

THE PORTAL

Portarlinton Neighbourhood House Writers' Magazine

Issue No 14 September 2020



Photo: supplied by Beryl Stott, taken by Phillip Griffiths- Castle at Sisteron Provence, France

Editor's Notes

And now it's September! More holidays have been cancelled, businesses closed or reduced to what they can offer under current regulations and a ferry is floating aimlessly at its silenced berth. Some of us have undoubtedly been affected personally through the loss of family or friends due to this virus that is sweeping across our planet. We'll get through it. We'll look at the world differently and plan our lives differently... or will we?

But one thing that remains consistent is The Portal, even if it is still just in digital form. We are delighted that our writing group has continued to connect through these times and has responded with stories and poems to stimulate our own creativity and hopefully provide enjoyment for our readers.

As we've mentioned before, our group usually responds to a set prompt. One recent prompt was: The first word must be Seven, the story must include the words 'anchors a-weigh' and the last word must end with the letter 'p'. See how many pieces in this issue have responded to that criteria.

Recently, we set ourselves the challenge to write stories of only 100 words in length. The first two of these short, pithy tales appear on the back page of this issue.

While all members of our group contribute equally to this magazine, I'd like to acknowledge and thank Ruth Wachtel for the excellent job she does in collecting, formatting and presenting our work in a magazine that we are very proud of.

J Macaulay (facilitator)



Some further notes about the front cover photograph and those above taken by Phillip Griffiths and supplied by Beryl Stott. Beryl writes;

'These (pictures) are taken at the castle at Sisteron, Provence and the staircase goes down about 300 metres which we traversed thinking we would walk out at the bottom, but there was only the hole where they had come out half way up the mountain, so we had to climb all the way up again.'

There and back again. What a journey. If only there'd been a sign at the top saying there was no exit below. Does this demonstrate that not all portals lead to where you want to go?

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Love in the Time of Lockdown

Beryl Stott

(A female's tale of love under pressure)

Seven weeks he has been working from home. I have to tell you I'm just about over it. The company was fine for the first few weeks, but I'm a bit of a loner; used to having my own space, so I was quite happy with Grant off to work all week, then home on the weekends.

Now my whole routine has changed. Before this, once he left I would attend to 'la toilette' as my friend Gabrielle refers to it, with a flirtatious shrug of her shoulder – she's such a coquette. Then maybe I'd sit on the window seat and watch the traffic go by for a while. Later on, I would indulge in a relaxing afternoon nap without him judging how long I took, or worse, prodding me awake so he could talk to me.

All the girls are saying the same thing when we have a catch-up. Some of them like the full time company more than others, but on the whole we were happier with the previous set up.

I used to look forward to a wander through the gardens too. Find a nice spot to sit in the sun, do a bit of meditating, smell the flowers so to speak. But no, now he wants to come with me. He doesn't even think about it until I start to go out, then he looks around and says 'Oh what a lovely day. Too good to be cooped up in here. I'll just have a bit of a break.' And out he comes. Then he expects me to sit with him! I feel I can't just let go and ooze into my usual languid meditative state with him beside me. I guess I'm just feeling a bit overwhelmed with the change in routine.

That's it, I was a routine kind of girl. Wake up in the morning, have breakfast, then once he was gone, indulge in a bit of quiet time planning my day. I'd take an informative trip around the neighbourhood, chatting with all the girls and wander home when I was ready. Now he's calling me all the time, 'Salina, Salina, where are you?' I know it concerns him when I meet up with my friends, but why should I return home just because he decides I have been away too long?

At night it's even worse. Before it never troubled him whether I was in bed or not; now he wants me there right beside him to cuddle up to. I don't mind a bit of intimacy, but every night is getting downright claustrophobic!



I think back to the days before all of this, particularly when I had the kids. Those were the days, talk about busy; so much to do. Feeding them, teaching them hygiene, etc. It was definitely a full time job. Of course they have all left home now, it's just him and me. I guess I would be lost without him, but I have to admit I have often wondered what it would be like living with someone else.

He is quite good company. Chats away, doesn't expect me to actually answer, just to look interested. Well I can usually manage that, but sometimes I have this surge of inner anger that just wells up, and I wait until he is unsuspecting, then I take a quick surreptitious swipe at him. Ah well, I have been with him too long to think about change, particularly at my age, and I would be the first to admit I may not be the easiest to get on with.

I've tried finding something else to break the monotony, some sort of hobby, but I'm not really a gardener. Not like Fido up the road, forever digging away; ends up with dirt all over himself. Maybe I'll start walking, exercise off some of this extra weight I've incurred eating all the treats he insists on bringing home. Just last night it was 'Anchors Away', the latest in gourmet 'home cooked' fish dinners. Very yummy. I was quite verbal in my appreciation as I licked a remaining dab off my paw.

On the amusement side, I've taken to outings with the girls. Gabrielle, Tootsie, Bella and I have great fun. We gather on the top rail of the back fence, right at the spot where all our fences meet, and indulge in some catty remarks about Misty up the road. Then, as the night goes on, we inevitably break out into our usual songfest. I have to admit it can get the neighbours quite riled up, but after a while some male usually breaks up our party by honing in. Grant begs me to give up these raucous outings, but I'm not going to, entertainment-wise our performances are most productive.

Just in Time

Eileen Jenkins

Part four : 'With a Little Help from My Friends'

(The Beatles)

*This story is a mix of gothic horror, humour,
teenage angst, romance and detective work.
It does not follow any genre apart from my own.*

'So,' said Officer Alright chewing his pen, 'You came to me because you think the Sugdons have killed Tina Watson and plan to hold her funeral here, currently, today, now, at this very moment?' They were standing under a pine tree next to the fire station.

