

At The Exhibition

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Special mention:

2022 Marysville BookNest Writing Competition

(In 1919 the Exhibition Buildings in Melbourne served as a hospital for victims of the Spanish Flu. 392 patients passed away there)

The small man sat at the kitchen table with a stub of pencil in his hand. Glaring sunlight was filtered by the muslin curtains as he pondered on the the words he had to write. It occurred to him that, if he didn't commit them to paper, this might not be real, might all be a terrible mistake. Life would then return magically to normal. He recorded the date, 1st March 1919, in the neat copperplate the good sisters at St Bridget's had thumped into him, then paused again, his thoughts fluid and meandering.

The kitchen was unnaturally cool. He hadn't the will to relight the wood stove, the engine of the house. This would have vexed his wife who never allowed it to die, no matter the season. Every night she was up in the early hours and he would hear her slippers feet padding down the corridor to satisfy its demands. Then came the familiar thumps as logs landed on the hot ash. Next her vigorous scraping with the poker. Sometimes she talked to it like a living thing, coaxing it back into service. Then she would return to bed and, the ritual over, go straight back to sleep.

Her apron was hanging behind the door and, getting up slowly, he took it down to hold it to his face. Smoke, wood dust, fat, spice. A warm familiarity, a tangible link to her and

also to his childhood. Not his mother - the last he had of her was a faint trace of lily of the valley as she gave him an absentminded kiss at the convent door, fleeing into the sunshine as fast as she decently could. But later a Nun in the kitchen took a liking to him, tut-tutting over his skinny frame. She would give him left over bits of dough and on special occasions he was allowed the exquisite delight of licking the bowl, the closest thing he knew to heaven. Until one day he impulsively put his skinny arms round her and buried his head in her ample middle. Flustered at the familiarity, she pushed him away firmly with a "Behave yourself, you little galoot." He wasn't allowed in the kitchen again.

He sat down again to resume his mournful task. God knows he could do with a drink, but he had to keep his head clear. He had things to take care of, unheralded responsibilities. Later in the blankness of night he would allow himself the consolation of oblivion. He would need it, if he slept alone in their bed, still filled with her presence. Perhaps he would sleep in a chair instead with a bottle handy at his feet.

He found himself picturing the first time he had seen her. A dance in the town hall, sheltering in a knot of girls made bold by their numbers. His mates had gone for the skinny, giggling ones, but straight away he had liked her dark hair and her ample person. She didn't seem much impressed with him at first, but he had a certain cheeky charm in those days and he soon had her smiling.

He forced himself to write her names. The first one, Hermione, that she never used. She was always just Beryl.

Beryl loved dancing. That first night she'd told him all about a ball at the Exhibition Buildings. She'd seen it in the paper. Soft light, beautiful twirling gowns, men dashing in evening dress. The domed hall brimming with flowers and potted greens. "I'd give anything to go to something like that," she said and her eyes closed dreamily at the thought.

Later he found out that she kept a scrap book of all the society balls. Knew all the dances on the programme, the waltzes and polkas and the Pride of Erin. They used to put in what the women were wearing "Lady Muck in black crepe de chine, Miss La-de-dah in heliotrope satin" and so on, and she devoured it all. The book was still kept in the drawer of her dressing table and he knew that sometimes she would look through it again, turning the pages slowly. Lost in her imaginings, swirling around with some rich gent among the flowers and the palms, dizzy and out of this world. The way things had turned out, he understood her fantasies.

But back then he had a decent job in a warehouse and though he couldn't run to High Society he did take her dancing every Saturday. Sometimes he even managed to acquire a bunch of violets or the occasional gardenia. He was a bit shorter than she was which bothered him at first, but they moved well together and people said they made a grand couple on the floor. At first she was very proper, keeping him a respectable distance, but gradually, with some sweet talking and perseverance he was permitted to investigate some of her plump warmness. Even take a few liberties.

