

Global short stories competition

Winners June 08

Where the Kookaburras Laugh

Myra King

There's a different feel to the air in the cemetery when the evening cools and calls. A cloistered breeze touches the stones, wafts across the fenced-in plots of blood-rust steel and bone-coloured cement. Somewhere near, a crow caws its bawdy ballad, the last note a drawn lament. But the kookaburras too, have their song.

A little boy, Danny, walks alone along the rows, stopping in front of one particular gravestone where the inscription has eroded to undecipherable scratches. His head moves from side to side, his lips soundless, mouthing words that cannot be read.

Danny lives nearby with his mam, his gran and his uncle, the brother of his father who died in the Great War. Danny's mam got the telegram the day Danny was born. For her, his father died in childbirth.

Danny stoops and stretches an arm as pale as a robber's promise through the steel pikes, feels the rust rub his skin, leave a mark like ochre. Like war-paint.

His fingers touch the top of an imbedded flower container. There is an earthen ping, then his treasure (a small lead horse, hand-painted and unmounted by harness or rider) becomes as irretrievable as rain.

'Danny, lad, where are you, boy?' His uncle's voice seems not to echo here.

Danny doesn't answer but crouches at the side of the grave. He listens as the sound descends on him with the impending dark.

'There you are. What are you doing?'

'Nothing, Uncle Don.'

'Well get up, lad and dust yourself off. Your mam's had your dinner ready for an hour now. She's fit to burst. Come-a-long, quick.'

His uncle turns around and heads off without waiting.

Danny pulls himself up using the grave-fence for support, rubs rust-powdered hands over his knees and the tops of his shorts. He smiles, strangely satisfied at the result.

He puts his hand in his pocket, feels the carrot nestled there like a fifth finger, and quickens his pace.

The moon is up already, even though the sun has just sat down on the horizon. The cemetery seems to breathe Danny gone, trails behind him so that he is too scared to look back.

He stumbles on the rocky track that leads back to his house. Ghost gum branches spider-web the evening sky, ensnare the light but speed his step. Soon he is at the horse paddock and Major, their carthorse, snickers softly, an almost human sound. Danny hears the horse before he comes into dusk-focus, grey silhouette on grey, the familiar smell of horse sweat and dirt as comforting as a hug.

Soft but bristled lips nuzzle his hand; he opens it, keeping the palm flat, and the carrot is whisked away in a disappearing act. There are sounds of crunching, then the big head comes back, nose tucks under Danny's empty hand and flicks it upwards.

'Hey, Major. There's no more, boy.' Danny laughs as the horse quivers back his lips, white teeth visible in the moonshine, almost a smile.

He climbs up the fence and slips a leg over Major's broad back. Major shakes his head as if in mock amusement and begins to amble back towards the farmhouse, his footfalls cuffing his huge feet in dust haloes.

Sliding from Major's back, Danny stands staring at his home. It looks oddly like the cemetery in this light. The fence of steel and picket demarcates the house from paddock and track. The front door is shut, the black form of

the knocker hangs there like a decaying tooth.

The door opens; he sees his mam, hand shading her eyes as if scanning the sun. She stares at him, sight unseeing.

He comes forward into the thin light streaming about her. Her hand, as fast as a snake, snatches him to her side.

'Where have you been? And look at the state you're in.' Rough fingers streak down his front and the blood-rust is smeared. He notices her hands are wearing it now.

There is a gust of wind, Danny shivers, sees his uncle standing behind his mam with the horse whip held upright, his eyes look tired but his grip is firm. 'I'm sorry my lad, but your mam is right. You can't keep going off when it's getting dark. It worries her. And it pains me to be the one to have to put it right.'

Major neighs for his dinner, the noise follows Danny into the house but the door is shut behind him and the sound is cut mute. We'll both go hungry tonight, he thinks, but at least Major will miss out on the flogging.

Some time later, Danny hears a soft tap on his bedroom door; he rolls over from his stomach and sits up slowly.

The door opens and Gran Sarah, his father's mother, creeps bent to his bed, balanced by a candle in one hand and a plate of sandwiches in the other.