'No.'

'What then?'

'When they arrive with the hearse,' said Vicki trying to hide behind the tree. 'Funerals take place at about eleven o'clock, so that the undertakers get home in time for their pie and chips.' They waited.

Shortly, a battered, vintage *Rolls* shuddered to a halt in front of the Church. The driver's door opened and Theo Sugden, wearing a 1920s style suit, with a funeral lily in the button hole, stumbled onto the nature strip. He pulled on the handle of the back door, which came off in his hand, so he put the other one through the window to open it. A woman, looking like a moth-eaten Gloria Swanson, stepped out and beckoned to a passenger in the back of the *Rolls*. Slowly, a small hand appeared which Mrs Sugdon grabbed at and pulled. What looked like a cocoon in a net curtain slowly stepped onto the drive of the church. The organ began to play as the bundle tottered drunkenly towards the aisle.

'It's Tina! I recognise her trainers, she got them cheap at K-Mart. She's been drugged!' whispered Vicki to Officer Alright in disgust, anger, repulsion,

and realisation.

'Listen, they're playing the Wedding March,' said Alright, waving his finger in time while humming along in recognition of the tune. He had quite a nice voice.

'Should be *Dance Macabre!*' whispered Vicki.

'Dance what?'

'Oh never mind! ... Do something!'

The Sugdons had already dragged the bundle into the church. Vicki reached for her phone as Alright pondered what charge he could hang round the Sugdons' neck, be it kidnapping, imprisonment, administering drugs to a minor, or driving with threadbare tyres.

*'Oooh! She's wearing a
Haversham haute cuisine bridal gown
and a Princess Elsa tiara,'*

A few minutes later, Archie Halliwell, alias *Nasty Piece of Work*, appeared from nowhere and strode into the church without any hesitation at all. He was accompanied by Tina's mother and Vicki. Officer Al-

right followed, as he thought he should be present. Archie then shook the net from the bundle to expose Tina's predicament and other things.

'Oooh! She's wearing a *Haversham* haute cuisine bridal gown and a Princess Elsa tiara,' uttered Vicki in a somewhat envious voice.

'Explain this Reverend Chatem!' commanded Archie as he supported Tina. The minister began small-talking, so Archie shoved her away. Unfortunately he shoved so hard she landed on the altar like



the proverbial sacrificial lamb. At 17, Archie was quite strong but he couldn't bear small talk other than on social media.

Mrs Sugdon hung onto Vicki's arm and Theo huddled on the front pew clutching the *Rolls* door handle to his chest while whimpering the Lord's Prayer.

'Now then, now then!' said Officer Alright chewing his notebook as he fiddled with the paraphernalia on his belt until he found some handcuffs. 'Let's be having you Mrs Sugdon.' He thought she seemed much more dangerous than the quivering mess on the pew.

The minister revived and began to pontificate again but Archie warned her that aiding and abetting a forced marriage was illegal and she ought to see a solicitor. He also warned Alright that failure to follow up leads was negligence and a failure of duty. Before he carried Tina out of the church his parting shot at the Sugdons was, 'I'll see you in court you corrupt, perverted, putrid, murdering bastards!' Tina fainted.

Vickie had called in the troops when Officer Alright's non-existent plan to scupper the funeral seemed like trying to stop a flood with a sieve. She knew that Archie, back from his fishing trip, would believe her and help her nail the Sugdons. Outside, the back-up team of Tina's Mum and Archie's father George cheered, clapped and booed as the

Sugdons were led to a waiting police van.

'I always knew that Archie Halliwell was a fine young man,' said Tina's Mum to George.

When it was all over and Tina had recovered from her ordeal she chatted with Vicki about the narrow escape she'd had.

'I thought they'd killed you,' said Vicki, 'I'm so, so glad Archie came home in time.'

'You like him, don't you?' Tina asked.

'Oh ... he's OK ... for a boy I mean ... I like his leather jacket.'

'Toss you for him,' laughed Tina as she took a dollar from her pocket. 'Loser gets Theodor Sugden.'

'Yuck!' I'd rather eat boiled cane toads!' replied Vicki offering Tina a liquorice bullet from a half- full bag.

Tina said 'Whatever!' as she put the dollar back in her pocket.

'What did you do with the gown?' asked Vicki.

'Saving it for a rainy day,' answered Tina as they sauntered arm in arm towards the skateboard park.

Archie warned her that aiding and abetting a forced marriage was illegal and she ought to see a solicitor.

The End



Image: Wikimedia. John Ward. Snowdon, approaching storm

Janet Campbell

Seven loud thumps on the door pierced the din of the wind and rain. Jim roused himself, slid into the holey treads that used to be slippers and lumbered to the door. Bracing to prevent the wind flinging it from his hands, he opened it just enough for his unexpected visitor to be recognised and nodded in.

Junior's hair was wild, his eyes flashing round the room as his hands mashed the air around him. He dripped across the width of the room twice in the time it took Jim to secure the door and turn around.

'Geez Junior, everyone's lying low till this blows itself out; what are you doing banging on a bloke's door?'

'I'm freaking out, Ballast. Freaking out. Can't find the old man anywhere. Boat's gone, car's gone, road to the point's closed so I can't get down to see if he went out last night. You know what he's like when he gets a sniff there's a run on. He wouldn't, would he? What'll I...?'

