

Global short stories competition

February 2011 Winner

Gayle Beveridge

Bloody Mongrel

Henry stopped his blue 1956 FJ Holden Ute, Franny, at the only service station in town that still had manual pumps. He heaved his large frame off the seat, slammed Franny's heavy door shut behind him and stumbled, his right shoulder thumping painfully against the pump. He was on his knees and the only thing that his eyes registered was the bitumen. He could hear his dog, Bloody Mongrel, barking frantically but wasn't sure where the sound was coming from. His head cleared with a tugging on his arm, and he looked up to see the servo attendant, Richard at his side, followed closely by Richard's grandfather, Arthur.

'Henry, you old Bastard, what the hell have ya done?' blurted Arthur, this being the only contribution he could offer to his best friend's plight, as he was 83 and quite frail.

'Time you got this bloody concrete fixed young man,' Henry let Richard haul him back to his feet, 'a bloke could fair break his neck tripping on those cracks.' Richard was about to tell him there were no cracks in the concrete when a nudge from Arthur stopped the words dead in his throat, before the sound of them had time to form.

'Struth Mate, will ya shut up that bloody, old, deformed dog of yours.' Arthur gave Bloody Mongrel a stare. He had never liked the beast. The dog was on the driver's seat jumping against the door, doing his darndest to keep Henry in sight. Bloody Mongrel was a dog cruelly shunned by nature. His back legs had only grown to a half the size of his front, dooming him to walk in a permanent backward stoop, which reminded Henry of Holden's lion and stone emblem mounted front and centre on the bonnet of his beloved Franny. Bloody Mongrel's upper lip shared the same affliction as his back legs, having not fully grown and was recessed high above his gum, so there was no time in his life, even in sleep, that he did not appear to be snarling.

'Fill 'er up will ya son,' Henry waved a hand at Richard as he and Arthur headed inside. The dog embarked on a cacophony of barking as Richard walked up to Franny. Richard had been expecting the onslaught but was startled nonetheless. 'Bloody Mongrel' he muttered under his breath and snarled back at the animal.

'Brisk this morning.' Henry glanced at his wrist and noticed his skin was grazed and bleeding. He used to be tougher than that but lately he felt as though his body was wrapped in rice paper. Arthur pretended not to notice. Henry picked up the Herald Sun and stared at the date; August 1st, 2006. Arthur grinned, 'Happy birthday, ya stupid old Bastard.' It was his 80th. 'What're ya doing out this early anyway?'

'It's 50 years today since I bought Franny, and popped the question to Dorothy.' Henry gazed wistfully at Franny as though he were glimpsing a wonder of the world for the first time. Arthur figured it was Dorothy and not the car that Henry's mind's eye was looking at. 'Poor girl must of thought you were never gunna ask. How long's she been gone now?' It had been nearly ten years. 'Too long', the words crawled out of Henry's lips as a whisper, too horrible to be said aloud. Richard came in from filling Franny. 'I'll take these flowers', Henry grabbed a bunch from a bucket on the floor, and suddenly dizzy steadied himself against the counter, 'I'm going up to One Tree Hill'. He reached for his wallet but Arthur shook his head. 'Your money's no good here today.'

'What's at One Tree Hill?' Richard asked his grandfather.

'Dorothy accepted his proposal up there.'

Henry threw himself onto the driver's seat, pulled out the choke and turned the engine over. 'Come on Franny, old girl,' he coaxed and turned the keys again. Franny chugged slowly to life. Bloody Mongrel gave a sharp, throaty yelp of approval and Henry bestowed a couple of matey thumps on his back, with motley hands gnarled by arthritis. Richard and Arthur watched them drive down the road until they were out of site, the old man and his dog in their old ute. Quite the threesome.

Bloody Mongrel let out a shrill, anxious bark and nipped Henry on the arm. Henry didn't remember starting the turn into Dead Man's Corner. At first, the understanding that the ute was sliding in the gravel came to him as it would to a spectator. 'Steer into the slide,' shrieked from a dark corner of his mind and in that moment he was alert again. He grunted with the effort as he turned Franny's wheel, righted her and brought her back onto the bitumen. He was breathing heavily, his heart pounding so loudly he wished he could escape the noise.