'Hush there now, lad. I couldn't be letting you go without supper. Eat quiet like and slip the plate under the bed when you're finished with it. I'll collect it myself in the morning.'

'Why does me mam hate me so, Gran?'

'Ah, she's always been under a drop that one, never bonnie like your aunt Rosie. And like I've said before, lad, when she got the news of your da, in the midst of her birthing, she tied the blame to you. I don't think she understands it herself but there it is and no denying.'

Danny takes the plate. The gloom has parted slightly and he watches as his gran shuffles on leaden feet from the room. He lies back on the bed but sleep darts from behind his lids. Images and voices of snatched conversations are caught in his mind: Selling up...moving...

Danny has lived here all his life. His gran came from Ireland sixty years ago when she was just a lass and freshly wed. And when Danny's grandpa died, his mam and his da moved in to help his uncle Don run the farm. After the war ended it began receding year by year, fifty acres sold off here, ten there, until now there is just the oasis of the horse paddock left. The working dogs are growing lazy and Major only has the cart to pull, the horse-drawn harvester has gone the way of the Stump-Jump-Plough. Sold to the highest bidder at their farm auction two weeks ago.

Danny's mam ignores him when he comes for breakfast the next morning. She's talking to his uncle Don, her voice as light as a thread.

'So, you did order the green one? The one I saw advertised in the catalogue?'

Uncle Don tousles Danny's hair, last night's beating forgotten with the dawn. 'Just like a woman,' he says. 'To be worrying about an incidental thing like a colour. I know what you want to hear, Danny. Ah, my lad, it truly is a wonderful thing to see. A Buick - a touring car. All six cylinders, four-speed gear box, and rear wheel drive of her. Dozens of horses under her bonnet, makes a mockery of old Major out there.'

He cocks his thumb towards the paddock. Danny is pleased to see someone has fed the horse. Major stands in a circle of hay. Strands of golden raffia cascade from his mouth and reflect the silver in his coat. He snorts the dust and stomps the flies. It seems to Danny the earth tremors beneath those hooves. No car could ever match that.

His mam scoops tea leaves from the Bushells tea-caddy. Danny can see the kangaroo and koala, soft grey embossed. He tries to find the kookaburra but the tin is facing the wrong way. 'Should be a treat to drive on the good roads when we move back to town,' his mam says.

Danny's gran is in one of her talking moods, she sits, perpetually cold despite the weather, in her favourite chair, with a rug over her knees. She only has Danny for an audience. But his ears are as forward as old Major's are when the dogs are howling at the moon.

'I just wish I had my boy back here in the place where he was birthed. Not buried in some far-flung country which I can never visit. I think it would have helped your mam too, Danny. Although I still have my Don. Nothing like my

Adrian though, but I'd never say it to him. Your da loved horses, like you. He had no time for the automobiles.'

Danny sits closer, plucks at a stray thread on the side of the old chair, feels it flake and disintegrate beneath his fingers.

'I have somewhere I go to visit my da.' His voice is low and his gran cups her ear and leans towards him.

'I have somewhere I go,' he says, so loudly that she withdraws as if she's been shot.

'No need to yell, boy. I'm not deaf. What's that? You have someone you know?'

Danny folds his arms around his legs, drawing them close to his chest. He rests his chin in the dip between his knees. 'Tell me again. About my da,' he says.

Later, with her story still sounding in his mind, Danny leaves his sleeping gran and runs to the horse paddock.

Major sees the bridle he's carrying and skitters away like a colt. But then he stops, wheels around, takes a few steps towards Danny and lowers his head. Danny approaches slowly, all soft-voiced words and promised treats. He slips on the bridle and fastens the strap. With thin strong hands he grabs a hunk of mane at the horse's wither and as deftly as a jockey, vaults onto his back.

'GO.'

He screams it like a battle cry. Major accelerates, his large bulk a catapult, but Danny is ready. He leans forward along the horse's neck, his bare heels batter Major's sides like tiny fists. He can feel his own heart and the strong pulse of living force beneath him. All around, those of the Twelfth Light Horse Regiment are galloping in a mad headlong dash, some to oblivion, some to live to die another day. The horses by the hands of the ones they trusted. Can't let the Turks have them.

