

Atlas, Broken

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Henry

“Damn you, Henry,” Loretta whispered as her slumber was rudely disturbed, “Damn you!”

It is said that the most annoying noise in the world is an alarm clock. This is true, and was true for Loretta, and it was especially true for Henry.

As his eyes shot open and blinked wearily, searching for the snooze button, he discovered that there was a noise more annoying than the buzzing of the infernal device, and that noise was the buzzing of his wife's voice.

“Henry!” she hissed, rolling over, “Henry! Turn that bloody alarm off and get up!”

“I'm trying to find the stupid button,” he moaned.

The new gadget, designed specifically to irritate, was a gift given to him by his co-workers at the behest of his boss. The button to turn off the alarm was one of several that would glow briefly only to change quickly, keeping him guessing where it would glow next. He had to press it three times to get it right.

“If you'd just get up when you're supposed to you wouldn't have to have that stupid thing.”

He yawned, “I'm so tired. So damn tired.”

“You sit around on your arse all day. How can you possibly be tired?” she muttered through a pillow, “Just get to work and let me sleep.”

With a crackling back he straightened himself up. He was dog tired. Given the chance he could easily have slept another hour or ten, and maybe then he would have a chance of feeling refreshed. There was no point trying to get any more sleep. He was awake, and he had to get to work, and that was all there was to it.

His neck popped a little as he rolled his head. The scratching sound of his palms on his stubble filled the room as he rubbed his face. The hairs on his face were at that itchy, scratchy, annoying length; too long to be ignored, not long enough to be soft and smooth.

He could have shaved. He really should have shaved. In a

perfect world he would be clean shaven, would wear crisp pants and have a nice shirt with a tidy collar. In a perfect world he would bound out of bed, kiss his wife goodbye, check in on the kids and march out the door with a good breakfast in his stomach.

He would drive in his shiny car down the clear streets, waving to his neighbours and find a good park at work with twenty minutes to spare before he had to start.

But Henry didn't live in a perfect world.

Instead his world showed him, in the dim, grey light of the bathroom, the image of a run-down face, puffy around the eyes, and puffer around his stomach. He looked down at his spare tyre, squished it a little in his hand and tried to flatten it down. It stubbornly bounced back.

He opened his mouth and smelled his breath. His tongue had a thin, white coating on it. His eyes, bloodshot, were underlined by dark patches. His muscles were flaccid. He pushed the front of his pyjama pants forward to check out the contents. Also flaccid.

Screw shaving.

He stumbled into the kitchen, muttering and cursing to himself, making a bee-line for the coffee machine. By an absent minded command his hand opened the pod jar and gripped empty air. Groaning, he opened his eyes to confirm what his hand suspected. No coffee pods.

“Great,” he grumbled, checking the container again, and then behind it, in case one had fallen down the back.

He could make an instant. He could boil the kettle and get a cup and get a spoon and get the milk and muster up enough concentration to assemble it all.

He stifled a heavy yawn. It was unsatisfying, stifling a yawn, especially one so large. The tremulous energy put behind it demanded an ear piercing bellow as the air was exhaled, a mighty roar that would let everyone know that he was awake and alive. His ancestors would have welcomed such a thunderous wowl. His family, though, would not.

So, instead of an earth shattering cry, it came out as a protracted peep, a whistling sigh, ending in a quiet breath.

“No coffee. Bugger. I'll pick one up at Di Mattina's,” he said to himself, trudging back to the bedroom to get dressed.

He solidly stubbed his toe on way through to the bedroom. The timbers in the house laughed at his antics, then at his bent digit, then at his twisted face. Pain shot up through his leg and did its best to work its way out. The yelp within him was suppressed. He bit his lip, closed his eyes and let the natural response play out in his mind.

In that expansive world he was hollering and yelping, clutching his foot and dancing about, making a scene to express the pain and embarrassment he was suffering.

On the outside, in the real world with its many concerns and social taboos, he merely let out an exasperated breath.

Loretta rolled over, mumbling, “Clumsy oaf. Be more careful! And pick up some milk and bread on the way home.”

The pain continued, albeit at a lesser intensity, so he stopped prancing about inside his head and took a second to look at the damage. His toe was pointing out at an awkward angle from its peers. With an effort he tried to move it back into place, but that only made things worse. With a subdued pop it flipped back in the opposite direction and pointed down.