They drove on to One Tree Hill. Henry and Bloody Mongrel sat silently, staring directly ahead with that respect that best mates have for each other, acknowledging fear at the same time as it dismissing it. Despite the cold they sat up there for a long time, the man and his dog in their ute; looking back down on the town. Henry could remember 1956 like it was yesterday. His parents had both died when he was twenty. He had inherited the farm and let the work absorb him for almost a decade, but 1956 was a big year. The 250,000th Holden had been produced, an FJ of course, the Olympics were being held in Melbourne, television was introduced into Australia and Elvis Presley recorded Heartbreak Hotel. Henry had decided it would be his big year too. He ordered his FJ and Arthur drove him to Melbourne in the early hours of his 30th birthday to pick it up and to make another very important purchase; a diamond ring. Once back in town he only went to the farm long enough to pick a bunch of flowers, before driving to Dorothy's and inviting her to enjoy a ride to One Tree Hill in his new car. Dorothy had come and when they had sat up there, looking back down on the town and he had asked her to marry him, she had thrown her arms around him, shouting yes more times than he could count. 'Getting too cold up here,' Henry gave Bloody Mongrel a rough scratch on the back of the neck, 'better get going before Franny decides not to start up again'.

Henry's daughter Wendy saw them coming down the road long before they got back to the farm. She smiled with fondness in their direction. Quite the threesome, she thought, the man and his dog in their old ute. Wendy and her husband, Alan had moved up from Melbourne six years ago to run the place. Alan was city born and bred and although Henry grumbled loudly about his farming ineptitude, Wendy knew how grateful her father really was, that the property would stay in the family. Wendy and Alan were the fourth generation to work it and all who had come before them, barring Henry, were buried in the little cemetery up in the back paddock. She put the kettle on and took a batch of scones from the oven as Franny passed through the house gates and pulled up just outside the kitchen window. As a special treat for Henry's birthday she was going to let Bloody Mongrel into the kitchen.

Wendy was frightened of Bloody Mongrel. She thought him a cunning trickster; not to be trusted. When he was laying down with his back legs folded under him and his bad lip resting against his paw, he could look positively cute. He exuded a deceptive persona that seduced the ladies and when they reached over to pat him, he would lunge and bark with such display of ferocity, that even the most ladylike of those creatures could be heard to scream, 'Bloody Mongrel' over her shoulder as she ran off in fear. So it had been when Wendy first came upon him. That dog had been 'Bloody Mongrel' for so long now that no-one could remember what name Henry had originally given him.

Bloody Mongrel started up a round of barking as Wendy began buttering the hot scones. 'Dad, shut that dog up before he scares the chooks out of laying again.' She buttered two more scones and told herself not to be annoyed with her father on his birthday, but her resolve only lasted for as long as it took Bloody Mongrel to start jumping and scratching at the door. 'Dad, if you don't do something about that bloody dog,' the end of that sentence drowned in the bile of fear as she jerked open the door and saw her father lying on the ground.

Wendy had coaxed Bloody Mongrel back into Franny so that the ambulance men could do their work. As they left for the hospital she saw him staring out the back window and for the first time, felt compassion for him. Alan followed the ambulance into town. Richard and Arthur closed up the service station and met them there. It had been a massive stroke. They sat each side of Henry's bed and kept vigil. The nurses ignored them when visiting hours ended and so there they remained neither talking nor catching each other's eye, until just before midnight when there was no longer any reason to stay. Richard drove Franny up to the little cemetery in the back paddock for Henry's funeral, with Bloody Mongrel tethered securely in the back. Wendy had insisted on the dog and the ute being there. They left the tail gate open so Bloody Mongrel could watch the proceedings and though none of them would have dared to voice it aloud, each and every one was sure that he understood what was afoot.