Jim cut him off with a firm shoulder grip and a nudge towards the couch. Jim was Jim to family but Ballast to friends and the crews who respected his calming manner and ability to steady both men and boats. Junior flopped down, still in his rain gear, and put his head in his hands as Jim scooped his half-full whisky glass from the table and moved to sit on the couch's arm.

'Course he wouldn't; even the kids on the rock walls knew this was coming in and knocked off after lunch. Anchor's away up the coast. Headed out yesterday morning to put down at Gummy's while this is going on. They're going out to the reef soon as it clears up. True to form, I see he didn't let you know.'

Junior took a moment to hear what Jim had said. He lifted his head to see the proffered glass. 'But he took the time to tell you, didn't he!'

'Well, truth is he didn't tell me deliberately. I saw him filling up the boat and spare can at the servo yesterday and asked him where he was off to. He was quite chuffed with himself because he'd teed it all up with Gummy instead of just lobbing on him. He reckoned your mum would have been proud of him. Here's a towel for your head. Get that wet coat off you and my couch and come over to the table. I'm hungry.'

Junior obeyed as he wiped both tears and hair with one broad swipe of the towel.

'Listen mate,' Jim said softly as he lit the cooktop under a pot of stew and dumped a loaf of sourdough in the oven to warm. 'I know it's been hard on you both since you lost your mum. But he loves you as much as ever. It's just that he's finding ways to keep busy, spending time with blokes like Gummy who understand where he's coming from. He knows you're happy with Johnno, the footy club, your mates, work and all that. It just doesn't occur to him that you'd worry about him or want to know what he's up to all the time.'

'I know, I guess, but mum's not here to look after the silly bastard, so I try to. I want him to feel better, but it's like I can't help.'

'You can, mate, and you do, every time you catch up with him or live a day of your life, looking forward to the future. Your mum trained him well and his mates have got his back. He'll show up in a day or two with a big haul for us all.'

'Yeah, probably from Gummy's stash of frozen prawns.'

A Special Place

Jenny Macaulay



‘Seven.’

‘Count again, Mum. I can see eight.’

‘You’re right, Tracy. Eight it is. And aren’t they beautiful just soaring above us without a care in the world?’

‘Were they here two hundred years ago when there weren’t any people?’ Tracey squinted her eyes as the pelicans appeared to float across the sun.

‘Well, I’m sure their ancestors were. But there were certainly people here too. The Wadawurrung people lived here then. They had been living here for thousands of years just like other Aboriginal clans all over Australia.’

Tracy picked up the empty case of a sea urchin and tenderly wiped the sand from its bumpy surface.

‘Where have they gone?’ she asked, her young face looking directly at her mother’s.

‘That isn’t a very good story to tell you right now. How about I tell you how they got here instead?’ She waited while her daughter dusted off a scallop shell. ‘I’ve only just heard this story myself.’

‘Long ago, before there were any people here, the father Sun,’ she pointed upward, ‘and the mother Moon had many children, in fact, too many children to feed, so they asked the eagle, Bunjil, for advice. He told them to make a bridge so the children could come to the land. They built a rainbow and the kids jumped on it and, anchors a-weigh, down they slid to the land.’

‘Ooh, that would be fun.’

‘Yes. They probably didn’t say “anchors a-weigh” but I’m sure they would have enjoyed the journey. Anyway, they landed right here, right on this spot near the birthing -cave, and they spread out across the land to form the twenty-six or so clans of the Wadawurrung Nation.’

‘Is that true?’

‘Well, it’s called a Dreamtime story. It helps explain where people came from. It’s probably as true as most other stories you’ll hear.’

Mother and daughter stood at the base of a rocky over-hang, the gently slurping waves of an incoming

tide embracing the lower rocks just a metre from their bare feet.

‘Why is this called a birthing-cave?’ Tracy asked.

‘You can probably work that one out for yourself.’

‘Is this where they had their babies?’

‘Smart girl. Yes. This was a very special place. A women’s place. The men were not allowed here. The women would bring the mother here to have her baby and they would celebrate on that space over there.’ Her arm indicated a grassy clearing to the right. ‘They would dance and sing and make sure that the mother and baby were looked after. This big rock right here was a guard rock. A sentinel. It made sure that everyone was safe.’

‘What if the men sneaked here?’

‘They didn’t. In those days the men did what they were told. Anyway, they had their own special place, just a bit further around.’

‘So Mum, why isn’t there a sign here telling people how important this place is?’

‘That’s a good question, darling. What happened to the sign up near the skate-park?’

‘Someone spray-painted it. I bet I know who it was, too.’

‘So maybe places like this need to remain special places that we just know about in our hearts. I really don’t know.’

‘Someone’s left some coke cans in the cave. Shall I get them?’

‘No, I’ll get them, Trace. We’ll pop them into the bin near the boat-ramp on our way home.’

They climbed the narrow track onto the point above the cave and glanced across the bay towards Melbourne’s city skyline. A cormorant, straight as a spear, dived into the bay and the pelicans circled silently on the thermals above.

‘Can we go to the men’s place tomorrow, Mum? Dad could come and tell me about the special things they did there.’

Tracey’s mother chuckled. ‘Now that would be interesting.’

‘So can we, Mum?’

‘Possibly.’

Illustration: Jenny Macaulay

The Pork Roast

Diane Kolomeitz



'Will this infernal trip never end?' Jules grimaced, as the banged-up bus hit its final pothole on whatever they called the only route into the village. *You certainly couldn't call it a road!* Just like her - fed up - the rusty but cheerfully flower-trimmed vehicle wheezed and settled to a halt in front of the 'hotel', steam hissing from its radiator. Its perspiring cargo spilled out, looking bedraggled and bewildered. Jules waited, hoping Steph would move her sticky legs on, and out of her space. She seemed to think because, both being single women they had been allocated as roomies on the trip, it meant doing everything together and was pressed tightly against her on the vinyl bench seat. They were nothing alike, and Jules was feeling a growing sense of annoyance with her constant presence.