After a bit more grunting and pushing, he worked the toe to be roughly aligned with the others. Somewhat satisfied, he put his foot down, but the toe stubbornly flopped down again.

Frowning, rubbing his foot and poking in the closet, he got dressed in yesterday's suit. It was a little crinkled. It needed ironing. There was a stain on the leg from where he spilled yesterday's coffee, but apart from that it was fresh enough.

Back in the kitchen, he fished out the crusts of bread from the packet and inspecting them for mould.

Not that he expected to find any. It was just that he had found some in the past. And a few times since then. But there was nothing to suspect that this bread loaf might have mould on it.

It was a habit, was all it was, that he had picked up along the rickety, unsealed road that had been his life. The same as sniffing the milk, or checking his shoes for spiders, or making sure the fly-screen door was closed before going to bed.

After making his toast and taking a couple of minutes to scoff a slice over the sink, he grabbed his satchel and slung it over his head. The strap nestled neatly into the groove that had been worn into his shoulder over the years.

He put on his hat, even though it was going to be a hot summer day, double checked his pockets for his keys and wallet, patted his shirt to confirm his phone was in there, and hustled out the door.

“Bye, Love,” he called out.

“Bye, Hon,” came a muffled reply.

Traffic, that great Titan, was abominable. It always was. He had experimented leaving earlier to avoid the rush, taking alternate routes, adjusting his driving style to be more aggressive or more passive or more assertive. Nothing seemed to work.

Traffic was Traffic, and it ruled the great, bitumen scarred savannah that lay between his home and the office. Traffic, the Great Invariant, the Almighty Constant, could not be conquered by the pathetic attempts of a man. Come what may, he would arrive at work at precisely the time Traffic deemed it was suitable, and not a moment earlier.

Every day he tortured himself over it: Surely, he reasoned, by leaving five minutes earlier, it should be possible to arrive five minutes earlier. It didn't add up. He had done statistics in High School, and he had done it again in University. He had learnt that such a matter as the time taken to get to work will distribute itself about a mean, and that mean can be influenced by starting values.

If, for example, he had left at one in the morning, it only made sense that he should get to work only a brief period after. The way the Universe was configured clearly demonstrated that these assumptions were absolute tosh, for as he moved his starting time toward the morning rush, a stranger, stronger force, stronger even than mathematics, took over and well behaving statistics went out the window.

Whether it was raining, or sunny, or if there were school holidays on or not, or whether there was a crash on the South Eastern Arterial, or if the Lygon Street festival was on, no matter what, he would arrive at work, without fail, at twenty five past eight.

It was a combination of traffic lights, of course, and freak incidents, and trucks performing complicated U-turns, and taxis stopping to pick up people on the side of the road, and nannas heading off early to get to the bank, and *morons on their bloody mobile phones*.

Like the one in front. He could see him clearly in the mirror, head down, reading some text or fiddling with Facebook. He blasted the horn and swore out the window. The blue Toyota in front lurched back to life as the driver within quickly tossed the phone to one side.

It sped through the lights, leaving Henry stuck at the red to wait out another cycle. He was grinding his teeth; another bad habit that Henry had picked up.

A tram, one that he had successfully overtaken only a few lights before, prattled up and stopped next to him, promising to make it harder for him to overtake again. It opened its doors to pick up more passengers.

The lights turned green.

“Come on, come on,” Henry seethed through his teeth, “Hurry up and get on the damn thing!”

He watched with no little anger as a woman with wet hair and a hassled look on her face raced in from the footpath with her hands waving. The doors, which had just begun to close, were thrown open again.

“*Oh, come on!*” yelled Henry, exasperated, slapping the steering wheel with his hand, “Ah! Ah, hell! Geez! Hell's bells!”

He wiggled his jaw, squeezing it with his hand to stop the sudden, jarring pain. He moaned a little, forgetting the annoying amber light that signalled Traffic's victory over his pathetic vehicle, and reached into his mouth to pull out two loose articles.

Opening his hand slowly and looking down through the blood and saliva, he spied two shining white lumps on his palm.

“Hell's bells,” he said again, rattling them a little.

