

ROSIE

It was a flaming humbug having to drive all the way to Bohle Vale in the stinking heat just to pick up her mother. Rivulets of moisture gathered around the back of her neck and dribbled onto the neck of her frock leaving a sticky mess on the material. Her hair clung to her scalp and droplets ran down the strands and into her eyes and she swiped at them, irritably. This time of the year was sheer hell and nobody in their right mind would career around like she had to, running a sort of involuntary taxi service for her mother. If I had the guts, she considered, I'd pack me bags tomorrow and head off down South, fruit picking, or something.

These treasonous thoughts consumed her whole being as she put on the car's flicker light and pulled up outside Aunty Flo's house. Well—it was a decent place once but it had deteriorated and the garden was a tangled mess of guinea grass and struggling shrubs where lolly papers and empty wrappers clung in colourful disorder, an inheritance from the store across the road. Rosie leant on the horn button and a shrill blast shattered the air. From underneath the house her mother scuttled out, shopping bag clutched under her arm. Reaching for the door handle she opened it and laboriously climbed in, pulling it shut so that the blast nearly cannoned Rosie out the other side.

“Where you been — yer late!”

“Yeah, well I got held up Mum, didn't I!” The motor revved as she let out the clutch.

They both stared ahead, each lost in thoughts. If starting work at seven o'clock each morning was bad, Rosie thought, pushing a damp mop around endless corridors smelling of stale urine and beer was terrible. This awful drive out to Aunty Flo's every day, a meal to prepare, and heaps of washing, eased only by the fact the day had ended and she could rinse her tired body under a cool shower and then tuck herself in bed. Not that a good night's sleep was always possible, Mum saw to that. She padded about the place like a dingo, tripping over things and flushing the toilet endlessly, and, as if that wasn't enough

to waken the dead, she'd slide open the door to the bedroom and call – "Rossssie . . . ROOSSSSEEEEE!" and God help you if you didn't answer. Just as sleep seemed possible the alarm rang. Now take these blokes in Canberra, they had it easy, Rosie considered, as she drove along. Fat salaries, big flashy cars and no money worries—sitting in their cushy airconditioned offices telling the rest of Australia to get off their butt and do something. Well let them come and live just one day—that's all she'd ask—one day, of her life, and see how they coped!

The car heaved and bounced along the dusty track that led to the carport of her small cottage that nestled like a somnolent lizard, gazing almost sightless at the high fences that sheltered it from the prying eyes of neighbours and the passing motorists. To hell with it all, Rosie thought, as she jammed on the ancient brakes with a jerk. The car skidded to a shuddering halt that sent her mother tumbling forward and all the parcels fell off the back seat and emptied on the floor of the car, amongst the old shoes and papers she had meant to clean out months ago. Rosie sighed.

The old lady heaved herself out of the car and the door shut with a deafening thump, and without glancing back at Rosie she ambled to the door of the cottage, and waited. Two gnarled feet encased in faded scuffs steadied the sagging frame that was bulky, but not unsightly. Her chin jutted forward and a frown creased the rounded temple where wisps of grey hair careered in gay abandon above two fierce blue eyes that had sunk beneath folds of wrinkled flesh. She looked like a mutinous water buffalo.

"What the hell's keepin' yer!"

"For gawd sakes Mum – I'll be there in a minute!" Thrusting the last wayward apple back into the supermarket bag, Rosie was sprawled halfway across the back seat of the car, her stern protruding from the open passenger door and her underwear displayed for all the passing public to view. Locking her arm around the bag she dragged it towards her, emerging breathless and dishevelled. The old lady glared balefully at her.

As Rosie pushed past her she paused for a moment looking her mother straight in the eye. "For the love of mike I don't see why you couldn't put the kettle on yourself—you ain't paralysed are ya!"



“I git in the road don’t I? You’re always tellin’ me—keep outta me kitchen, so that’s what I’m doin’ — keepin’ clear!”

There was no point in starting one of those bickering arguments that they had resorted to these past few months, so she stalked through the house and put down the bag of groceries with care, filled the kettle and threw the switch on the stove.

“Well don’t just stand there looking useless Mum—turn on the telly or somethin’ ”.

With a grunt the old lady shuffled over towards the television set and snapped on the switch and instantly the news blared out, but she didn’t seem to notice how loud it was. Rosie blanched visibly and was about to shout at her to turn it down when she remembered her mother’s hearing was getting worse by the minute. By now the old lady had slowly walked over to a creaking sofa, whose contoured seats looked like speed bumps foretelling the weight of countless bottoms, and the shabby arms were hidden by a hideous green crocheted cover that Rosie had tried to arrange artistically. Her mother loved to crochet and even now she fingered the pattern lovingly as she settled herself, and she voiced her thoughts, “I like green!” Receiving no reply from Rosie who was scrummaging in the grocery bag she raised her voice above the television announcer, “I said—I like GREEN!”