He whispers in Major's ear, it flickers back, listening. 'We can do it this time, boy.'

Danny sees the fence approaching, sees the top wire, a tightrope of tiny razors stringing across it.

'To the wells of Beersheba,' he yells. The fence is in front of them, larger now by its closeness.

'Over!'

The one word like a spur. He digs in his heels, loosens the reins and lifts with the leap. For one suspended moment both are flying.

'We've done it boy! We've jumped the trenches. We've saved the troops.'

Danny lets the horse stretch out under him, feels the smoothness of the gallop, watches over Major's shoulder for pitfalls in the unravelling terrain. Moves his hands, steers him safe. Horse and rider saving each other. His breath gasps and grasps his chest. He smells the acidity of fear and death. He hears the battle, the shots, the screams, the thuds of fallen men and horses. Knows his father is one amongst them. Danny lets out his breath, a long sigh that seems like it will never end.

Soon he reins Major to slow, loosens his grip once more as the graveyard comes into focus. It is different in the daylight. He only goes there in the dark. In the light it would be too hard to pretend. He thinks of his father, of the gravestone with the make-believe words, thinks of the little lead horse, of town, wonders if the kookaburras will laugh there.

Joint second place (with *The Willow Tree* by Elaine Desmond)
Dead scorched birds
Helen Forbes

Forked lightning is shooting from the end of the child's arm. There is no hand, just jagged gold, crackling and jumping, balls of sparks bouncing off the ring of pink fur that trims her sleeve. Nothing but the lightning moves. Not her arm. Not her face. Not even her eyes.

Someone speaks. Her mother. She has shining chestnut hair and sparkling white teeth. Lightning in both hands, she swirls her arms, making golden streaks in the night, dazzling circles and great swooping trails. A name, spelled out in sparkling gold. Amy.

"Look!"

Amy doesn't look. Her eyes are still fixed on her own fire, her arm still rigid.

At the end of the garden, where the shed used to sit in a jungle of nettles, three coloured wheels are spinning on the newly painted fence. Faster and faster, showers of coloured sparks dancing in frenzied spirals. In Amy's hand, the lightning is fading. Frowning, she watches it die, then she drops the burned-out sparkler and runs.

"Wait, darling! Not too close."

Amy stops at the bush. A gloved hand emerges from her sleeve, each finger a different colour, and grasps a branch. The scarf has slipped from her little oval mouth. She holds her breath, but tendrils escape through the gap in her front teeth, float from her and evaporate into the freezing night.

On the fence, the Catherine Wheels splutter and die.

"This one, Dad?"

A boy. He is older than Amy and he has lifted a rocket from the metal box. He hands it to his father, then he carefully replaces the lid on the box. Together, they set the rocket in a small bucket of sand.

"Stand back, Mark, son."

The night's stars dim and disappear as the sky explodes. Beyond the fence, the solid bulk of the hill is lit up in showers of cascading colours. Again and again, the hill is lit up, the sky sprinkled with stars of gold and purple and red. The fireworks whistle and crack and bang. The noises bounce off the hill, slam against the windows, echo across the moor.

In the house next door, heavy feet thump up the stairs and the watching boy drops down on his bed. The door is shoved open and he shrinks from his mother's whisky breath.

"Like bloody Beirut out there!" she hisses. "Close those curtains and get to sleep."

But . . .

The word stops before it reaches his throat. He swallows it and tugs at the curtains. They don't meet. Sometimes he watches the moon through the gap. Sometimes it is a pale sliver of gold, sometimes just a shadow behind bruised clouds. Sometimes he stays awake until dawn.

From the neighbours' garden, a high pitched squeal, then a barrage of bangs that shake the whole island. The boy can get up without making the bed squeak. It hurts his chest to hold his breath so tight, but he can do it. The moon is a huge orange ball and around it white rockets of light are flashing and skittering randomly. They whistle, then they die, falling from the sky like the feathers of dead, scorched birds.