A horn from behind him shocked him back. He hurriedly put the car in gear, swore, lifted the clutch, swore again and bunny hopped to motion. His teeth ended up somewhere in the passenger foot-well. He would have to fish them out later.

“Always something,” he complained to himself, “There's always bloody something.”

He stuffed a handkerchief into his mouth to stop the bleeding. Using the back of his hand to wipe his face, he concentrated on the rest of the journey to work. A minute or two to find a park. A few minutes to grab a coffee across the road. Another minute to get upstairs. And that meant that he would be late, again, and be grilled by Mister Miro, again.

He gritted his teeth, stopped doing that because it hurt, and gripped the steering wheel hard instead.

It wasn't like he meant to be late. And it wasn't like he was half an hour late. And it wasn't like he didn't make up the time during lunch, or by working late.

It was two damn minutes every time. What was two minutes, anyway? Spend a little longer at the water cooler, bang, there's your two minutes. Spend a little longer on the crapper, bang, there's your two minutes. Spend a little longer checking an email... Ah, what was the point?

It was going to be the same thing today, as it was yesterday, as it was the day before that. Only he would have to do it with a busted toe, an aching jaw and without a couple of teeth.

Work

The park was not great. Across the main road and a side-street away, it was better than having to park the next street over, close to the shopping strip. The walk from there was longer, and there was a higher concentration of nannas milling about, especially on pension day.

At the crossing he stopped to wait for the lights with the rest of the hordes that had dragged their sorry corpses out of bed.

There, in front of him, loomed Atlas Holdings. Its grey and brown exterior, aged and cracked to the point of crumbling, did nothing to imply that inside was anything different. The windows needed to be cleaned. The sign wanted a fresh lick of paint.

The only thing that stopped it from being just another concrete slab in the forest of concrete slabs was the gigantic statue of Atlas. Muscular, strong, bearing the weight of the world on his back, he was the archetype of what a man could be.

He could carry the heaviest of loads. He could bear the unbearable. He stood until the end of time, reliable and invincible, stolidly facing his task. Atlas could not be shaken, not matter what the world could throw at him because, after all, he was holding it.

The lights went green, Henry pounced off the pavement, coffee in hand, to enter the dull doors and nod politely to Miss Fisher on reception.

He attempted a smile. She reciprocated.

“Hi, Henry.”

“Hi, Miss Fisher. How're you?”

“Fine thanks. How're you?”

“A little sore, actually.”

“That's good.”

She drove a knife into an envelope and pulled the innards out, roughly splashing them on the desk.

“Do you need something?” she asked.

“Ah. No,” he said, “Sorry.”

He hustled over to his cubicle, keen to slip in before anyone noticed. If he got his monitor on and his computer powered, he

would be just fine. The machine buzzed to life, flicking through to the login screen after a few seconds.

Henry's Boss, Mister Miro, had seen his entrance and was watching him from under his shaggy eyebrows. This was the menacing pose he struck when he needed to be authoritative. He stormed over.

“Late again, Henry?” he asked, appearing behind him.

He was shorter than Henry. He was dumpy, and fat, and sour-faced, and quite ugly. His suit was permanently attached to his frame. If there was a human underneath the layers of material, Henry could not imagine it. And if he ever tried, his mind turned away, shuddering.

Apparently he was married. Apparently some woman out there had seen through his abrasive personality and obvious mental deficiency, and found him enough of a catch to slip a ring onto his finger. His thoughts turned to what such an amazingly resilient woman would look like.

In many ways, Henry thought to himself, Mister Miro was quite inferior to him.

Why, if it came to a straight line run, Henry would win hands down. If they had a game of chess, he would be sure to whip his Boss. If there was ever a chance of fisticuffs, oh! if ever there was a chance! But if ever there was, Henry would show him a thing or two.

But Mister Miro, Big M behind his back, was his Boss, appointed and approved by upper management. He was part of the furniture, part of the firm, and there would be no budging from his role as top-dog on the ground floor.

“Not really, sir.”

“Not really? Looks like *really* to me, Ludlow,” he retorted, holding up his shiny watch.

Henry protested, “It's only thirty two past. And my teeth...”

“Not by my watch. Mine says thirty five past.”

Henry looked at his phone. It agreed with Henry's assessment and, he imagined, pretty much every other electronic device in the office that had access to the internet.