They ordered a headstone from a place in Melbourne that was said to do excellent work and waited nearly a year for it to be ready. On the anniversary of Henry's death, Richard and Arthur closed up the service station and came to the farm for a headstone ceremony. Richard brought his tow truck as Franny didn't start any more and Wendy insisted on the ute and the dog being there. Bloody Mongrel was curled up on a soft bed in the back of the ute. There was a pile of straw near the tail gate that Wendy replaced with a fresh batch every day. 'He won't come out. He hasn't left the ute since the funeral.' Wendy stepped over and scratched the back of the dog's neck. He was quiet, for all his spunk was gone.

Alan and Richard laid the headstone while the others watched on. Hearing a thump, Wendy turned to see that Bloody Mongrel had fallen from the ute. His deformed back legs no longer any good to him, he dragged himself to the grave and lay there staring at the stone as though he could read it. 'Alan can you get Bloody Mongrel and we'll head home.' Wendy was afraid she would lose her composure if they stayed any longer. Alan bent to pick up the dog, hesitated for a moment, then put his hand near

Bloody Mongrel's snout. 'He is home,' he said.

They buried Bloody Mongrel that day, in a small grave next to Henry's, and over the coming months they built a shed around Franny right there at the little cemetery in the back paddock. They ordered another headstone from that place in Melbourne. It was inscribed, 'Here they lie, quite the threesome, the man, his dog and their old ute'.

Highly commended Deana Mundell Dreamtaker

He lived in an abandoned warehouse filled with trash and ruined paintings. Several broken panes in the skylight let the rain and wind in, making vain my quest for shelter within. But they served a purpose. I became aware of this shortly after I saw him, crouched in a far corner, a sickly Gandhi surrounded by filth. He looked at me as though I'd entered his home uninvited and judging by the overflowing trolley of his belongings, I had done just that. I walked up to him to introduce myself and was hit by the putrid stench of a man whose clothes, are protection and privy both.

I immediately recoiled, missing his name in the process. Worried that I had offended him, I tried to hide my revulsion under the act of shaking the rain off my coat.

Buried in a web of wrinkles, looking out from under a pile of matted hair and bushy eyebrows, was a pair of defeated, yet wary eyes. He reminded me of a dog, turned feral by a thousand beatings but still holding out for some act of kindness. In one hand he held a pen, in the other a torn sheet of paper that had been crumpled and smoothed out many times already. I was struck by the smooth skin of his hands. But for the filth caking his fingernails, they looked practically dainty, at odds with his ravaged, pockmarked arms and the rest of his deflated, decrepit appearance.

At my entrance he had stopped drawing or writing and because I wanted to reassure him, I sat down opposite him – not too close – and asked if I could see.

“Ain't drawn nothing,” he grunted after a long pause.

After an even longer pause, with a half gesture towards the side of his head, he continued, “Dreamtaker taked – took – it all.”

“Dreamtaker?”

He appraised me with his piercing gaze and seemed to find me worthy. “Long time ago. When I'm young. Famous.”

Something like a glimmer of expectation flashed in his eyes and I realised I was supposed to make a connection. Embarrassed, I tried to seem appropriately impressed but the light vanished and, it seemed, so did his story. We sat in silence for a long while, and each passing second robbed me of my courage to restart a conversation. The floor was icy through my clothes and even at the opposite end of the warehouse, the odd raindrop still landed wetly on my face. I wondered how the old man hadn't died a thousand times in his weather-beaten clothes.

All around us, on ripped canvas, torn newspaper and more, were what I took to be the signs of his artist's block. Jagged whirls, splotches, half-started sketches had been drawn in pencil and ink, but also with leftovers and other fluids I didn't dare identify. There were piles upon piles of the same corrupted energy that couldn't quite manifest. I shuddered.

In the corner of my eye I spotted movement and saw that he was slowly tracing lines on his napkin. Brow furrowed, he continued in silence for about thirty seconds then stopped again. He had the nib of the pen to the paper and was pushing against it. The skin around his knuckles was white with his struggle but the pen refused to be budged. He peered up at me, his thick eyebrows forming a steeple on his forehead, and I looked away, feeling self-conscious. I noticed that the rain had abated and I got up.

