

Global short stories competition

September 2011 Winner
The Blanket
Rhonda Aaron

Inner-City Sydney

Ya won't believe it but another Wingamully kid was shot dead today. By the cops. So Winga's gone crazy, again. Me and auntie Charity was watchin' tellie when mum came runnin' in flappin' this scungy old blanket.

'The young policeman thought Zac was reachin' for a gun,' mum said.

'Was he?' asked me, sorta shocked.

'No, Iluka. Just foolin' around. God, his poor family.' Mum suddenly burst into tears. 'Zac was only sixteen.'

'Bloody pigs,' screamed auntie, draggin' her hands through her fuzzy black hair. 'Faith, if they did that to my boy I'd tear them limb from limb.'

I tell ya, no one doubts that. Everyone in Winga knows how Charity loses the plot big time. She's my mum's younger sister and her and her pair of meathead sons lobbed in at Easter. Uninvited, unwanted and unwashed. And now my feral cousins are major pains in my big girlie butt. And they smell gross.

I've been prayin' for them to leave but so far nuthin. I even gave my pocket money to the poor little brown kids in Africa who don't have anythin' to eat or read. Didn't do it just to score points with the Almighty, just did it 'cause I'm a good person. Wish I had more to send, then I'd buy me a paint-set too. Still, I keep remindin' myself of what mum says; how money shouldn't be all that important 'cause it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a bloke rollin' in moola to squeeze through the pearly gates. Or somethin' like that. Hey maybe I could sell a paintin' and make a heap of that thing that shouldn't-be-a-big-deal and... Sorry, my brain's got walk-about-itis.

Mum also reckons how Charity and her yo-yos are guests so "we should all play nice, young lady." Well, I read her Women's Weekly and guests are meant to 'ventually leave. They even talked 'bout fish bein' like visitors; after three days they start to stinkaroo. And it's not like we invited them to have a "short hospitable stay" and was "looking forward to getting to know them better." Plus we never put out

teeny-tiny soaps and fresh towels like recommended in WW. So I s'pose our rels are more like the other meanin' of host and guest – major parasites. Suckin' on our blood then complainin' it ain't to their taste. Yep, a bunch of spongers; inhalin' our Tim-Tams, slurpin' on our generosity and invadin' our home.

Anyways, mum let out a huge sigh and flopped down on the sofa. For some reason she was still holdin' that old blanket, and started rubbin' it 'gainst her face. Totally weird, hey.

I tried talkin' calm, normal like. 'Who chewed a hole in that old blanket?'

'Reckon it's from the bullet,' said mum. 'The police dropped it after they dragged Zac into the paddy-wagon, so I took it. I'll give it to his mum. Last week she told me he'd been sleepin' rough to avoid his bookie so she gave him a blanket to keep warm. Poor stupid kid.'

So Zac was avoidin' his bookie, hey. Some Winga kids bet their best stuff on the footie and the gee-gees. Even their virginity. I tell ya, my mum would totally kill me dead if I did that. Not like some other mums. This girl in my year-seven got these major expensive guinea-pigs and her mother reckons it never hurt her any... Sorry, gone walk-about again.

'Zac just turned sixteen,' snarled auntie, in case we missed the age thingie.

I'm twelve and a quarter, so if it happened to me I'd only have three and a bit years left. And I ain't hardly done nuthin. Not even pashed a boy. So now I feel a bit confused. Zac was a right bully and there was times I wished he'd get blowed up by a humongous bomb or trampled by an angry camel or...

Then mum started huggin' me major tight, the way I usta hug my teddy, and said, 'I'll find out when the funeral is.'

Funeral? That'll lure the emos out of their dark caves. And the drama-queens better nick some waterproof mascara. I su'pose the only kid who'll be honest sad is Pongo. Zac and him was rug-rat mates. They usta do everythin' together; light-fingered shoppin', tag-races with the pigs until they were snortin' porkers, beatin' up other kids. One of their faves was sittin' on the school roof and gobbin' on suits. Triple points for scorin' a wanker in a waistcoat. Hey, I wonder if ghosties can gob?

'What will they do to the shooter?' asked me.

'Oh the piggies will have an inquiry and let him off,' growled auntie lightin' a ciggie. She took a puff and did that loud exhale routine. 'And ya can guarantee if he'd been a black kid they'd promote the bastard.'

Mum sniffled, 'But at the end of his days he'll havta face his maker.'

'Jesus-friggin'-Christ woman, how can ya still believe in that old claptrap?' said Charity, who fell out with the Almighty a whiles back. Reckon they didn't see eye-to-eye over her unchristian temper. Anyhoo I stayed dead quiet but mum didn't.

'Sissy, God has given us a good home and...'