'Come on,' Jules urged impatiently. 'Let's get into the shade. I'd murder a cold drink.' She thought she'd murder Steph too, if she didn't hurry up.

This was not a scheduled stop on the road between Pushkar and Ajmar, but the rough and mountainous road, traversed by thousands of pilgrims and washed out in parts by recent heavy rain, had shaken both transport and the nine passengers to their limits. Raman, their Rajasthani guide, after a loud but completely unintelligible conference with the driver, had decided on an enforced lunch break so they could try to cure whatever ailed the bus.

A gaping crowd of men seemed to have been hanging about waiting for such an arrival. They were smoking strange-smelling cigarettes and aiming occasional half-hearted kicks at the skeletal stray dogs and snuffling pigs that shared the space outside the so-called hotel. Some of the younger ones, sensing a possible sale, held up handfuls of beads at them in a hopeful manner. As they parted to let the motley assortment of foreigners through, Jules in her sweat-soaked t-shirt was aware that many of the older men were staring at her breasts. Passing through a cloud of smoke and under a profusion of overhanging wiring, the travellers filed thankfully into the cool of the ramshackle building that purported to be a source of

accommodation and meals. There were three more men inside; one who appeared to have barking authority over the others seemed to be the 'inn-keeper'.

As Jules looked around the squalid room, their recent travels flashed through her mind. This had been a 'taste of India' trip that included a couple of the major cities of Rajasthan and the annual holy festival at Pushkar. The fiery beauty of the setting sun over Lake Pushkar and the magnificent rose-coloured city of Jaipur seemed very distant to her now. Pink was the colour of hospitality in India, but there was little of that inviting hue in evidence here. This structure was off-white, with what looked suspiciously like animal excrement, mixed with straw, plastering the walls erratically. For a moment, she wondered if the smell of the Pushkar camel fair had somehow taken over her senses, but no, there was definitely an overbearing, dank smell of dromedary here. The wooden tables looked as battered and dirty as she felt, and she was glad to be wearing her hiking boots, but Jules was past worrying. Not so Steph, who was babbling about food and what they might be having for lunch.

It would probably be Thali. While initially she had liked the spiciness of the dish, Jules was 'over' the staple vegetarian plate of Rajasthan. '*Too much of a good thing,*' she told herself. '*Give me meat, for Krishna's sake!*'

Raman appeared from behind some hanging hesian strips that partially concealed the entrance to what apparently served as the kitchen and passed out glasses of lemon water from a tray. He told them to find a seat, and that lunch would soon be on its way. Jules spotted the austere Marlene and Graham, who were sitting with Aaron and Ammon, and squeezed into the small space at the end of their table, while Steph was still debating what they might be eating. She had cornered David and Mihran, who rarely spoke to each other or indeed, to anyone, and who were looking uncomfortable with her animated attention. Jules had only previously

spoken superficially to the others at her table; they all looked quite conservative. Marlene and Graham were from somewhere in Wiltshire and were Christians; she knew that because she had seen them reading from the King James Bible on the bus. And Aaron and Ammon in their white nylon shirts and black trousers, could have been riding bikes round suburbia anywhere, distributing booklets door-to-door. They were natives of Bangalore, which quite bizarrely, was apparently the centre of Mormonism in India. *'Actually, for a small tour group, most of them look religious,'* Jules thought.

The remaining woman in their group, Samsara, had drifted in and was standing near Steph. She was wearing an orange cheesecloth shirt with wrap-around trousers, and always seemed to be very 'zen' wherever she was, so she did not seem perturbed at all by her surroundings. Steph, by this time, was asking Raman what they were having for lunch.

'We have a treat organised, especially for you.' Raman's features looked strained.

'He's putting on a good face.' Jules wondered at the possibilities of treats coming from this kitchen.

She didn't have to wait long to find out.

Just at that moment, the lawnmower-engine sound of a small motorbike cut out behind the kitchen and, amidst scuffling noises and animated voices coming from beyond the hessian strips, an amazing aroma started to fill the unventilated space. Jules stood up and strained to see what was happening. Through the open back wall of the building she could see a rough spit over a firepit – and two men hoisting an impaled, partially cooked pig onto it. Its juices were dripping down their muscular forearms and glistening in the sun. One man was the inn-keeper, but the white teeth gleaming in the other tanned face belonged to the bike rider, who had miraculously just transported an almost-ready suckling pig to them in a crate on the back of his bike.

'The Pork Master!' The thought made Jules gasp involuntarily, as she stared at the man who had now come into the room to nod at them and drape one leg over a bar stool. He was wearing loose chinos and a crisp coral-coloured cotton shirt rolled up to the elbows, and he seemed charismatically right at home in a room full of strangers. Jules felt quite mesmerised in the heavy air, and her heart thudded weirdly when she found him smiling directly at her. Someone in the kitchen had put on some music, and she recognised it as the playlist from 'Slumdog Mil-

lionaire'. Their guide, Rahman, had got up to check on the repairs to the van and having found it would be ready in four hours, was doing some slightly jubilant Bollywood dance steps.

'My namesake, A.R Rahman,' he laughed self-consciously.

