

## ROGER VICKERY

### ONE OF THOSE SPECIAL NIGHTS IN THE CELLS

I was sharing a cigarette by the El Alamein fountain with Lizard and some of the local kids, when the juvenile squad jumped us. It was a well planned operation. The yobbos in footy jumpers who were shouting insults at the bouncer outside "The Pink Pussycat" suddenly turned and began nicking us for disorderly behaviour.

My arresting officer gave me a knowing smile, man-to-man like, and asked me was I looking for a little police brutality? I shook my head, probably a shade too quickly for my street image, but the other kids, including an innocent passer-by, were too preoccupied wriggling and screaming to take note of my discreet behaviour.

The paddy waggon ran us direct to Darlinghurst Station.

"Occupation . . . ?," enquired the desk sergeant, sounding all the syllables, obviously the life of the night shift.

"Social worker!" I heard myself sounding like a well-drilled soldier.

He looked up, apparently grateful for some light relief.

"If any, I was about to say . . . social worker, eh? Not, I hope," he raised his voice, "one of those who help out the needy in Forbes Street."

The nearest juvenile squaddies grinned. Forbes Street was a block away from the Station. On any weekend night there are fifteen to twenty guys propped up against the old stone walls, bottoms to the traffic, displaying their wares to the night riders who cruise slowly past. It would be interesting to note down the number plates which pull on the hand brake in Forbes Street after 9 p.m.

"No, Sergeant. Marcoota Youth Refuge."

He wrote that down but didn't record a charge. It looked like one of those special nights in the cells.

"Well, Marcoota, hop onto your scooter," boomed the sergeant in best T.V. salesman style. "Have *we* got a refuge for *youuu!*"

The innocent bystander, a Greek-looking boy, was next. He was explaining how he'd just been walking past at the fountain and how he'd driven in from Westmead and didn't know any of these kids. I think he was making it worse for himself. Sure enough, as I was led through I could hear the sergeant saying something about — "Donta you worry Tony . . . ."

The kids in front of me shuffled meekly into the cells. But it was a different story once the key was turned in the lock. They leapt at the bars

like monkeys greeting a lunchtime crowd. They yelled defiance and egged one another on to heights of exuberant obscenity. Mum justice had done her worst. Now they were home. Now they were free to rage.

Lizard and the innocent bystander came past a few minutes later with the desk sergeant in the lead. As he drew alongside the kids they ceased their catcalls, only returning to the larrikinism when he was safely past and then they made it clear that they were sledging each other, not the law. I could see Lizard was panting to join in but from the apprehensive way in which he was glancing sideways at the sergeant he obviously had some prior run-in with the man. Something told me that would-be comedian had a very dangerous streak.

I pulled Fast Eddie off his perch in the front of our cell and jammed my head against the bars. "What are you on about?" he snapped.

"I'm trying to give Lizard the evil eye. He's got to stay cool. He mustn't meddle with this cop."

But when had Lizard, in the month I'd known him, ever controlled the need to impress what Youth and Community Services called his peer group? Lizard was worst at pinball, vomited on mandrax, and regularly got conned out of his fee for cracking it. Even his tattoos were a laughing stock. So he always tried to top the gang, ready to do anything which would lift him off the ground floor of the pecking order. I believed I could help Lizard. The Cross was as tough on him as the homes he'd run away from.

Fast Eddie reckoned my evil eye reminded him of an ape with the runs. It was certainly having no effect on Lizard. The opportunity to cover himself in glory was unfolding and he was as eager as a kelpie at a sheep dog trial.

The sergeant was leaning on the bottom cell, having a joke on the near to blubbing innocent bystander. In the second it took the sergeant to yawn and scratch the front of his heavy blue trousers Lizard's desperate greed for glory swamped his sense of survival.

"Geez . . . fancy some of that," he jeered.

"O.K. Larrabina," sighed the sergeant, unlocking. "Se we want to take a little walkie to the toilet, do we?"

Lizard paled.

His mates hung on their bars like gymnasts, whistling and whooping to show they had no fear of the big, bad wolf.

"Sergeant," I heard myself whisper, "Seargeant!" I shouted it the second time.

