

Greg Young

TO COOK A GOOSE; or, that's how the cookie crumbles

The dimly lit mess room reflected the sombre mood within. We'd been to a funeral—that of “The Spaceman.” All that remained of him now was our memories and an epitaph in an already overcrowded cemetery at Wittenoom. As with most of us it had been his first trip there. Now it was his home and he was part of its history. We'd worked with him for six months, and in that time he'd seldom spoken. We hardly knew him—though we knew him better than most. Had the world been cloned with Spacemen, conversations would have been long silences—but it was us who were silent now.

I looked about the room and absorbed the ambience. Our mess was no mess, it was health-regulation clean. Two transportable “World Wide” huts joined in the middle formed the sizeable eating area for fifty hungry blokes. No women. The servery, three paces past the entry, was the domain of Casey the cook, where we ran the gauntlet of his snide remarks and wisecracks. Today was no exception.

“Hey fella, yer look like yer need an injection.”

Casey took a breath. His long deliberate pause for effect.

“—a meat injection.”

His remarks typified his “camp” humour. The kitchen staff laughed—as they had twenty times before to the same tired joke.

No adverse reaction emitted from the fresh-faced new bloke, though a new arrival, chainman with the surveyors. They'd clued him up, for sure. “Don't let Casey upset yer, and whatever yer do, don't upset him—not intentionally anyway.” No one dared. He had too much power. The cook was king, and in his castle he reigned supreme. What he said went, and who he said was sent—usually on the bread plane next morning—without breakfast. If he refused to feed you, you didn't eat—simple as that.

The room filled quickly. Only those downing shouts in the canteen were yet to eat. A queue stood by the urn in a microcosm of humidity as overboiled water precipitated from the ceiling onto white cups and saucers, and into open jars of

coffee and tea bags. Outside, the day's dry heat, a severe contrast to the evening temperatures, had already dropped several degrees, as was typical at this time of year. Casey, in search of aggravation, strode by the urn, stopped, observed, and turned towards those gathered around.

"Righto. What the hell's goin on here? Who's flicking water into the coffee? Who's the smart arse?"

He shoved Cowboy out of the way. A mistake. He'd ruffled the wrong bloke on the wrong day.

"You, yer goose. Yer friggin urn's on full throttle. It's friggin rainin yer grumpy old bastard." He pointed to the ceiling. "Piss off an annoy some other poor bastard."

There were cheers throughout the room as Cowboy shaped to punctuate his anger with a left hook. Mum grabbed his arm and halted its delivery.

"That's it. I won't be serving you again. I refuse. Might as well pack your bags. Smart arse."

Casey had not counted on the united protest that followed. Like a Cory Aquino rally, we all gathered around him. Our day had renewed purpose. Mum stood toe to toe with Casey.

"Cowboy stays. If he goes you go—same way as we sorted out The Spaceman."

There had been no foul play with the Spaceman's demise, but Mum left Casey guessing.

"Only joshin—only joshin. Prob'ly workin too hard. It's me artistic temperament, see. I curse it sometimes."

And so we had a win with Casey, for the first time ever. He lost face in front of the lot of us. It seemed not such a bad day after all.

Casey remained quiet, thanks to us—as our mood became buoyant, thanks to him. With a carton of VB from the canteen we adjourned to the confinement of Cowboy and Tom the Pom's room. An overworked air-conditioner vibrated above their door. Walls stood bare but for traces of blu-tack where January's Playboy centrefold once stood. Like Spaceman, she'd moved on. The room smelt of yesterday's cigarettes and Cowboy's socks. Tom the Pom positioned himself lengthways on his bed, his head propped up by his elbow. I joined

Cowboy seated on his bed while Mum sat on the floor by the carton. We each opened a can and toasted our departed cobbler.

"To Spaceman."

"To Spaceman."

"Hey, what yer reckon about Casey, hey? You've got him worried now Mum. Reckon he thinks we did him in."