“All right Mum—so what, so do cows, there’s nothin’ special about green!”

“Well it’s restful like! You growin’ that tea or somethin’?”

“You get bugger all for ten dollars. Two bloody hours’ work for a few miserable groceries and a lump of meat.” It was a bit like a lucky dip thought Rosie dipping into the bag, only you paid for your own prize. The kettle was shooting great geysers of steam into the air and on the television screen the programme changed to feature a sequin clad pop band — the Sound of the Century, they claimed, and the old lady looked at them in stunned amazement. “Looks like their pants are on fire!”

“Do yer want condensed milk or cream?” From under a mountainous pile of dishes draining permanently on the sink, Rosie was trying to extricate her mother’s mug, and it was a work of art she had almost perfected, withdrawing the mug without sending a stack of dishes cascading into the sink with a clatter. She withdrew the mug with a smile of triumph.

“Well what is it? Make up your mind!”

“Dunno why you keep askin’. You know I like me tea sweet. Not like that muck Flo makes, its warm and horrible. Mean old codger she is Rosie, uses them tea bags over and over till the water’s barely coloured. Dunno how George put up with her. She give him the rounds of the table but he never raised a hand to ’er.” She screwed her body around till she faced Rosie and smiled. “But he ’ad a lovely funeral and it gladdened me old heart to see him go. I always liked George.”

The faint jingle of the telephone was barely audible over the noise of the television but Rosie heard it and galvanised into action. Jamming the lid on the teapot, she hurdled the pile of ironing, neatly skirted around the coils of the vacuum cleaner hose and disappeared into the bedroom. Watching the rapid departure with a sniff of disapproval the old lady shouted “Don’t be all bloody night on that thing—once you git in there you lose track o’ time—and that’ll be the end of me cuppa!” As a profound afterthought she added, “Dunno what you kin find to talk about—blowed if I do!” The words fell on deaf ears, Rosie had gone.

It was true about the telephone and she did lose track of time but she reasoned, it kept her sane, until the bill arrived, and then she grimaced but never audibly grizzled about the amount and somehow found the money to pay. This time however the conversation was brief and Rosie emerged looking slightly smug as she deftly kicked some stray ironing back onto the pile.

“Yer don’t have to tell me who that was!” challenged the old lady with a knowing look. “It was ’im weren’t it eh? That bludger from the mines. Yer can’t fool me Rosie Fletcher cause I knows yer like I knowed the back o’ me hand. He’s comin’ to stay this weekend ain’t he?” Without waiting for an answer and observing the guilty look on her daughter’s face the old lady carried on, sure now of working on Rosie’s biggest weakness—guilt. “I’ll be shoved off—not wanted, I know, just a flamin’ old nuisance. Yer want to get rid of him Rosie I’m warnin’ yer he’s a super bludger. Arrives ’ere like the Lord of the Manor, huh! ‘ ’ere’s me washing,’ he announces, like he was God, and poor

fool you waitin' on 'im—yeah, rushin' around cookin' and makin' him coffee in a flash—'mazin' just how quick you can be cause I ain't even sighted me tea and we've bin here over half 'n hour!" Banging the mug down on the table beside her mother, Rosie ignored her remark and swept back into the kitchen like a dowager in full flight. Taking the lid off a saucepan on the bench she peered at the contents and gave them a vigorous stir before placing the pot on the element. Sipping her tea in noisy enjoyment the old lady turned back towards the screen giving the semblance of intense interest, but her mind was sharp and clear as she thought about her daughter, and wished she could meet a good steady bloke who'd do a bit about the place and pay a few bills. Rosie was a bad picker, always mothering the lame dogs and kids. Well at least she'd got them off her hands, two of them shack'd up with ne'er do wells, the other two both pregnant before they were fifteen and burdened down with unwanted babies and beery husbands that spent their Saturdays at the pub, drinking the wages. She'd done her share of helping them, handing over cash to buy food for the kids. Well, she couldn't see the poor little mites hungry. Now they were nagging at her to sell her little cottage set on a few acres, hoping to collect a windfall before she passed on. She'd always kept her little house even though she lived with Rosie, and her greatest enjoyment was pottering around the garden admiring the trees she and her husband, long since dead, had planted when they were young. They'd have to carry her off in a coffin before she'd sell and that was that. Rosie's only boy had been born years after the girls and was away at a fancy boarding school. The fees were crippling and it pained the old lady to see her daughter pushing a mop around a rundown pub, to keep him there. Working herself to a standstill when the effort was unappreciated. Now there was this new romance, one of dozens. Rosie seemed to go to pieces when he was around—like an alley cat on heat. Well it would end with an emotional upheaval the way it had so many times before, and she would have to pick up the fragments.