Jules could see the plump, luscious buttocks of the pig rotating in the vibrating stillness of the Indian summer beyond ... she felt quite strange and stood up. Swaying towards the back yard, she knew she had to get some fresh air. Was it the heat, or the strange, sweet smell of whatever those cigarettes contained? Her head swirled as she found herself imagining what it would be like to press herself against their culinary saviour, to fumble under his vibrant clothing, feeling the hard muscles beneath, to be mounted and impaled ... Outside, the pig squirmed in anxious anticipation and its juices made the coals beneath spit and sizzle.

'Time to eat?' The Pork Master caught her arm and steadied her, his dark eyes probing the depths of her consciousness.

'We'll get some fresh air afterwards.'

The room, until then subdued, suddenly erupted in a cacophony of complaint.

'Eat, eat what?' Graham shouted, as Marlene started quoting Leviticus from the Old Testament, something about not eating any animal that had a split hoof completely divided, like a pig, camel, hare or ... a hyrax? *What on earth was a hyrax?* Mihran, with an invocation to Allah, joined the fundamental Christians in a rejection of all things pig, and now David, pulling anxiously on the Star of David hanging round his neck on a leather thong, was saying that he could not eat pork either. Or shellfish, he added inconsequentially.

The two Mormons had realised it was the first Sunday of the month and they had to fast anyway, so they'd gone on a walk with Samsara, a Buddhist who could not eat meat killed specifically for her. Rahman, a Hindu, looked apologetic as he shovelled in pieces of dripping meat, but muttered that those of lower caste were quite happy to eat pig, even if the animals did eat garbage. It was beef that they got all fussy and uppity about. Steph, oblivious, was already loading her plate from the spit.

And Jules, well, she just looked gratefully through her eyelashes at the gorgeous man serving her some delicious chunks of crackling.

'More pork for me,' she thought happily, contemplating the long, sensual afternoon ahead.

Through the open back wall of the building she could see a rough spit over a firepit – and two men hoisting an impaled, partially cooked pig onto it.



New Beginning

Ruth Wachtel

'Seven times, Barry.' Jim Davis looked up from his laptop screen and swivelled his chair round to face young Barry, the offender, the 'unteachable one' as staff room hearsay had him described. 'Seven trips to my office in two days. This is serious.' There was an uncomfortable silence as the boy twiddled with the cords of the hoodie dangling over his chest. He pulled hard on one of them, then looked straight at Mr Davis, the welfare co-ordinator, as he shoved his chin into the garment making his eyes the only facial feature visible. Barry liked this new jumper. It was huge and warm. He could hide in it. His Gran had bought it for him when he started his secondary school life just weeks before. It was the only thing he'd been given for this new beginning. The hoodie, even though it wasn't part of the school uniform, was at least large enough to cover his too tight trousers he was embarrassed by. There was a button missing on the waistline, a dodgy zipper and they were too short. His old, scruffy trainers were OK. They were like those the other kids had, but they were too small. His feet hurt.

Several nights before he had dreamt that he had outgrown his bed. His head lolled over the edge of the mattress and his feet dangled way off its end.

Turns out he had just slipped sideways and was lying across it, not lengthways. He could still recall feeling like a giant. This sensation had hardly dissipated since the dream. He wished he could stop growing.

Barry realised he was going to have to pull his face out from his hoodie. He could barely breathe through the miasma of his own dank, foetid sweat. If only Dexter, his Mum's boyfriend, hadn't taken so long in the bathroom this morning. 'Maybe you could join me in the shower Barry.' Dexter had cajoled. 'That'd be fun and save water.' Barry could imagine the sneer on Dexter's fat face. He was never sure whether Dexter was teasing or serious. Either way, he felt wariness of this creepy man was warranted. He had turned and stomped back to his room to dress and slammed the front door loudly as he left.

Barry had taken to mentally referring to this recent intruder in his life as 'Dickhead Dexter'. Dickhead was always stoned or stank of rum. Dickhead and his Mum went out one night and left a nearly full can of Anchors Away Rum, which Barry had drained. He didn't like the taste, but it felt warm. Dexter never asked him about his missing can of drink. Perhaps they'd moved on to other mind benders and forgotten it.

Barry pulled his jumper down from his face. He breathed in clear air and flicked his lank, unwashed hair forward, screening his eyes from Mr Davis. He pulled the sleeves over his hands. Needed to bury himself. He liked Mr Davis though. He didn't bullshit him or tell him off. He wasn't like the other teachers with their rules and work demands.

'Show some respect, Barry.'

'Don't waste my time and yours, Barry.'

'Why haven't you completed the work, Barry?' He'd told them all to get fucked of course. That was partly why he was here again in front of Mr Davis.

'So...what are we going to do about this?' Jim maintained the silence for a while and just sat looking at this pale, dishevelled adolescent in front of him. His pungent body odour was awful.

He reeked. At some point he was going to have to talk to him about personal hygiene. Maybe not today though. Keep it friendly and less confronting.

'Barry you know you've got at least another four years to go before you can leave school, don't you?' The boy raised his head and looked out the window to the oval beyond. Distant noises of a students' football match could be heard along with a muffled, controlling whistle sounding its charge. Just as Jim took note of the boy's pubescent facial hair, without warning Barry's stomach rebelled. It roared and grumbled loudly. The empty cavern of his belly was screaming boisterously for sustenance. The boy squirmed in his chair and put his hands over his protesting middle. His face reddened with awkward humiliation. Turning towards his desk to try and

*Barry liked this new jumper.
It was huge and warm.
He could hide in it.*



mitigate the boy's embarrassment, Jim asked him, 'When did you last eat, Barry?'

'Dunno. Nothing to eat in the house this morning, Mr Davis.'

