammed inside? Oh, those were the days...’

‘Sure. Bet you were nuts,’ the apartments sniggered.

‘Harold. Ignore them,’ said Edith. ‘You’ll be fine.’

‘No disrespect, Edith,’ said back unit, Clare. ‘But, that’s easy for you to say. You’re absolutely gorgeous. Those new plantation shutters look fabulous on you, they really highlight the hydrangeas. Just last week you were wearing bunting and balloons — you host Christmas for goodness sake!’

Weeks passed and the street watched as people filed in and out of Harold’s front gate at the advertised time slots. Toddlers took in his garden, tradies tapped his walls and smooth-talking developers sized up boundaries and profits.

Auction day finally arrived. Edith’s family and friends spilled onto her front lawn, barbecued snags and icy drinks in hand, eager for the street theatre to begin. A small boy tossed a red ball in the air over and over again, enjoying the festive mood.

A latte-clutching crowd gathered. Harold and Edith felt eyes upon them — assessing him, admiring her. The auctioneer performed his energetic spiel, praising Harold’s ‘scope for enhancement’ and ‘local amenities’. The congregation fell silent.

A tall man leant lazily on a tall tree trunk, arms crossed, sunglasses on. ‘Planning approval’, ‘height limits’ and ‘ROI’ unmistakably peppered his chat to a faceless somebody through his in-ear buds.

‘Now who will get the bidding started?’ The mute crowd stayed statue still, only their eyes moving, darting side to side. Hands remained in pockets. A woman coughed. A toddler squealed. The boy’s red ball travelled up and down, up and down.

‘Ladies and gents, make no mistake. I will sell this property today,’ the auctioneer warned.

Suddenly, the tall man came to life. ‘One point six,’ he trumpeted. Heads turned towards the tall tree in unison. Harold and Edith scanned the crowd on the nature strip in a hot panic, seeking a partner, a pram, a pup.

The mob rumbled as the auctioneer marched onto Harold’s porch and through his front door, seeking ‘advice from the vendor’. There had been no further bids. Harold felt broken. The Edge Residences looked towards him somberly. ‘Ohhh, mate,’ they said. The units wept. The red ball flew high into the darkening sky, bouncing down in Harold’s front garden, behind his sign. The small boy snuck through Harold’s gate. His father followed, smiling apologetically at a clipboard-wielding woman in towering heels.

The auctioneer emerged from Harold, arriving at his theatric mark on the footpath. He raised both arms in a priestly gesture. ‘Ladies and gents, thank you for your patience. This property is officially on the market.’ Harold stared ahead — he felt cold. Edith couldn’t look at him. She just couldn’t.

In Harold’s front yard, the small boy and his father crouched down low by Edith and Harold’s shared fence, examining a glossy beetle stuck on its back, rows of tiny legs flailing helplessly. ‘Daddy, I can save him,’ said the boy, flipping the bug over with his finger. ‘See?’ They smile.

On the street, the mood had shifted. The party was over. The crowd, sober. ‘It’s okay, Edith,’ wobbled Harold. ‘My time has come. It’s okay. I’m okay.’

‘First call at one point six million dollars, second call—’ bellowed the auctioneer, holding a thick rolled contract toward the heavens. ‘One point six five,’ a cautious voice sang out, piercing the tension. The auctioneer stopped and looked around. ‘Who was that?!’ The small boy and his father emerged from behind Harold’s sign, hand-in-hand. ‘Okay then! Welcome, Sir!’ The auctioneer laughed and shook his head.

Numbers began to fly across the street. The tall man by the tree stood even taller. The auctioneer cajoled and chanted in double time. ‘At eighty I have, eighty I have, do I hear ninety? Five if you like, Sir.’ The chaos lasted just three minutes, but it felt like hours. Finally, the thwack of paper hitting palm. ‘And...SOLD!’ he shouted. ‘Congratulations, Sir.’ A red ball soared in celebration. The boy squeezed his father’s hand. They smile.

As the sun begins its journey down under the plane trees, Walker Street is still once again. High nests slowly fill with sleepy magpies. Possums begin to stir. Harold and Edith survey their patch, sitting side by side, just as they always have.