He had to meet her parents of course and he knew right away they thought she could do better. So when he got her in the family way he was only too pleased to do the right thing and take her off their hands.

At the wedding she insisted on wearing this blooming great hat with a tall feather in it, towering over him. The picture was on the mantle shelf, a bit brown from the fire. He knew he looked like a little twerp in his cheap suit, but he smiled at the memory of the occasion.

He got up slowly and ventured into the stifling heat of the back yard. Bypassing the lavatory, he urinated under the straggling lemon tree. He had been trying to grow for her ever since they moved in a dozen years ago.

They had rented the house just after the wedding and he was earning enough then to get her a few nice things. She made home-cooked meals for him and life as a married man had seemed pretty good back then. He loved sharing her bed, not just because of the sex, but having spent so much of his life alone, her nearness was a wonderful thing to him. Then young Olive was born and he couldn't believe he'd had a part in creating this perfect little being.

For a while they thought she'd be an only child, but five years later young Stanley made his appearance. A son! He was over the moon. But the next day he turned up late at work still pie-eyed from his celebrations. When the manager challenged him he had said something inappropriate and was shown the door. From that moment his life had started slowly unwinding. He had never stopped hating himself for his stupidity and his capacity to ruin everything that was good.

Bleak reality set in as he tried to find work. He went from a comfortable office to taking anything he could get, any sort of dirty job that was offered. Soon they were just scraping from to week. He found a few drinks after work helped ease the worry, then felt guilty for spending the money and needed a few more. He began to despise himself.

He kicked mournfully at the earth round the lemon tree. There just had to be something wrong with the soil. He'd tried tomatoes but they grew small and scarred. The potatoes turned up like dirty marbles. The only damn thing that grew was the choko vine climbing rampant on the dunny wall which produced crop after spiky crop of pallid green fruit. The insipid flesh reminded him of all the joyless institutional meals he had forced down in his life, but sometimes it filled a hole when times were tight.

He went back past the sleepout and found himself reliving that awful night in the winter of 1915. He couldn't even remember what they were fighting about, probably his drinking, it was usually that. And then Beryl had said that he wasn't man enough to support his family and he'd said, "I'll show you who's man enough" and the rage had sustained him through the cold night outside right up until he marched into the recruitment office in the morning. His enthusiasm began to wane as they questioned him endlessly, poked at him here and prodded him there. Officially recorded on the enlistment form were the meagre details of his life: Born Fitzroy, Victoria, age 30, Height 5 ft 5 1/2 inches, warehouseman, currently unemployed. Distinguishing marks: scar on left knee, tattoo of a rose on the left arm. That was courtesy of a blonde bint named Rosie who'd dumped him cold right after he'd had it done. By the time he had to sign his name the impetus of his anger had vanished, but he scrawled it anyway. He couldn't act like a coward now.

Of course he was the worse possible candidate for a soldier, being an amiable sort of bloke who had no desire to rip the guts out of another human being. And he would be the first to admit he had a bit of a problem with authority. It started when he was fined 5s for jumping ship in Port Said. Well he wasn't Robinson Crusoe there, half the men on board had done the same, keen to have their first sight of foreign parts.

When he'd been over there a little while they sussed him out and gave him a job in the stores, but he still had to turn out if there was a big push. The only way he could survive the horror was to disappear into a bottle. His mates found their consolation in other ways and often got more than they bargained for, but he was turned off by the skinny whores with their mottled skin. Truth be told he was usually too drunk to get it up and too frightened of taking anything home to Beryl.

Then he began going AWOL, just a couple of days here and there. Lost most of his pay. One awful night he found himself in a bomb crater with his mates when a shell hit them full

on. He was blown up in the air like chaff and then dumped back on the undecipherable mess of what remained of his pals. After that he'd scarpered for ten days, found an abandoned cellar filled with cheese and liquid consolation and settled down for the duration. When they found him he was secretly glad because the wine had run out and the cheese and was doing terrible things to his bowels.