It is silent now, the orange moon shining down on the garden next door, on the giant heap of rotting wood that was once Old Alasdair's shed. The father is crouching, fire in his hand. He touches it to the base of the heap.

"It's not going to work," Mark says. "It's not, Dad."

The man laughs, pokes some more among the wood and the fire catches.

In the room, the boy has to let his breath out. It steams up the window and he rubs at it quickly with his sleeve. By the time the window clears the fire has taken hold. Mark is gazing into the flames. His father behind him, he drapes his arms over his son's shoulders, pulling him close against him and smiling down on him as if he is the

most precious thing in the whole world.

The watching boy shivers. There is a memory in him, in his shoulders. A memory of being held close like that, warm breath on his head and his neck. A man . . . It is gone, evaporating into the night until it was never there.

They are all gathered at the fire now. The burning wood is roaring and crackling. The mother is crouching beside Amy, her arm holding her tight. Amy's little mouth curves into a huge smile and then it's distorted by a yawn. She sinks against her mother.

The boy turns from them. He pulls the cover up around his ears. Its thinness cannot shut out the chattering voices, carried on the still night air.

At last he hears the father tell them it is time to go in. He's on his knees again, peeping through the gap. Their faces, as they approach their back door, have turned blue in the moonlight. Amy looks up. She stops. He hesitates, swallows, and then he waves. She stares back, then she runs into the house.

The father takes his time tidying the garden, lifting the spent fireworks, dousing the bonfire until not a spark is left, locking the shed and checking the back gate. A window creaks open. A lisping, baby voice: "Night night, Daddy." "Night night, sweetheart."

He grins up at her, blows her a kiss. The window creaks shut.

The boy's face is in the pillow, tears soaking into the lumpy stuffing, a fist in his mouth to keep the sobs in. He wishes it was Beirut. He wishes a missile would land on their council house, with its damp chill and the wind always battering the grey walls. On his mother and her hidden half-bottles and gaunt wasters of boyfriends. On the village and the fat headmaster with his prize ram and his bad breath. On their new neighbours with their perfect garden, their perfect children. Amy, blown to fluffy pink smithereens, strewn across the moor; Mark and his shining mountain bike, jet-propelled into outer space and annihilated, like one of their "superb" fireworks. The whole island, smashed to bits and scattered across the sea.

But it's not Beirut. It is nowhere; just a tiny scrap of land crouching on the shores of the Atlantic. And now the sky is dark, the moon and stars shamed into hiding. The hill squats, black and unyielding.

He watches through the gap until the first fragments of daylight start to trickle from the sky.

THE WILLOW TREE

Elaine Desmond

I remember feeling shocked when she had arrived back that winter. Shocked .. and desperately sad. Fifteen years ago, I had sent my only daughter into the world – buoyant, full of hopes and dreams for her future. And now, the world had returned her – angry, bitter and badly damaged.

She had stood on our doorstep that frosty December evening, nose red from the cold, eyes small and tender from crying. She had looked lost .. thin and brittle. Was this what divorce did to a person, I wondered? Suddenly, I felt glad that Miriam and I had worked through our problems for the past forty years.

“Welcome home, darling,” Miriam had said, visibly dismayed at our daughter’s appearance. She had reached out uncertain arms for a hug.

But Jessie had brushed past, tears in her eyes.

“This is not my home,” she had said, in a thin, shaky voice. “I’ve left my home behind.”

And, with that, she had rushed blindly upstairs to her childhood room. Miriam and I had exchanged a quick look of dismay as she had rushed to tackle the daunting task of soothing our only child.

Feeling useless and in shock, I had grabbed my coat and headed to my haven – the garden. The night was still and silent. One could almost hear the ice crackling in the air. A rich aroma of burning firewood filtered from nearby chimneys. In the bitterly cold night, the garden seemed naked, spectral almost.

A pretty wooden arch separated the main garden from what I always termed ‘Jessie’s patch.’ Behind this arch was sacred ground – my daughter’s territory. It lay barren now, save for a delicate film of diamante ice sparkling in the moonlight. I remembered clearly the happy times I had spent with Jessie here when she was a child .. times when everything had been far less complicated.