Jabbing at the contents of the saucepan Rosie tried to dislodge the burnt bit, not that a bit of burn hurt anybody. She held the pot over a plate and spooned the glutinous mixture

onto the plate where it sat like a brown shapeless amoeba — quivering. With the plate carefully balanced she snatched up a knife and fork and plonked it down on the table beside her mother, who jumped in fright and eyed the plate suspiciously.

“What is it?”

“Yer don’t ’ave to eat it if yer don’t want it!”

“That’s not me question — what is it?”

“Bolognese.”

“Huh—coulda’ fooled me, looks like Whiskas or somethin’.”

“Awww Mum, it’s not, it’s bolognese, the Boss give it to me, leftover from the counter lunches.”

Dipping her fork into it the old lady speared a lump and cautiously tasted it, pulled a face and said, “Can’t eat that rubbish—I’ll have me usual.”

“Mum, I’ve told you a hundred times, packet soup’s no good for you—it’s got no—no—nourishment!”

“Yeah, I notice you’re not eatin’ any—go on—be my guest and stop goin’ crook on me. Yer always naggin’. Well you jist wait till yer gits to my age and nobody wants yer. I gits lonely don’t I? No fun bein’ shoved from pillar to post. You try sittin’ under Flo’s house every mornin’ winter and summer from half past six in the morning till she decides to git up and let me in—nine o’clock or more dependin’.”

“I keep tellin’ yer and tellin’ yer—get a key from Auntie Flo and let yourself in and you could make a cuppa tea and read the paper till she wakes up—simple!”

“I talked me flamin’ head off explainin’ to ’er and all she kin say is she wouldn’t feel safe handin’ me a key knowing I could lose it—me! Her own flesh and blood.”

“Look Mum I’ve done me best, I ’ave to be at work real early and you won’t join the Pensioners, yer won’t stay ’ere with all the comforts, so you have to put up with it and that’s that.”

The contents of the plate were emptied into the bowels of the pedal bin and the lid fell shut with a clang.

“Well Mum, I’m off to ’ave me bath!”

“Awww, Rosie couldn’t you sit down and talk to me—ain’t talked to anybody for days. I’m lonely!”

"You try working all day in the heat Mum—I'm havin' me bath!" With that she high tailed it into the bathroom without looking back, but she could feel the eyes boring into her.

Tears welled up and filled the old eyes, spilling over and running into the craggy face dispersing into the cracks. She mopped them away with the back of her hand and thought of the injustices of life. Of the years she'd bathed and fed Rosie's brood of kids. Sewing dresses for them and keeping them like little dolls. Years in the convent had taught her to be handy with sewing and handwork and she had derived enormous pleasure out of parading the girls with their smocked tops and crocheted jackets. Funny she thought, how easy it was to cry these days. She could remember a time when wild horses couldn't have dragged a single tear out of her, but somehow the loosening of emotions came with the wearing out of the body, and she was aware that she was old, tired, lonely and depressed. She'd even lost the joy of gardening. Only last year she could rake and mow nearly all day but lately it had become an effort. Once the memories she had of the cottage were all pleasurable, the times spent with her husband cultivating the land and clearing the scrub. Now the Council had graded the roadway once filled with stagnant pools of murky water, so that a smooth wide track swept grandly past the mangroves and their ominous roots. Yesterday she had learned that a rubbish dump would border the property, the garden would be ransacked for cuttings, fruit trees stripped and the corrugated iron cottage pilfered. Precious possessions like the gilt picture of the Last Supper would have to be stored and nothing would ever be the same again. The tears fell in a salty stream and soaked her dress. Bony fingers stroked the green crochet cover.

Rosie peeked around the bathroom door and saw the dejected face, the wrinkled skin glistening with tears, the unseeing eyes. In a flash visions of her mother in better days filled her mind. The strong body, and tireless energy, like a young colt busting to get going. Why she could walk twenty miles and still do a day's work and be up with the crows next morning, bright and happy to begin a new day. Was this sad, hunched form her mother? A pain shot through Rosie's body, as if a limb had

been torn off and she suppressed an agonizing groan. Rushing over to the old lady, the towel unravelling from her waist as she went, she grabbed her mother in a hug so fierce and rough the breath was expelled from the ancient mouth in a gurgling explosion.

“I love you Mum—gawd save us, you’re the best thing ever happened to me, I could never ’ave managed without you — never. Course I’ll talk to you—long as you like!”