He ambled over, one arm slung over Lizard's slight shoulders, as if he were a proud father smiling for the camera on sports day.

“You wanted me Marcoota?”

I went for what Youth and Community Services call non-threatening, descriptive communication.

“That youth is 14 years old, malnourished and in need of psychiatric help, not a beating.”

“Beating? Physical violence? Mr Larrabina has requested his toilet privileges in a manner that was plain to everyone in these cells. Perhaps, Marcoota, you also want to heed the call of nature?”

That provoked hysteria. The inmates began jeering at me. They knew which side a walk to the toilet was coming from. Jimmo, a kid I’d arranged a good behaviour bond for only a week ago, started the group singing that number — “They say this guy, this guy’s in love with you.”

“No way I want to go,” I said it very quietly. “I’ll take being arrested for no reason . . . .”

For the first time that night a serious tone came into the sergeant’s voice. “This group of lairs were standing around the fountain abusing passing police vehicles.

“O.K. O.K. I didn’t know that,” I lied through my teeth.

I was glad of the chance to back down on something. My big gun, if you could call it that, was about to clear holster.

“But I don’t believe Lizard deserves a kicking. None of them do.”

Denials echoed across the cells.

“Beat us! Beat us,” called Jimmo. “S.M. forever!”

“Remember, we’ve been detained without being charged.”

The sergeant grinned at me. Absentmindedly, he fondled Lizard’s hair only to grimace when he found his hand was covered in gel. He took hold of Lizard’s ear and hauled him over to the wall phone.

“Get Tom to come down here . . . What? . . . Toilet job . . . .”

With the receiver slung onto his shoulder he swung around and explained himself like a teacher patronising a slow learner.

“Senior Constable Dowler has what one magistrate called a regrettable zest for physical confrontation. You must appreciate, Marcoota, that magistrates are only given to criticising constabulary in very extreme cases. Zest, a good word zest. But just between you and me, Tom is a bit of a psycho . . . .”

“Yeah, well you’d know!?” yelled Lizard.

The sergeant rapped him on the head with the receiver.

“Stick it up your arse and say g’day to yuh piles!” Lizard continued as an armlock fell across his upper lip.

Tom scared the hell out of me. He was the Mister 5 by 5 type on 8 by 8 dimensions.

They frogmarched us down the hallway. The toilet smelt of disinfectant. I had a flashback to a tonsillitis operation I went through when I was 7 years old. There was that same sense that parents, doctor, the whole system had forgotten that I existed.

The sergeant reached under a washbasin and pulled out a telephone directory.

“Look what we’ve got here, Marcoota. Strange thing to keep in a men’s convenience. Inductive reasoning. A good term that I’m sure you’d be familiar with. Apply some inductive reasoning for us. What use could we have for several hundred pages of directory?”

Lizard sneered.

“So you won’t leave any marks! You’re too gutless to leave bruises. Punch through the yellow pages why don’t yuh? Yeller pages’d be right for pigs!”

“Don’t provoke these bastards, Lizard,” I yelled.

Tom backhanded me. As I went down I didn’t miss the opportunity to put some beef into the movement. I slumped against the wall, pretending to be dazed. The sergeant began slow-clapping.

“Thespian talents, Marcoota, are not your long suit. I’ve seen more accomplished dives in the Police Boys Club under-tens. Get up you little bludger!”

Tom yanked me to my feet.

“Thanks, mate. Have you ever done a tour at the Bathurst bike races? No? We had a hell of a problem there in the early seventies. The 31 squad was billeted in a day before the bikies arrived and we went out to get organised . . . Off with your shirt, son. You too Marcoota!

You know what? We found that the PMG had fouled up the change-over of the new telephone books and we were under supplied. A day later we had 30 or so beauties in the cells and there was a queue, a bloody queue, waiting to use the few books we had. Grab him Tom!”

Lizard had twisted free and was away. Tom threw himself across the floor bringing the boy down with a brutal tackle which sent Lizard’s head cracking against the basin. Blood trickled down his face. He was going to be badly bruised and I doubted he could escape delayed concussion.