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Aware of her burgeoning interest in watching things grow, I had bequeathed Jessie this small plot when she was just eight years old. She had been excited in that open, unabashed way unique to children.

“It’s the best present ever, Daddy,” she had said, hugging my legs.

I had asked her to draw up a plan of how she would lay out the space. Expecting a childish drawing of pretty pink flowers and green grass, I had been rather surprised to be presented instead with a vaguely professional effort. She had explained it to me proudly:

“It’s going to be a vegetable patch, Dad,” she had said, watching my face, aware that I was impressed and beaming because of it. “These lines here are the rows of vegetables. And this is a little bench where we can watch to make sure the birds don’t eat everything.”

“And what’s this?” I had asked, pointing to a scribbled mass which stood in almost comical contrast to the meticulousness of the vegetable plot.

“That’s a willow tree, Dad,” she had said, somewhat impatiently. “You know, like the ones in the park ... with the white flowers.”

And I could still remember that blustery day in April when we had set to work after our trip to the garden centre. Jessie had been wearing her favourite fashion accessory – her pink Wellingtons – as well as a warm sweater and dungarees. Her cheeks had glowed with exertion and happiness.

We had carefully planted our rows of vegetable seeds using lengths of string to keep the lines straight. Afterwards, we had secured the empty packets with elastic on lollipop sticks at the end of each row, as a reminder of the crop to come. Planting the delicate Kilmarnock Willow had been the final task – Jessie had known exactly where she had wanted it.

“Here, Daddy, in this corner by the bench – in the shelter so the wind can’t hurt it.”

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And that was where the willow had stood ever since – for twenty five years now. I regarded the thin trunk and elegantly drooping branches, now bare and exposed. Maybe this was where Jessie’s interest in agriculture had

started, I thought – right here, in this small plot at the back of my garden.

Because, with Jessie, her love of nature had always been intrinsic to her very being. It was as though she had been born realising a connection to the soil and an innate understanding of all that grew from it. Later, she had studied Land Management and her subsequent career had taken her all over Africa.

And it had been in Africa that she had met Glen, the man she was to marry. He had been an Australian backpacker. Neither Miriam nor I had ever met him but Jessie, with her usual spontaneity, had fallen hopelessly in love. A few months later, she and Glen had married in an exotic ceremony in Bali. It had been much too far for Miriam and I to travel but Jessie had assured us that they would have a second wedding for us nearer to home.

That, of course, was never to be. Because, while Jessie had been busy setting up a new life in Australia, it appeared Glen had been occupied too. From what I could gather, he had cheated on Jessie throughout most of their brief married life, most recently with a mutual friend. Their divorce, like their two year marriage, had been unhesitatingly swift.

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Christmas came and went but Jessie hardly registered an interest in any of it. She would bundle herself up in sweaters and coats, obviously feeling the cold after the Australian summer, and sit quietly in her room. Or she would spend hours on long, solitary walks returning exhausted, face drawn and frozen.

Miriam would try to encourage her to speak about how she felt, but Jessie would snap back angrily or, worse still, stamp upstairs in tears. I would watch these thwarted attempts at comfort and withdraw to my garden. My daughter was sinking further into her own private well of torture .. and I had no idea of how to help. At least, with my plants, I could still feel useful.

It was early spring when Miriam suggested that we undertake a shopping trip to the city. These trips were something I endured occasionally for the sake of my marriage, but only under strict duress. Jessie had adamantly refused to accompany us and I found myself reluctant to leave her. There was something about the depth of her despair which made me feel deeply uneasy. It was as though her desolation was dangerously close to overpowering her. Eventually, though, I had been persuaded and Miriam and I had left together.

By the time we arrived back, lugging shopping bags, dusk was beginning to settle. The house was silent and in darkness. Jessie would not usually be out walking this late. I found my heart had stopped beating - frozen, like time itself. Oh Lord no, please no, I thought, my breath catching in my throat. This was what I had been dreading all along. I ran upstairs as quickly as I could - my old legs frustratingly unresponsive to such urgency.