“The phone says...” he began, but thought better of it.

Mister Miro was not one to be corrected. In fact, Henry might have the entire Chronological Institute of Switzerland backing his cause and still Mister Miro would shrug, point to his watch and shake his head.

“I’ll add in five off my lunch,” Henry resigned.

“Make it ten to make up for yesterday.”

“But I already... Ah, whatever.”

Mister Miro forced a smile, “That’s whatever, *sir*, Henry. You can lose the attitude.”

“Yes, *sir*.”

“You don’t look very presentable this morning, Ludlow. I hope you haven’t any on-site visits today. Why, look at you. You haven’t even shaved. And you’ve got blood on your chin.”

“It’s my teeth, *sir*. They fell out.”

“All of them?”

“Only two.”

He pulled his cheek back to show him. There were two gaping holes staring back.

“Tsk, tsk! Henry, that’s no good. No good at all.”

“Tell me about it. One minute I was...”

“No good for the company. We can’t have you talking to clients with missing teeth. Where are they, anyway?”

“In my car.”

“What are they doing there?”

“Well, if I’d stop to search for them, I would have been late.”

“You *are* late, Henry! And unshaven. And missing teeth. This is not how an employee of Atlas conducts himself,” Mister Miro barked, “It’s undignified and I won’t have it, you hear me?”

“Yes, *sir*.”

“I don’t want to see any more gaps in your mouth, Ludlow. At least those two are on the side. Try not to smile so hard and you should be fine,” he instructed in a fatherly manner.

“Shouldn’t be a problem, *sir*.”

Mister Miro, having imparted his unworldly wisdom, nodded to himself, adjusted his tie and marched off to inspect the other cubicles. Henry ignored him and turned to face his rectangular

prison.

He sat down at his desk and plonked his coffee on top. It spilled a little, creating a ring around the base that, in an hour or so, would harden to a semi-permanent feature on his desk along with all the other semi-permanent rings that he had built up over the month.

The cleaners never wiped his desk down, he noticed. The only time the rings ever disappeared was when he decided that the terrain on his desk was too uneven to rest his hands on. Surely the cleaners had some kind of vendetta against him. That sounded a little paranoid, and it was, but it was the truth.

The used staples on the floor remained there from last year. He had, as an experiment, coloured one of them with a marker. Every so often he would look down and note that it was still there, waiting patiently for a vacuum cleaner to lift it from its short-pile home and deliver it to a better place.

A better place. A better time. Somewhere that wasn't here or now, Henry mused, somewhere else entirely. Wherever that better place was, it was wherever he wasn't. It was not anywhere at home, or on the way to work, or anywhere around or between.

Perhaps it was in another country. Perhaps all the better places had already been consumed, and all that was left were the grisly sinews, bones and scraps of everyday life. Perhaps there was no such thing as a better place. It was a mythical construct designed solely with the intention of keeping the false embers of hope glowing.

That was a depressing thought, that the best was already gone, that there was nowhere left to go but down.

He looked at the confines of his cubicle, at the aged, bent photographs pinned to the sides, at the scrappy, skin-speckled mousepad, at the piles of paper varying from white at the top through to yellow at the bottom. He sighed a long lungful of air. It was hard to imagine what down would be like.

The ember of hope inside him glowed a little. Maybe it would not be so bad. Maybe, given the right push, he could quit his infernal job and start afresh as a sandwich hand in the cafe over the road. Maybe he could take out a loan and start his own cafe.

He could learn how to make proper coffee, how to roast his

own beans and start a franchise and whip up batches of muffins to feed the hungry workers.

Or maybe he could stop dreaming and get on with his work.

He wiggled his mouse to get some life into the cursor and double clicked on his usual pattern of applications. His first stop was his emails. If there was just something about the merger, a little note indicating that the client was pliable, that might be something that could make his miserable morning more bearable.

He waited with a vacant stare, sipping his coffee while he watched the progress bar slowly fill from the left side to the right. It sat, tantalisingly close to completion, only one more block to go.

“Hey, Hank,” said Geoff, balding and sombre, poking his nose over the top of the cubicle, “Late again, huh?”