'What did you have for dinner last night?'

'Made me self some noodles.' This wasn't the first time Jim had been made aware of Barry's hunger. Other teachers had alerted him to their suspicions.

'Right. Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to give you a voucher for the canteen. Go and get yourself a couple of pies or pasties or something.

While you're at it, can you get me a sausage roll? It's just about morning teatime and I'm hungry too. Come straight back here. We need to talk. Can't do it on an empty stomach can

we? Can't do anything much on an empty stomach.' Jim handed the voucher to Barry and watched him lope out the door dangling the paper of promise in contrived nonchalance between his bony fingers.

The boy's temporary exit gave him time to quickly review case notes on Barry. His eye twitched irritatingly. He opened the desk drawer to find his new spectacles. He hated wearing them but couldn't ignore his protesting stressed eye. He rubbed at his chin and adjusted his glasses several times while reading Barry's notes. He needed to find out whether there was just neglect, or whether there was abuse, which would mean mandatory reporting. Sometimes the weight of this work felt like lead, complex and dense. Jim closed the file and went into the adjacent store room. He grabbed a backpack and began to fill it with polo shirts, a couple of jumpers and various other bits of school uniform from the stockpile on the shelves. He included some soap, a couple of safety razors and deodorant. He'd give Barry a gift card for shoes and trousers. The accounting and paperwork on this could be done later. This wasn't the first time he'd appreciated the importance of the school's discretionary funding and parents' association money for those in need.

Barry walked slowly to the canteen noting the empty corridors and murmuring from classes full of

activity. He knew he was the outsider, the freak no one liked much, the stinker, the object of scorn and derision. He walked up to the canteen, took in the thick aromas of food permeating its forecourt and handed the note to the canteen manager through the servery window. She read it, smiled at him, then asked what he wanted. Two warm paper bags were soon delivered. The smell was intoxicating and made him salivate. He held the bags close to his chest, their warmth an assurance of food's comfort at last. He hurried back to Mr Davis's office.

Jim Davis was just finishing a phone call when Barry quietly opened the door. He motioned for him to sit on the chair opposite. Barry handed him the sausage roll and as they ate,

Jim told him that he had phoned his mother to tell her that the school was donating items of school clothing and other requirements. Jim didn't mention the discussion they'd had about access to the local food bank or about the visit from the social worker he'd organised. He pointed to the backpack, the 'rescue package' he called it. Barry was to collect it at the end of the school day. They were to meet again the next morning. He'd have the school psychologist join them. Now they both sat and devoured the food hungrily. Through the crumbs of his pie Barry managed to spurt out a thank-you. Jim then delivered the equivalent of his sermon along the lines of - never being ashamed of poverty, it's out of your control, no one opts to be poor, ask for help, and so forth. He had the speech down pat, but it was no easier to deliver than the last time he'd had to give it.

'S'pose you don't have any lunch today, Barry.'

'Na. The pies were lovely though Mr Davis.' Jim handed another canteen voucher to him and told him to buy something a little healthier for lunch, perhaps a salad roll. Barry took it gratefully and sauntered out thinking, 'Stuff Mr Davis.' For his lunch he would order another one of those magnificent hot pies.

*He knew he was the outsider,
the freak no one liked much, the stinker,
the object of scorn and derision.*



Freedom in Faith

Diane Kolomeitz

She walks the wind-torn streets in tunnels red.
Leaves swirl beneath, graffiti leers on walls
As on she plunges through its spattered spray,
Unmindful of the seeping words of spite.
Those tarnished thoughts from someone else's head
Do not deter her passage through the night.

Cathedral soaring high against the storm,
Is comfort to her in such pouring rain.
She breathes relief, puts shoulder to the door
That welcomes her at evening, hail or shine.
Its stiffened joints protest but then conform
To silence, as expected in His shrine.

The sign of the cross, her secret pact with Him
Will gain her entry to this holy house.
She finds her pew, the same she always claims
And settles in, her restless thoughts now calmed.
Beneath the gothic arches, light is dim,
Their arms protecting those within, embalmed.

For outside, more than just the weather rages.
Climate change, forgotten for the time,
Takes backseat to the news of a pandemic.
The airways, crammed with calculation dire,
The newsprint trickling death across its pages...
She wonders if, soon too, she may expire.

This time is hers, to put aside a life
That deals with others' needs, a sacred space
To give respite from negativity.
Outside, she's tested by this new trial sent,
When voices claim apocalyptic strife ...
Within the Autumn of their discontent.

As Winter's cloak descended after Fall,
It kept dark secrets in its hoary heart.
She wonders now about the words of Christ.
'The truth will set you free,' he told the Jews,
But whose truth did he mean – a truth for all?
Or only those who walk in Christian shoes?

She's praying for the Universal Church,
But ponders on exactly what that is,
When many of her friends are not the same.
Religions vary, but a heart that's pure,
That does not hurt or maim, lay blame, besmirch,
Will justice mean a heart like this endures?

Bowing her head, she thinks of Nations spread
Across the world, and all who are in charge.
The welfare of the world as it is known
Is lying in their trembling, human hands.
But news is full of those who mourn the dead,
Whose bodies lie in far-off, foreign lands.

Her prayer's now for community, her city.
Concerns more localised, of distancing
And disinfecting surfaces from touch,
Invade her head and swamp her inner thoughts.
She shakes her head but thinks it still a pity
That people don't observe rules as they ought.

For those who suffer, those with troubled minds,
She begs for mercy, to be freed from pain.
The departed, those so dear are not forgotten,
And tears well, unbidden, in her eyes.
Uplifted, filled with love for humankind,
She rises from her knees and gives a sigh.

