

**David Myers**

## **HUCKLEBERRY'S HEARSE**

It was a real family affair when we buried Huckleberry. The kids had never seen anyone die before and they were fully occupied having what the hack psychiatrists call a traumatic experience. Probably the first since the divorce. You can't expect to build character without good traumatic foundations and I have always done my best to contribute to my children's characters.

"He was just sick on my leg twice" sobbed Susie into the telephone "and then he put his head down and didn't move anymore." I sympathised from the heart: it reminded me of my last hangover.

By the time I made the scene, it was 11.30 p.m. and Huckleberry was lying in state in the wheelbarrow. One floppy ear curled over the front of the tray and his rear end which had grown with old age to the proportions of a hippopotamus slumped at peace in the other end.

"He's eighty four in doggy years" said Susie and started sobbing again.

I had to be careful. It was my old house and I had paid for the mortgage all those years, but on the other hand there was still a court order against me threatening me with gaol if I set foot on the property again. I have an excitable nature and I was never able to resist lighting firecrackers in my ex-wife's letter box and throwing dead ducks in her swimming pool during the long tedious months of the divorce. It was because I was losing the divorce badly and in those days before I began with meditation I couldn't abide losing anything. I wondered if the judge would accept as reasonable and proper that I had returned to bury a faithful old family retainer.

Herself waddled out from behind the Mercedes that she bought to celebrate her divorce victory. She was dragging her new Greek boyfriend behind her. He only came up to her shoulders but he was very nuggetty, probably from swinging a pick and shovel up at the opal mines in Coober Pedy.

“This is Nick Octopoloulos” she leered at me kneading his biceps. Nick obviously didn’t expect to get his hand shook, so I pumped it vigorously and said “Owyergoin Nick orrite?” I thought my bluff Strine personality was the best one for this multi-purpose social occasion. My English personality thought it was a bit “off” really to go shaking a hand that had clearly spent lots of time playing with my ex-wife’s twat when it wasn’t digging up opals.

“Jason’s locked himself in the bathroom with the computer” said Susie. Susie has a knack of making productive contributions just when social intercourse has staggered into one of its many deadends.

I put on my fatherly personality for Jason and called through the frosted glass bathroom window. “Jason old chap, I know you’re grieving but it’s not safe to play with electric machinery in the bathroom. I saw a foreign movie the other day where this de facto wife killed her man by throwing her electric hair dryer at him in the bath.”

“I wasn’t playing” said Jason with a certain glum dignity. “I was overcoming the defences of a pinball software programme so I could copy it onto my command module floppy disc.”

I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. I still use a portable Remington manual that gets stuck every time I press the semi-colon key. It has helped me to make my sentences shorter. But I’ve modernised to the extent that I’ve bought a dual colour ribbon so I can do my italics in red ink now. At thirteen years of age Jason already came up to my eyebrows and was built like a pampered bull. The last time I’d seen him, he’d given me a bear hug that lifted me straight off the ground and bruised two of my ribs so badly I couldn’t eat steak for a week. It is very difficult to assert fatherly authority to an adolescent gorilla who can talk computer jargon but I did my best.

“Son” I said “we can’t just leave Huckleberry in the wheelbarrow.”

“Jason got second yesterday in Manly-Warringah shot put” said Susie just to prove that her timing isn’t always perfect.

“Alan, are you going to stay in the bathroom all night?” called Herself “Or are we going to get this show on the road?”

I thought it was a bit vulgar to call Huckleberry's funeral a roadshow, but after the dogfights in the divorce court seven years ago, I knew better than to start squabbling about semantics in the middle of the night on a property where I was an illegal immigrant.

"Coming darling" I said "I mean, I beg your pardon Nick, coming Alison." Being divorced does complicate conversations.

Herself had a shovel in one hand and a pick in the other. Nick stood behind her trying to peep over her left shoulder. "Can I help?" he said.

"Quiet!" she said "It's this pipsqueak here that bought the damn dog and now he can bloody well bury it."

"Yes dear" I said.

"If we put him in the vege garden, he'd be good fertilizer" suggested Nick who was obviously determined to be more than just a pretty face.

Jason ignored everyone and pushed Huckleberry's hearse down the concrete path and past the rose garden to a flowering almond tree. The moon vanished behind some black clouds and it became difficult to tell one body from the other. Who could say for sure in the darkness where the corpus delicti ended and Alison began. Revenge tempted my imagination. I phantasised about burying Herself instead of Huckleberry by error and thus regaining legal control of my matrimonial mansion and my two kids. They couldn't put me in gaol for an honest mistake in the dark, could they? Maybe Nick would help. We could let him live on in the garage afterwards as a reward.

Nick dug stolidly while Herself went to fetch an extension cord and a lamp. Jason told me how he learnt to plug his class computer into the headmaster's report card files and make the necessary adjustments for the records. Susie wandered off to make a cross out of tomato-bush stakes and pick her mother's best roses for Huckleberry's farewell.

It was then that Nick hit the water pipe with the pick. He said why didn't someone tell him there were water pipes at the bottom of the

bloody garden and who in hell designed the damn place anyway. It was good to hear him swear. He sounded like he might be able to hold his own against Alison after all.

The moon came out from behind the clouds and illuminated a graceful spout of water that rose like a classical fountain and then fell, as though ordained by some higher principle, into Huckleberry's hearse. Slowly the wheelbarrow began to fill and Huckleberry began to rise.

"You incompetent bunch of donkey-dicks!" Herself had arrived back on the scene armed with a lamp and an outsize larynx. "God-damn Poms and Dagoes and halfbreeds, there isn't a dinkey-di among the lot of yer."

This was too much for Nick's simple Mediterranean pride. "Don't you compare me with no Pom" he yelled. And throwing down his pick, he stomped off into the dark. I heard his truck starting up and guessed he was off back to Coober Pedy where there weren't any women to distract him from the finer things in life like opals and beer. Herself fumed off to her office that she'd made out of my study: she'd be up to 2 a.m. sending off final notices of unpaid accounts.

The funeral was pretty tranquil after that. Susie turned the water off at the main and Jason and I dug a good comfortable hole for the dog I'd brought him home twelve long years ago. We laid a red rose on his heart and then we covered him over with dirt. Afterwards Jason tied Susie's cross together and we all put her bouquet of roses and dahlias on top of the grave. I was grateful to old Huckleberry. It was only because he'd pegged off that I'd got to have a moment of peace with my two kids. I guess I'd better go and buy them another puppy dog tomorrow. Life goes on.