He tried to explain the horror of it at the court martial, but he got six months anyway. One day sitting in the relative safety of his cell, they came to tell him he was going home, services no longer required. And under their breath "glad to be shot of you, you useless piece"

And so, early in 1919, he found himself walking down the bluestone pavement to his home. The narrow street was familiar but to his war hardened eyes there was something not quite right. None of the modest timber houses were blasted to pieces. There was glass in all the windows, a scattering of flowers in the small squares of garden. As he approached his home near the railway end of the street, his anxiety rose alarmingly. Stopping outside the wire gate he saw in the front garden a young girl he didn't know. Had he come to the wrong place? Had they moved and not told him? Then he recognised his own daughter, grown out of sight. Tall and plump like her mother, the beginning of little titties pushing out her cotton dress. And then he saw the boy, small and wiry like him, hiding behind his sister's skirts.

An overwhelming desire to run away swept over him, but then his wife had appeared in the doorway, arms akimbo, staring at him non-comittedly. He tried to read her face, the face he hadn't seen since that dreadful night all that time ago. And now here he was standing at the gate like a lost soul, waiting to see if she'd let him in. In the end she'd said sarcastically: "If you keep loitering in the street you'll get arrested."

She was very cool to him at first, complaining how hard it had been surviving, how little support she had been given. But later that night she must have felt sorry for him. And when he was at last allowed to lose himself inside her cushiony warmth he felt he had another chance at life. He determined he would do better, get a good job, look after them all.

But it was tough out there. Everyone coming home and no favours for returned men. Day labouring was all he could get. Beryl had taken a job at the weekend at the market to stretch their money out. It must have been there that she caught it, this awful thing that was running its deadly course through the city. A strong, healthy woman in the bloom of her life, but she had stood no chance against it. He wondered if there was a God how he could let this happen after the hell of the past few years.

Sighing, he went back into house.

There was some sort of strange sickness about on the ship coming home. Mates who like him had come through the war unscathed had fallen victim to it. Even Jonno, a great brick wall of a man, had succumbed, gasping for his last breath just as the ship was coming through the Heads.

When he'd taken the kids to her mother's place she'd given him a withering stare and he knew she was thinking "It should have been you". He didn't take her on, knowing he'd need her help desperately now. To be honest he did wonder why he hadn't come down with it. "Too much blood in your alcohol," Beryl would have said with a sideways smile. Christ, the whole thing just wasn't right. It was all arse about. Why was it that young people were dying, like his Wife, so full

of life and warmth and spirit?

He knew there had been things like it in the past, had learned in school of the carters in London crying out "Bring out your Dead" and the bolt of cloth that carried it up country. There had been plagues like this before and he expected there would be again. But why now? Not after all the loss and grief of the war. Hadn't the world been punished enough?

There was no-one with her at the end. He could only stand inside the entrance of the great building, waiting each day for what seemed an eternity. He'd seen photos in the paper of rows and rows of narrow, white covered beds, laid out in the vast vaulted space. No flowers or ferns now, no evening dress or crepe de chine gowns, just tired-looking nurses and despairing doctors. So many faces limp on the pillow who all meant something to someone. Like him they could only hope against hope.

Trying to shake it from his head, he took up the pencil again. It had to be in the paper tomorrow, it had to be done. He began: Born Richmond 1887, loving wife of Wilfred, dear mother of Olive and Stanley.....daughter of William (dec'd) and Mary, loved sister of Edward, Mavis, (Mrs Brown), Ethel (Mrs O'Brien).....and so on through the list. Mustn't forget anyone. Passed away on 1st March 1919.....at the Exhibition.

He pushed his chair back from the table. He knew it was real now and his shoulders slumped.

The sun had moved away from the back of the house and the afternoon light in the kitchen was dim. He went to get his coat, putting the paper in his pocket. When he closed the front door the house lay still apart from faint whispers of regret, sighing in the shadowy corners.

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