Farewelling the priest, she heads into the rain.
Her face, that of the everyday unknown,
Is migrant stock; she's lived across two cultures,
Giving thanks, to grow old in this place.
A restless heart ... but faith has kept her sane,
Revering God, forgiving human race.

She goes into the night and disappears,
Her path through sodden leaves bears only prints.
Please God, let her through alleys pass secure,
To reach the warmth of home fires once again.
Be generous to her now, free her from fears
That lie ahead for all of us. Amen.

Anchors Away

Sue Jager



Seven of us continued to meet in secret, throughout three years of comprehensive government lockdown. We felt both the government and local social pressures intensifying around us like a threatening storm. We planned our resistance, accordingly. Clearly, we could no longer be publicly associating, so we rapidly set up a private messaging site so we could forward details of any illicit, intended get-togethers.

There was a highly charged atmosphere within our larger group, and we developed a sixth sense about which of us were obedient, frightened and capable of potentially dobbing in any wrong doers. It was a dangerous time, with tempers flaring and patience running thin. It was also a time of denial and defiance against giving up the social fabric that had formerly held this tight knit group together. Simply, not everyone could be trusted to break rules and maintain social contact. Some people are more natural isolationists. They signal this fact, radiating righteousness, in every interaction.

Bonds were broken and reforged in this period, with the mysterious seven continuing to rally and meet. We met 'coincidentally' while out walking in areas. We hid behind bushes and sat together at remote and concealed, broken down picnic tables. We parked along deserted back laneways with the car windows down and sipping tepid takeaway coffee from paper cups.

We dressed in tracksuits because exercise and shopping for food was still allowed. Tracksuits became a cover for everything really. As restrictions eased slightly in the midway point, we individually hired or sourced small canoes and paddled into the middle of the bay, bearing in mind proper social distancing of course. Fortunately, it was a calm and

sunny day, as several members had not had much rowing experience and there was a bit of hysterical carrying on. Anchors away, ' we shouted where no one could hear, two kilometres off the shore at Edwards Point. Exhausted and sunburnt we paddled back to the safety of the beach and seriously wondered if it was worth that much effort and exercise, to meet and have that illegal, face to face group chat.

We were well into the third year of lockdown and, we seven were the only people in our town who looked fit and trim due to the excessive amounts of exercise we were doing to keep our fragile social network alive. We had long given up asking if this would ever end and when would things get back to normal.

Things never did return to normal and talk of disease continued everywhere. There was limited travel allowed and great unspoken fear, that tourists would bring the virus into town. Locals hid in their homes. It was no longer a joking matter and we all started to feel like it was just a matter of time. With no new activity, our face to face social bonds had nothing healthy to continue to build on. People grew even more fractious and distrustful.

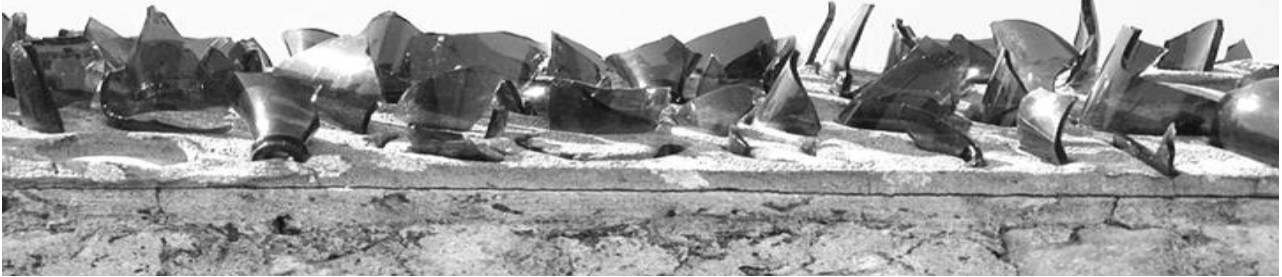
Eventually the inevitable happened and the dreaded text came through. The seven had been in proximity of an unnamed person who had the virus. We were to present for immediate testing at the police medical caravan at the edge of town. It was all over. We had had a great run of thirty-six months, but now it had all been exposed.

We gathered one final time outside the mobile virus test station. Pissed off, Party over, Local Pariahs.

Illustration: Sue Jager

Ill-gotten Gains

Eileen Jenkins



Benny was running as fast as he could, but the police were gaining on him. He knew there was an alley at the end of the street he could turn into; it was a blind alley, but he felt he could manage the wall at the end. He would have to be careful of the glass fixed onto the concrete at the top, a bit like chocolate chips in an iced cake. But he was fit. He'd done it before many times as a kid growing up in the back streets, and since. Brunswick was his territory and he didn't intend getting caught now.

Throwing his tool bag and loot sack over the wall, he jumped up to reach the top where the glass had been smashed down with a hammer. It left a gap just wide enough for a slim man to heave himself over. Once on the other side, Benny retrieved his stuff and ran towards the street at the end of the dark passage way. Panting, he could hear the footsteps of the police reaching the wall. Not bothering to see if they followed, he ran into the street and made for the house three down from the right. Uncle Ron would hide him until it was clear.

It was Uncle Ron who'd been like a father to Benny, teaching him the trade and covering for him in tricky situations. Benny's Mum was dead and his father in prison, so he relied on Uncle Ron to pay him for the loot he brought to him after every job. Uncle Ron was good that way.