“Evidently. Thing is, doesn't matter what I do, somehow I'm always getting in at the same time, and you know what? I reckon Big M is waiting for me every morning. Why else would he always be in this vicinity, hmm?” mumbled Henry, taking another sip and wincing as the heat of the coffee aggravated the fresh nerve endings in his mouth, “The ground floor is too big for that to be a coincidence. I think he's got it in for me. I reckon if I got in five minutes early he wouldn't even notice.”

“Big M's like that, you know. Only picks out the negatives.”

“How come you're never in late?” Henry asked.

“I never go home,” he joked.

Henry looked up at him. Geoff's eyes were puffy and black. His jowls hung low, slack from years of remaining loose and pliant. If there ever was someone who could believably state that he never went home, joking or not, Geoff was the guy.

He was always just around, always somewhere in the building.

“You get your coffee from Di Mattina's?” Geoff asked, pointing to the logo on the cup, “Terrible stuff. You should go to Borsello.”

“Too far to walk. And I cut it pretty fine as it is.”

“Never too far to walk for good coffee. Only thing that keeps me sane. Ha.”

“Is that the answer, then? Coffee?”

“It's a start.”

“Hey, do you reckon, and hear me out on this, but do you reckon if I bought a cafe, I'd be any good?”

“Can you make a decent cup?”

“I don't know. But how hard could it be to learn? You've got uni bums in Di Mattina's who haven't got the wherewithal to tie their laces, and they can make a brew,” Henry said, “How hard can it be?”

“True, but their coffee is still crap – whoops, here comes Big M,” Geoff said, then ducked back down.

Mister Miro's shoes marched with their regular time, the heel-toe evident even through the layer of worn carpet.

“Settled in, Henry? Taken your time, then? Had a good chat, Henry?”

“Sir?”

“Leave Geoff to do his work, Henry, and concentrate on yours.”

“But he was speaking to me.”

“And you were speaking to him!”

Henry bit his tongue. Again, no matter what argument he could deliver, Mister Miro would win out. Logic can't compare with a pigheaded lump of cement. He decided to change the topic.

“The merger's looking the same as it was yesterday night. Haven't had any emails or calls come through just yet. Just some stuff about the up-coming Henshaw account.”

Mister Miro sniffed, “I hadn't asked, Ludlow.”

“I thought that'd be why you came over, sir.”

“I came over to tell you to stop your yapping and get on with doing what you're employed to do! But, since you brought it up, what's the latest?”

“Um. Like I just said. There's no change from yesterday.”

“No change?” Mister Miro asked, eyebrows raised, “That's not the kind of news I was hoping for.”

“Well, um, sorry about that,” he replied, getting a little warm around his collar, “It's just that unless there's an email or a phone call or...”

“That sounds like loser talk to me, Ludlow. That sounds like

you're giving up. You know why? Because a real winner wouldn't be content with letting things just sit. A real winner wouldn't wait for the merger to happen or not happen," Mister Miro intoned, working up to a fever, "A winner does whatever needs to be done! Not like a loser. You know what a loser does? A loser lies back lazily and takes what comes. And I don't have losers in this office."

"Yes, Mister Miro."

"I only have winners! That's how we thrive! That's how we remain ahead of the pack! Atlas is a winner! Look at him, Henry, on your way in and on your way out. He's out there, holding up the world. Rain, hail, or shine! He's dependable. He has to be!" Mister Miro said dramatically, holding his arms up and shaking his flabby cheeks, "He's not a loser."

"Yes, Mister Miro."

"You don't want to be a loser, do you?"

"No, Mister Miro."

"Good! Good!" he said, his words dripping with sarcasm, "That's a good boy. That's what I like to hear. So what are you going to do about it?"

"There's not a lot I *can* do, Mister Miro. We've already made our offer, and if we make a second counter-offer before Gibson makes their first, we may appear desperate."

Mister Miro's face fell, "We're not desperate, Henry."

"I know, um, I mean, that's right. That's what I'm saying. That's why we need to hold off and let them respond to our offer -"

Mister Miro repeated, louder, so that everyone could hear it, "We're not *desperate*, Henry!"

"Yes, sir, that's why..."

"And the last thing you want to let our clients think is that we're incapable of keeping our cool. And that goes for our competition, too. Why, if we show any sign of weakness, they'll pounce on us like a cat on a mouse. They'll tear us to shreds! They'll scatter our parts to the wind."