“You bloody drongo! I said grab him.”

He began examining Lizard’s head.

“Looks like it’s only a scalp wound. Let’s have a look at your eyes. Hold still you stupid little bastard, I just want to see if you’re O.K.”

“Oh sure, you’re really worried about him now,” I shouted. “A minute ago you were lining him up against the wall to kidney punch him through a telephone book. You were happy to pulp his kidneys, they’re probably half-shot anyway from the junk he’s put through his system, but you worry about a wound that the magistrate can see.”

Tom shot a look at the sergeant who tightened his fat lips and nodded.

“Yeah, you finish the job on him. I’ll stick disinfectant on the kid’s head. And Tom, don’t hold back, he’s one of those troublemakers who have to be stopped early.”

Adrenalin swept through me. I felt as if my chest was connected to a giant fly wheel. I grabbed at what I could.

“Wait a minute! You mean to say you’re leaving me with a man you said was a psycho, a man who may never be promoted because of a proven bashing charge?”

The sergeant was caught off guard.

“I said no such thing, you lying mongrel!”

Tom didn’t believe him.

“Hey, Serg, have you been bad-mouthing your own in front of scum like this?”

“Don’t you use that tone to me Senior Constable. Where’s your experience, man? He’s a scared little liar.”

I sure was. That’s why I was thinking so quickly.

“O.K. Tom, how could I have known that you’ve been reprimanded for violent behaviour unless *he* told me?”

As Tom began chewing that over, the sergeant suddenly changed tack.

“You take the kid upstairs. I’ll deal with Mr Big Mouth.”

“You booked us in but you didn’t prefer charges. What am I in here for, protective custody? I won’t be using one of those over worked court solicitors. I’ll get a top brief who’ll pin Lizard’s scalp and the illegal paper work to your service record. You made a big mistake by tossing us in here without making it official. You touch me and you’ll pay for it.”

His eyes were bulging. I’d gone too far with my threats. I could almost hear him thinking that it would be worth any risk to do me over.

“Look Serg,” I back-peddled. “All I’m trying to do is avoid a flogging, I mean it’s a very human reaction. Lizard and I were cheeky. O.K. we’ve had a scare. I mean, I’m not lookin’ for trouble.”

“I am,” muttered the groggy Lizard. “I’m not suckin’ up to no cop. I’m no gutless bloody street worker.”

I stared at him. His naked chest was covered in cheap tattoos and scars from fights and years of pathetic diet and all he knew was how to inflict more damage on himself. Thanks a lot, Lizard, I thought, spit on the only one who’s out to help you.

But it was precisely that interjection which seemed to calm the sergeant. He shoved us down the corridor, back to the cells and silently, angrily, pushed us inside.

“I’m on duty all night, Marcoota. You just better pray that my ulcer doesn’t play up before the next shift.”

The gods must have ensured the alka seltzer supply at the front desk. Lizard and I passed a sleepless but visit-free night.

Around 6 a.m. they brought us breakfast, a hamburger from the Taylor Square cafe. Lizard scoffed mine down. He looked dreadful but put on a defiant front as the sergeant led us through the back exit and pushed us, one by one, into the laneway.

The serg was aiming me a kick at my pants when Lizard, who was in front of me, turned and yelled. “You pigs think you’re so tough. I’ve had sour apples that made me crooker than what you did!”

I was nonplussed. I stood stock still and looked back at the sergeant. He was grinning at Lizard’s sprinting back. His big, genuine smile disappeared the second my face came into his view.

“The little bastard’s worth ten of us,” he sighed.

## MARY ANNE BAARTZ

### HE GREW WINGS

This was always Manfred’s best time; a clear night, the stars reflected in little ripples and eddies on the water. It was now, for just ten minutes or so, that Manfred would forget the aches in his groin and the burning in his gut. It was just as well for the bottle was empty, drained, and his possie under the Story Bridge might have been damp, and would be soon enough. But for the moment he was lying on velvet and nothing hurt. Manfred closed his eyes and let the crisp air of the satin morning soothe his lungs and let the tiny splashes and dips of the water cello their way through his crippled brain.