"Jessie," I called, hearing the panic in my own voice.

I checked the bathroom, her bedroom - dreading the sight of her vacant, lifeless body on the floor, a bottle of pills .. a knife even, at her side - blood maybe ... Oh God, please no. But .. nothing. Sick with relief, I walked to my room and sat heavily on the bed, trying to catch my breath and calm my swirling thoughts.

It was as I eventually stood up to draw the curtains that I saw her. My room overlooked the garden and, from this height, I could see over the arch. She was sitting alone on the bench, the padding of her clothing causing her to look plump and round. I called quickly downstairs, exhaling in relief:

"Miriam, it's OK – she's in the garden."

"Will you go see if she's alright, Jim?" she called back. "I'll make some tea."

I inhaled sharply. I was on the verge of retorting that it would be best if she herself went when I was silenced by a moment of glacial-like clarity. I had been a coward .. of the vilest kind. I had given up on the one person who I had silently vowed to cherish from the moment I had first watched her tiny fist curl tightly around my finger. And it hadn't even been fear of Jessie completely breaking down that had kept me away. No. It had been my own fear of not being strong enough to handle it when what appeared to be the inevitable finally happened.

"I'm on my way," I called down to my wife.

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Outside, the hum of twilight throbbled in the silence. It was brighter than it had looked from indoors. I approached

slowly through the arch which was now covered in tiny rose buds.

"Hi, Jess," I said, almost expecting her to leave.

"Hi, Dad," she replied, looking up briefly. Her voice was soft and sad.

"Mind if I join you?" She didn't answer, but moved along the bench - a positive sign, I thought. I sat.

Silence. I looked around desperately for inspiration.

"Have you seen how well your willow is doing?" I asked suddenly, nodding at the drooping branches, now heavy with buds. "Do you remember when we planted it together .. and you with those pink wellies of yours?"

She nodded and made a vain attempt to return my smile but then turned her head away quickly. I realised she was trying very hard not to cry.

More silence. This time it was Jessie who broke it.

"I thought he loved me, Dad, you see," she said quietly. "I really believed that."

I saw the tears forming little reservoirs at the bottom of her eyes, but not yet overflowing. She bit her lip and tipped her head back in a frustrated attempt to banish them.

"And I don't know how to begin again." She sighed shakily. "I'm just .. so .. tired."

She picked furiously at a piece of chipped paint on the old bench, a tear falling like a lonely raindrop onto the shrivelled, decaying wood. This was what I had been avoiding, I thought, as I felt my own heart break too. How could I begin to tell this lovely, talented woman how much more there was ahead? How much there was to hold on for? Again, the unsuspecting willow tree offered salvation.

"You know, Jess," I said, sitting back slowly. "I've watched this willow of yours for over twenty five years now. As each winter turned harsher, I've worried about how something so delicate would possibly survive. And yet, there it goes again .. every spring ... bursting alive with more determination than ever."

Jessie wiped her face and absently regarded the fresh green buds.

Her smooth little hand rested on the bench and I reached across shyly to cover it with my rough, old, weather-beaten one. I wondered, as I did so, when it was that I had stopped being able to protect this child of mine.

"The thing is, Jess .." I began, ".. life isn't always easy. In fact, sometimes it hurts us terribly." I lifted her hand slowly and gently placed it back on the bench. "But it's also life that pulls us through when we put our faith in it. Because it always does, Jess, don't you see? Spring always follows winter."

My daughter regarded me quietly. Then, slowly, she removed her hand from beneath mine and gave my fingers a tight squeeze. Her grip was surprisingly strong.

And then .. maybe it was a trick of the fading light or of my old eyes ... but something strange happened. I watched as Jessie's pinched, haggard features slowly transformed into those of a young girl - with plump, glowing cheeks and a wide, carefree smile. There was a flash of pink as little legs swung happily beneath the bench.

And it was then that I knew .. with a certainty that shocked me. My Jessie would not be defeated by this. The winter had been harsh and long but she was my little girl .. and my little girl was fighting back.