“Came for me after a show. Tall man, shiny watch. Told me he wanted to buy all of my paintings. Asked to see what I'm working on.”

He stared intently at me, as if to say: Your move. Unsure of the protocol I sat down again and waited. Almost immediately he continued his story, his voice breathy with intent. Once more, the next instalment was brief.

“Took him to my studio. Shown him all I got. He liked it. Asked me for more paintings.”

He was the worst storyteller I'd ever come across yet his little bursts had created a thread in my mind, and I could see everything that had happened to him. The young and beautiful artist, riding triumphant on his rising star, the large and imposing, equally beautiful, equally charismatic dreamtaker, promising to take the artist to the next level. I leaned forward, anxious for this new pause to end while he worked his pen. His gravelly voice started up again.

“More and more and always more. So much. Then no more.”

I waited.

“He stopped asking you?”

“I stopped. I can't paint anymore. Just a little at first. I can't finish. Then I can't start.”

His pen scratched the paper, taking his frustration and anger out on the torn page. Meanwhile I was mesmerised, confused, disappointed.

“I try but it's not coming. Then I see it, what's happening – the dreamtaker is stealing my thoughts.”

“Your thoughts?”

“From my mind. He's taking all my thoughts from my mind. I see his paintings and they're mine. He takes them before I can paint them. I tell him to stop. I ask, I beg, I hide from him but he always finds me and he takes my thoughts before I can paint.”

You sad man, I thought. You sad, crazy fool. I started to get up from the ground again but he spoke again, nearly yelling this time. His eyes were riveted to mine, his left hand furiously working the pen in it. He looked positively broken by his lunacy.

“I lose my thoughts and my career. I lose everything. I'm here now. No more drawing. Not for years.”

I collected myself and straightened up. “That sounds really unfortunate, I'm sorry. I hope you get your inspiration back, Sir. Have a nice evening.”

I hadn't made it ten feet when I heard his desperate, strangled cry, and his quick, dragging steps. I turned around to see him right behind me. His arms were outstretched, reaching out towards me, his hands like claws. Overwhelmed by my terror, any thought of self-defence flew out the window. The last thing I saw before the darkness were his eyes, pathetic and determined at once. A dog gnawing on the last bone in the world.

I awoke in a small, cramped space. A tiny slit in the side provided the only semblance of light. Through it I could see the old man. He stood jabbing his pen at a canvas before him, seeing nothing but its dirty surface. I shouted at him to let me out and he made his way over to me. His acidic smell filled the tiny space with my nausea. He peered through the slit.

“I take your thoughts from your mind now.”

Then I saw him by the old man's side – the Dreamtaker. He wasn't beautiful, there was no seduction in the way he looked at me. He was dark and radiated more darkness. Locked in my cramped space I knew he would drain me until I had nothing left to give, then kill me. I also knew he would feel nothing about it.

The tabloids gobbled the old man up. No wonder – the phoenix rising from its ashes is a favourite tale of theirs. And what a phoenix: he's famous again, his name on everyone's lips, his appearance matches his delicate hands for the most part. His arms he keeps carefully hidden so no one will know. He lives in a penthouse apartment with a view now. Every day I see the sun rise and set over a million rooftops as I rot, powerless, inside my cage.

In the beginning I fought. Every time he took me to the Dreamtaker, I rebelled, kicking and screaming my refusal. In vain. The Dreamtaker was much too strong, and only got stronger with each subsequent visit. The old man would entertain guests, all the illustrious celebrities who now fawn over him and snap up his paintings, while I was trapped in the other room, in the Dreamtaker's embrace. I would scream but no one heard me. When they were gone he would set up his easel before me, taking more thoughts from my mind.

I don't fight anymore. I can feel the last of my thoughts draining away, and with them, the Dreamtaker's menace has faded. He's almost become kind. No matter; soon he'll have nothing to take from me. Soon I'll be free from it all.