'Yeah right. The Bella-Vista Estate. Reckon the developers had the sacastrophies when they named this dump,' snarled auntie, pacin' up and down like my granny's caged ferret. Then she flopped down on the sofa. 'Faithy, I don't know why ya defendin' this life. Look at us. Chewed up and spat out. And where do we end up? Stuck in a divey 'burb where the haves never bother settin' a pedicured foot. Not unless it's to screw us over with some shonky deal. Ya better face it; your God don't care. He's too busy workin' for the filthy rich.'

Friggin' phew, hey.

Now mum was fingerin' that old blanket like it was a set of rosary beads.

'Charity, my God, your God loves us all. He loves...'

'Who? The stinkin' deros? The snivellin' kiddie-fiddlers? The drugged-up prossies? Get real. And that Vatican mob only love them who can fork over the big bucks.'

'But Charity the Pope says collectin' wealth is a venial sin.'

'Oh really. So when will they be handin' over the Vatican loot? Maybe we can put our names down for one of those marble statues. Yeah, I'll take an Aphrodite to go. We'll display her in the kitchen and charge admission. Until she gets nicked.'

'Sissy, I'll pray for your soul.'

'I tell ya Faith, if I ever start thinkin' 'bout returnin' to the church all I'll havta do is talk to you. You're such a bleedin' gullible wimp.'

'Maybe I am but I do know our church ain't just for the rich gubbos.' Mum picked up the Worship News. 'See this new bishop, he's a Roula Islander. Just like us.'

'Token. Prob'ly more coconut than your kids,' huffed auntie.

Better explain 'bout the coconut biz. We're brown on the outside, white inside. 'Cause we're spoilt with whitie ways. As if hers ain't. Don't see my cousins eatin' no witchetty grubs. Or spearin' fish under the Harbour Bridge. Hey, maybe they could weave 'emselves a new hut to live in. As if. But I still got the brains God gave me so I still kept my smart mouth double-zipped.

But mum couldn't let it go. 'Perhaps it's a good thing to have a touch of the coconut. And my kids are doin' fine at school and are gonna get good jobs.'

'Yeah sure. What jobs? Cleanin' toilets? Just like their dear mama,' smirked auntie.

After hearin' that my tongue pract'ly came flyin' outta my mouth. 'I'm gonna be a journalist. Just you wait and see.'

'Well la-di-dah. And who's gonna pay for your education?' asked auntie. 'Anyway, who ever heard of a Roula journo makin' it in Sydney.'

'Ya don't know nuthin. There's a Roula lady at the Herald.' I know I shouldn't've but I poked my tongue out. Sometimes the little rebel's got a mind of its own.

'You bloody cheeky brat,' hollered auntie reachin' out to smack my face. So I took off.

Ya prob'ly noticed how the sisters ain't much alike. Charity looks a bit like mum but dresses dif'rent. Mostly trackie-daks, while mum enjoys embarrassin' us in her floral muumuus. Chances are ya don't wanta know this, but I'll treat ya like grown-ups and tell ya anyways, on real hot days she don't wear no undies. How's that for gross.

The other dif'rence is their faces. Mum's is soft and crinkly from smilin', while Charity's is sunk. Like the kindness got sucked right outov it. Mum says her little sister ain't had much luck in life, but when I think 'bout ours it ain't exactly lookin' like we won the lottery. But auntie's got a way 'bout her when it comes to grouchin'.

"Faithy, ain't your muumuu a pretty colour. Reminds me of the shirt I wore that day my hubbie beat me up in front of the kids."

See, she has a way of makin' her family feel guilty for stuff that ain't really their fault. Like those mothers who bang on and on 'bout their three-thousand hours in labour, then flash a pained smile when they pat their fat-headed kids. Anyhoo I reckon Charity's lucky to have her boys, 'cause they're the only males in her life who haven't bolted.

Later that arvo I took our family photo-album, along with a secret somethin', and climbed up on the mossy wall at the back of our place. I tucked myself away from pryin' eyes, just behind the broken lattice held together by the devilish ivy. Then I watched a carpet of caterpillars move like they was one big critter, tryin' to scare off

the hungry birds.

I opened the album and found my fave; my mum when she was twenty, lookin' deadly pretty with frangipani in her long dark hair. Plus it's a good photo 'cause it makes her legs look mega slim. She's sorta standin' side-on, so I've tried copyin' her in front of the mirror loads of times and I reckon if ya ignore my humongous thighs I look mostly like her. Why can't we be that person we sometimes get a squiz of? Be like our reflection when the light's just right. Why can't I be even a little bit perfect? Then mum could be really proud of me.

Anyways I heard a loud crash down the laneway, near the overflowin' bins. A ho-lo, homeless loser to you, was rummagin' through the empty bottles searchin' for dreggies. Then I spotted some rats, and not all had tails. My cousins sneaked up on the old man and stealed his ciggies, so next the ho-lo started chasin' the dufus thieves.