"Yeah. Quick thinkin, hey—and here's me thinkin the Spaceman's good fer nothin. The bastard's our patron saint now, hey. Helped us get the drop on that standover merchant, that's fer sure. But what about when he said, "I curse me artistic temperament?" Can yer believe that bloke? Who's he think he is—a master chef or somethin? He's only a friggin short order cook, fer christ sake—and not too flash at that, hey."

"He is a bastard that Casey, you know." Tom the Pom spoke with authority, his first can already finished.

"We all know that Tom," said Cowboy. "Did he get you on that meat injection too? He did me."

"Pass us a can, Mum. Thanks mate. Well, yeah—but that never worried me. It was knocking me piss off that got me riled. Remember that time? You know, when I put it on him to chill my carton—you know—when the canteen's freezer shit itself."

"Yeah—yeah."

We remembered now. The canteen's fridge did a thermostat late February. We drank hot beer for two days until the new one arrived. Although most of us kept a couple of coldies—just in case—on the outlet side of our room's air-conditioner, the replenished cans did not always keep pace with thirst. In retrospect it seemed strange that a bloke from the land of hot beer had pursued a coldie with the most vigour.

"Well, you know what happened? The sod drank half the bloody carton. I put it to him. I said, "Hey, that's my beer you've just drunk." Know what he said? "That's my frigging commission, you Pommy bastard. Now piss off and think yourself lucky I didn't drink the lot."

We laughed at the hide of the bloke. Tom the Pom had kept it quiet until now. His embarrassment was safe with us. Casey had caught us all out, one way or another. Cowboy spoke.

"What about them friggin pork chops he gives us? Every friggin night shift—pork chops. They're usually rotten, hey. Near enough, anyway. Can't we do somethin about him?"

I spoke about the puddings he dished up.

"Every bloody night—jelly. Yer'd reckon he'd whip up a bloody trifle or somethin, fer a change? Bit of variety'd go well. Remember when I mentioned it to him?"

Mum imitated Casey's arrogant mincing tone.

"What are you complainin about? There's plenty of variety—red on Mondays, yellow Tuesdays, green Wednesdays. You're a bloody mob of whingers—whinge, whinge, whinge."

We laughed. He'd been putting it over us for far too long.

"So whadda we gunna do, Mum? Gotta do somethin."

"Drink more piss," said Mum—and we did.

At three cans Tom the Pom was asleep and at home in his own bed.

"Tuck him in Cowboy. A fine ambassador fer Pommy drinkers, hey. Look at him."

As he slept, his green VB lay by his cheek like a cuddly toy.

Conversation returned to the Spaceman. His parting now added to our strength—our bluff against the formerly most powerful man in camp.

"Yer know," said Cowboy, "Yer know how the Spaceman just lived in his own world and didn't give a stuff about anyone or anythin else? In life he mighta been more together than we'll ever be. Casey never worried him, hey. We never worried him either, I don't s'pose. We tried hard enough. He sure as hell got to us though."

"Bullshit Cowboy. He's still friggin dead," said Mum. "So what's it matter? He never did nothin—never challenged life. That's what it's all about yer know—being in control and meetin life head on."

"Who knows? Anyway, we've won the challenge with this bloody carton by the look of her. She's a dead'un too. Now what?"

"I'm still thirsty," I said. "What say we challenge Casey's Brandy stock, Mum? They reckon he's got heaps stashed away. Couldn't we raid his kitchen—or somethin? I'm game."

It was grog talking—but it seemed worth a try.

"Come on Mum," said Cowboy. "Be worth a few more laughs—then we'll call it a night."

We waited a moment for his response, but we knew his answer already. How could he say no?

"Me and me big mouth, hey. OK, we'll give her a go. I know how we can do it."

We opened the door and met the cold night air—much colder than a few hours before. At the end of the huts that faced the bush, we relieved ourselves into darkness. The stench on splattered red dirt would not escape noses passing that way early tomorrow. Half-sober and forgetful by morning, we would most likely also wonder who the dirty bastards were.

"Be with yer in a minute," said Mum.

Mum headed off in the direction of the Hammersley workshop and returned with a hammer and punch.