He knew the worth of things and he knew where the best jobs could be found. Only an hour ago, with Uncle Ron's directions, Benny had been in a large house belonging to one of the rich Italians living in Brunswick. The owners were out and apart from a snooty cat, he'd been alone helping himself to the jewels and silver he found left carelessly around the house.

Benny's Mum was dead and his father in prison, so he relied on Uncle Ron to pay him for the loot he brought to him after every job. Uncle Ron was good that way.

A decade later, Benny sat before a solicitor and attempted to listen to his droning. The death of Uncle Ron had affected him badly. Ron was the one who cared enough to offer him a home after he came out of prison. Ron was the one who gave him handouts when he became homeless. Ron had retired from his profession and, as much as he tried to persuade Benny to give up the game, Benny had kept on until eventually the police caught him and put him away again. The solicitor was still droning.

'Do you understand? I'm telling you that Mr. Ronaldo Bocelli left you his property.'

'Don't wantit mate. Sell it ... I've gotta place with me mates.'

'You can't live on the street any longer ... you'll die like they all do.'

'We all die don't we? Anyway ... 'is place's worth nothing.'

The lawyer sighed. He shrugged his shoulders knowing he would not be able to make Benny understand the value of a property in an area fast becoming gentrified.

'Just make sure you clear it out before we put it on the market. People don't want trash ... others' trash ... get rid of the lot and then we can hire a painter in to freshen the place up. Let me know when it's ready for the painters and I'll arrange the rest,' continued the solicitor, rising to dismiss Benny.

Benny left the office not knowing why he felt so depressed. He felt a drop of rain, or was it tears. *What to do now? Where to go first? Bottle shop? Mates? Uncle Ron's? May as well get it over and see*

how much had to be cleared. Uncle Ron had been a bit of a hoarder in his time. The shed in the back yard would be a good place to start.

Benny turned into Ron's Street armed with a bottle of Scotch and a bag of fish and chips remembering how he used to bring these to Ron's every Saturday, until he became homeless. Then he'd neglected his uncle, being too ashamed to visit. Uncle Ron had always seemed to welcome the little meal they'd had together in the kitchen, or sometimes in summer, in the back yard. He used the key on the small bunch the solicitor had given him, letting himself into the shabby terraced house with the cast iron railings and bull-nosed veranda roof. The hall was empty and smelled musty ... as though there was some damp somewhere. Mice droppings littered the kitchen benches. The cupboards were bare and most of the furniture gone. Benny attempted to open the windows but they'd been painted so many times they were stuck. He had difficulty opening the kitchen door which had swollen with the winter damp.

Then he noticed the yard was tidy and the plant pots which used to hold Ron's geraniums had all been piled in regular heaps. *Where did the geraniums go? Must have given them away!*

The yard now had a mournful, un-lived in look. Making his way to the shed, he fumbled for the key to the large padlock. With a scraping sound, the door dragged open. Benny was amazed to see it tidier than he'd ever known it when he'd visited before. The floor was clear of boxes, oil drums and junk. The shelves were cleared of paint cans and weed killer. The bundled newspapers had gone too. The thing which did strike Benny's attention - was his old loot bag in the middle of the back shelf. Gingerly he reached for it and lowered it onto the potting bench. It was covered in cobwebs but the zip still worked. He opened the bag and an envelope addressed to him immediately caught his eye. He opened it.

Dear Benny

By the time you get this I'll be gone. I tidied the house and got rid of a lot of the stuff but this bag belongs to you and I want you to have it. I'm sorry you didn't get a propa start in life but you can't teach an old dog new tricks and the only thing I was good at was burglarizing. Don't fret for me mate, but stop sleeping ruff and smoking or yool end up like

me. I reckon the stuff in the bag will see you thru and the cops will have long fourgotten it bye now.

Your loving Uncle, Ron.

Benny sobbed as he placed the letter in his pocket and began glancing through the swag in the bag. It was the stuff he'd taken from the rich Italians all those years ago. He realised what Uncle Ron had done. He'd saved this loot for the rainy day he knew Benny would experience. The pity of it all was that Benny now realized the most precious thing he'd had was gone, and he'd let it happen; he didn't even know Uncle Ron was in hospital; he hadn't been able to say *goodbye*.

Well no more 'burglarizing', no more sleeping 'ruff'. From today I'll start afresh. I might even keep the house. I might even like living in Brunswick. I could grow geraniums in these pots.

Slowly, Benny zipped up the bag, locked the house and made his way up Brunswick Street. He turned left into the police station.



Stalk

Jenny Macaulay



Tall. Thin as a stalk. Angry pustules erupting between struggling whiskers on his seventeen-year-old chin.

Work-experience. Four consecutive Fridays. She can handle it. Her boss suggests he stick to her like glue. Does he mean literally?

Her gift of deodorant, ex-husband's, on his second Friday, goes over his head.

He's almost angry, however, when she shares around his gift of chocolates on his final day.

Sunday morning she wakes as perfume from her garden roses permeates the security screen into her bedroom.

'What's this thorny twig doing stuck to your jumper?' his mother says. 'Buy your girlfriend roses eh?'

Old Jim

Sue Jager



Old Jim was amazed that Peter Sligo, the Funeral Director, took time out to acknowledge him after the funeral service. He had not been fond of his neighbour, Mavis, but was paying his respects because he had nothing better to do. He had few interests outside of horse racing.

Both Jim's mother and wife had died ten years earlier. Sligo's firm handled both funerals. Jim gave a jaunty wave as the hearse departed the church.

Peter Sligo acknowledged the wave with a polite nod, knowing with strong conviction in a small town, Old Jim represented the trifecta of return business.

THE PORTAL

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