So of course the cuzzies did the usual Winga cry, "Help! A dirty pedie's after us" and took off.

Kids do that quite a bit 'round here. But usually they pick on the drunks when they're sleepin' one off, and roll 'em. As if the homeless ain't havin' a shitty enough life. Don't seem fair, do it. And somehow it got me thinkin' 'bout reincarnation. Reckon if dead Zac was gonna come back maybe he'd havta star in his sequel as a ho-lo. At least that'd be some sorta justice.

Then I remembered the secret somethin' in my pocket, a bit of Zac's old blanket that I cut off. I don't know why I did it but now I held it tight, closed my eyes and let it spin me into a daydream. There I was squelched inside this huge ugly cocoon, tryin' real hard to fight my way out before 'mergin' as a beautiful butterfly.

Then I'd uncurl my new wings and flittity-flit high into the sky, and head off for somewhere real far away. And never return to Winga. Not friggin' ever.

Highly commended
Favourites
Julie Chilver

It's important to choose the right earrings to go with my new dress. Diamonds mean he'll come, rubies mean he won't. I hold to the light the gold hoop from which a tear shaped diamond clings. They were given to me by Ralph before he walked out smelling of some girl's cheap scent.

Nevertheless they are the right choice for tonight. I can see a story in the facets, my new blue dress fragmented and the morning sun is framed in diamond shapes. A similar effect can be had by taking Valium and half a bottle gin. The door behind me opens and in walks Evie. She walks across my bedroom, she's wearing jeans, not dressed for my special dinner yet. She sits down uninvited.

"Mum?"

"What?" I am sharp, she is not my favourite.

"I don't want you to be hurt again."

The word 'again' echoes between us like loose talk in an alleyway. I ignore her, outlining my lips in a light brown shade, trying to decide on a colour to fill them in with. Pink is too wishy-washy, too expectant. Bright red too trashy. I pick up a golden cylinder from my make-up bag and twist to reveal a dark red, like dried blood. A colour to make them sit up, a colour which adds gravitas bringing a serious note to the occasion. I stand and twirl.

"Do you like my new dress, Evie?"

"It's lovely, Mum. Is it silk?"

She thinks it too grand for a birthday dinner at home. "You have asked him?"

"Yes, I have."

Her face appears to collapse on itself, weighed down by doubt and fear. So like

Evie. As a child she was always the cautious one, the one trying not hurt us. I think she lost herself in the care of others. I expected to call her Eve when she grew up but she never matured. I kept back that name. I kept it along with my approval. It's hard for a woman with a daughter. They overshadow or stay in the shade. Evie wears a lot of grey.

Simon was the one who sat beside me as a child, helped pick out the strands of pearls to match my dress. He'd work the clasp as his tiny breaths warmed my neck.

"What about this one, Mummy?" Cultured pearls in white or oyster, black ones alternated with balls of silver. When he was six he made me a necklace from cut-up coloured straws threaded on a thin piece of elastic. I wore it until the elastic frayed.

"It's not natural, Joy." Ralph would bleat. "This link between the two of you." It made me think of lines of precious pearls, chasing around into eternity. "It won't do him any favours."

Evie hesitated in corners, not daring to enter rooms. She once saved up for a bottle of almond essence for my birthday because she liked the picture on the front. A woman with red hair, like mine, smiling out from her small bottle prison. Evie placed the bottle in a tartan box lined with crumpled tissue paper and tied it with a bow. I put it on the shelf in the kitchen. I never used it. Evie looked every day to see if I'd opened it, to see me put drops into cakes or biscuits until it drove me mad. I hated baking, I hated the smell of the essence. I once read that cyanide smelt the same. Evie would have that hopeful look which pushed her lips apart, it made her look gormless. I emptied the bottle down the drain. There's no point in harbouring false hopes. Girls like Evie, colourless and pleading, for them life would not be kind. My mother had raised me not to be hopeful, she said I would never be disappointed. I believed her then but now I think disappointment sits with those who expect it and it

stays.

“I’ll ring Simon again, Mum. He’s driving down from Brisbane, he said he might be able to drop in.”

I’d forgotten she was there. My daughter leaves the room and I don’t say a word. I feel a heaviness gathering on my chest, a fizzy feeling rising to my face, reaching my eyes. It must be for Simon, these tears, I haven’t seen him for ages. He’s been busy. It can’t be Evie.

“Couldn’t you give her something? A morsel dropped from the table while you’re giving it all to Simon. You’re turning him into a self-centered prick.” Ralph, the voice of reason? He couldn’t hack it in the end.

An unwelcome image of Evie as a teenager, pulling her sleeves down, trying to hide from me. I clasped her wrists roughly, pull up her jumper sleeves up to her upper arms. Neat cuts crossed the bluish insides of her elbows, a ladder leading nowhere.