"Righto, let's go."

Security lighting illuminated our way to the back of the kitchen. With the toilet and shower block close by we were vulnerable to discovery by a midnight caller. Our hearts raced fit to burst. We crowded the door to the kitchen as Mum produced the tools.

"I'll punch them pins outo' the hinges—should do the trick."

Mum belted each pin firmly upwards, placed them in his pocket, and swung the door outwards using the tongue of the lock as a hinge. Once inside, we

pulled the door back into position, switched on the light, and scanned the room. Our priority was the Brandy.

"Over here fellas."

A case of Brandy sat on a wide shelf beside the twenty-kilo bags of sugar. On the bench stood three large untempting bowls of jelly—all red.

"Tomorrow must be Monday," said Mum as he grabbed four bottles of Brandy. "This one fer tryin ter sack Cowboy—this one fer the pork chops—and these fer Tom the Pom's stolen beer."

With that, Mum emptied two of the bottles into the as yet unset jelly. A streak of light brown flowed through the mixture—and disappeared.

"Don't put too much in, Mum. She won't set."

"Don't panic, Cowboy. Grab that packet up there for us, will yer? Make sure it's red."

With that, Cowboy reached for a packet of red aeroplane jelly from the pantry's middle shelf and tossed it over. Mum upended the opened packet into a saucepan of hot tap water and mixed furiously.

"Always said yer was a stirrer."

"There ... that should do it."

Mum offered more of Monday's colour to each bowl, then returned the unwashed saucepan to the drawer, and the spoon to the sink.

"Let's piss off."

We switched the light off and edged the door back slowly.

"No one comin. Let's get outa here."

Slowed only by drunkenness and adrenaline, we pushed the door back, replaced the hinges, and left. Tomorrow we'd double up on jelly—for the present, we needed a brandy.

Morning arrived. Except for Tom the Pom, our breakfast was toast and coffee—plenty of coffee. We'd have run Casey's gauntlet without fear had we desired a

hot feed—but we felt unwell. Beer, brandy, and lack of sleep had taken their toll.

“Hey, hear what happened last night?” said Tom as he joined our table.

We said nothing.

“According to Casey, some fellow stole all his Brandy—and he’s not very happy. Wasn’t you chaps, was it?”

“Can’t say,” said Mum, “but just eat up all yer jelly tonight, Tommy—there’s a good boy.”

We just smiled and nodded, and so did Tom the Pom—but he didn’t know why.

After a fourth cup of coffee, we picked up our cribs from the kitchen and headed towards the Toyota and the day ahead.

“Phew, what stinks?” said Tom the Pom as we walked past the end of the huts.

“Some dirty bastard,” said Mum, blank-faced.

I agreed, though I did faintly remember being partly responsible.

Every bump on the drive to the hill seemed exaggerated. Corrugations and worn shock absorbers combined to treat us cruelly. It was a long day. By the time we returned to camp, however, our mood had improved. We arrived sober, hydrated, and anticipating with great delight—for the first time ever—tonight’s jelly.

A quick tub, a change of clothes, a soothing ale and we were among the first up for the evening meal. As we ambled past the bain-marie, Casey dished out our selections from the meagre choice on offer.

“Any of you know who stole my Brandy?”

We shook our heads.

“Well, I’ll tell you what. What goes round, comes round—and I’ll catch the bastard. He’ll get his just desert.”

“Give us some puddin please Casey me old mate,” said Mum. “Pile her on, hey.”

"Me too," I said.

"I thought yer didn't like me jelly?"

Cowboy and Tom the Pom requested likewise.

We sat down, rushed the main course, and woofed into the jelly.

Tom the Pom took a mouthful and looked at Mum. He winked back.

"That's right Tom. She's full of Brandy. One more helpin and I reckon we'll be pissed."

We giggled like school kids. A second helping wasn't needed—but we still had it.

"Yer know," said Cowboy. "Yer know when Casey said those thieves'll get their just desserts—he was bloody right. And I'm gunna go have another."