I’ve sat here for most of the day, sponging foundation on my face, filling the cracks, running my hand through my red curls, only red now with the aid of a bottle. The grey roots appear faster and faster, as time roars on. The sun is setting. Lights shine from neighbouring houses, white squares on black cloth. It’s nearly seven, time to go down.

I haven’t helped Evie with dinner, I seldom do. I remember my own mother saying, “Boys do so much more for their mums.” I felt slighted but I understand now. It’s not about practical things, it’s emotional.

I squeeze my feet into heels. Is it odd to wear tights and shoes in your own house? I shuffle onto the landing and hear Evie and her husband, Brendan, in my kitchen. Their children are running up and down the hallway, no doubt pressing dirty fingers

on my walls.

Brendan's voice rises above the mayhem, over the crooning of my Funny Valentine by Frank Sinatra, my favourite, playing from the living room. "How can a woman called Joy cause so much pain?" The sound of laughter, first his, then hers. Evie stops laughing "It doesn't hurt anymore." She open her arms for her husband.

The scene is distant from me, as if held in a snow dome. I reach the bottom step before they realise I'm there. On my birthday you'd think someone would pay attention to me.

Evie's head jerks up from its nesting place. "Mum, I didn't hear you come down." She looks down at my shoes, falters before looking up again. Eyes steady in her head, they're green. Like mine, clear and pale. "Fancy a drink? Gin and tonic?"

I nod and glance around at the table set with a white tablecloth, cutlery laid in order, three wine glasses and two tumblers for the kid's lemonade. Three gold candles in pewter candle sticks, throwing light and shadow across the damask.

"Mum, I'm so sorry. Simon had to fly off to Melbourne for a meeting." Evie frowns, not meeting my eyes. She looks stressed, pink cheeks, she scratches her hand.

Evie hands me a glass and I watch the lemon slice fall slowly to the bottom. "You could have let me speak to him. He is my son."

Those green eyes, like mine and yet they're not. There's no fear in them, I see pity. Ice cubes hit the edge of my glass, Evie takes it from me.

"Mum, why don't you sit down. We'll join you. I just have to chop some herbs. There you go."

I catch her looking at Brendan with pleading eyes.

"I'll join you, Mum." He sits down opposite me. I see him realise too late that we

are positioned eye-to-eye in confrontation. “Girls! Sit down now. Draw a picture for Granny.”

Alice peeks her head around the door jamb, ten years old, or is it eleven? She looks like her mother, hair straight as a plum line. She looks at me, defiant. “I don’t know what to draw.”

“Ask your sister.” Brendan turns away from her. “Kids. Always running around, so much energy, eh Mum?”

“I don’t remember it like that. Simon and Evie were quiet.” It occurs to me that they were probably terrified. I couldn’t stand noise. Simon kept me onside and Evie played in the shadows. How lonely it was. In the days when mothers would chuck their kids out first thing and not expect them back until dinner time. No wonder a lot of us drank and took sedatives. Afternoon quiz shows looked shinier through the glassy frame of a Quaalude. Shepherd’s pie had been made by mid-morning, sprinkled with cheese and popped in the oven to heat up in late afternoon. Perfect family gathered round the table when Dad got home at six. And when Dad stopped coming home, Evie took beef burgers from the freezer compartment. She vacuumed around me, out of my mind, sprawled out in my chair, holding a glass of gin.

“Mum, are you alright? I’ll get you some crackers. You’ve hardly eaten a thing.”

Evie put down a bowl of crackers and bowl of something sludgy next to it. It tastes surprisingly good. She’s right, I haven’t eaten all day. It didn’t seem that long but I knew it was as I tracked the height of the sun. It’s so easy to slip under a blanket of the past and it’s not one of those soft wool blankets, oh no, it scratches my skin until its red and raised into welts. As I live in my memories the real world goes on. I’m waiting for someone.

“Here you are, Granny.” Mary, the younger one appears at my elbow holding a

sheet of paper. I take it, a drawing of five figures, our names scribbled underneath; Mum, Dad, Alice, Mary and Granny. You can tell it's me because of the curly strokes of a red crayon. She's drawn a grin from ear to ear. I hug her and she smiles at me beneath long lashes. "Alice hasn't finished hers yet."

Evie looks at me, she's still wearing her jeans but with a silky short sleeved top. I can't help it, I look down at her arms. In the light of the candles I can see traces of silvery lines. Evie catches my eyes and grabs one of my hands. "Happy Birthday, Mum."

Brendan brings through the beef for carving and the girls come through, bumping and jumping, faces shining as only young ones do. "I want to sit next to Granny." "No, it's my turn."

"Girls, you can sit either side of her. Just move your glasses without spilling your drinks."

My heart hangs in my chest as if I've worked out what it's for. I was a lousy mother but I'm a damn fine Granny.