Henry's face turned red, "Which is why..."

Mister Miro smiled his sickly, wide smile, "Which is why Gibson's counter-offer will need to be made *before* we make a

counter-offer. You can't rush these things, Ludlow. You see? Do you understand?"

Henry's mouth twitched a little. He wanted to punch Mister Miro. He wanted to plant his fist into his jaw. He wanted to pick him up by his shoulders and belt, hold his round frame over his head and throw him over a cubicle or three. He wanted to sock him in his stomach so hard that he barfed all over his crisp pants and shiny shoes, and lay on the ground gasping for air like a goldfish.

But that would be illegal. It would be considered assault.

He would be arrested. And then Henry would be out of a job, in jail even, or fined. And none of those outcomes were really what he wanted. He wondered for half a second if it would be worth it.

"But, sir..."

"We're not desperate, Ludlow, so just you think twice about what you're doing before you go putting ideas into our client's and our competitor's minds."

There was no point arguing. In a roundabout way, Henry had made his point. In a roundabout, unsatisfying, frustratingly painful way.

"I'll hold off on the counter-offer," he hissed through his lips, "*Just like you said.*"

"Good, Ludlow, good. And you can lose the attitude."

Mister Miro eye-balled him for a few seconds before turning on his heels, content that he had performed his duty as Supervisor, Mentor and Overlord.

Home

Coming home was different to going to work. You couldn't get fired for coming home two minutes past the expected hour, for starters, so the pressure was not there. Still, traffic, the Great Invariant, ensured that the trip back was just as mundane, tedious and predictably unpredictable as the trip to work.

Henry's car pattered through the city streets, waited in line at lights to reach the inner suburbs, wiggled between lanes in a vain bid to get past a bus or tram or slow moving trucks and crawled up the main roads to finally reach his quiet suburb.

On hot days such as this one, Henry was always concerned that the added pressure on the car would cause the engine to give out, that the radiator would blow its top or that the oil would come gushing out across the road at the most inconvenient location. He had roadside assist, but there was still the fear of being stuck on the side of a stinking hot road, waiting for hours for the familiar orange lights to show themselves.

It had been making a rumbling, rattling noise from somewhere deep within, and the other day he found a few tell-tale spots of black oil that had bled from the lower bowels of the engine.

Loretta had demanded he get it serviced, and he would have done it, if he had half a day and a wad of cash to spare. The coming merger was important.

His car limped past the rows of houses, each doing its best to look like the next. From suburb to suburb it played out like a silent motion picture of style, a gradual change from weatherboard to brick, from iron roofing to faded tiles, from green grass to yellow, as he transitioned from civilisation to the Land of the Vertical Blinds.

In Gladstone Park the lawns were patchy. Hedges were uneven. Letterboxes, the sentinel of the suburban abode, were rusted and broken. It was not because the owners were lazy or poor, or that they shunned displays of opulence.

It was simply the way the suburb was and no amount of effort could change it. Anything new would fade and crumble as the Sun fired its destructive ultra-violet rays. Garden ornaments stood no

chance. Patio furniture would develop holes, and borers and ear-wigs would make their homes in the nooks. Swings and slides changed from brilliant artificial reds and blues to faded pinks and cyans.

The Sun had rolled its way across the sky, scorching the land below, and now that it was receding to the horizon once more, the birds came out from their shelters.

Wind-chimes mournfully called out from backyards across the suburb, joining the chorus of bored dogs and squabbling birds.

Wattle-birds clambered about in the banksias, playfully tumbling upside-down in their bid to catch a bug or two. Sparrows balanced themselves on the telephone wires, chatting to themselves until they got chased away by mynas.

A starling poked its head out from underneath the eave as Henry's car rumbled into the driveway. It fluttered away to the fence and watched him with a suspicious eye.

“Hey, bird. Nice to see you, too,” Henry muttered, waving a hand at it and stretching his back, “You've got it made you know. No traffic for you.”

The bird merely hopped about on the fence, doing its best to keep him in view.

“Let me give you a word of advice. If you ever decide to become a sentient species, don't. It's not worth it. It's just not bloody worth it. You're better off eating seeds and flying about and rooting and having fun,” he said.

He slammed the car door and trudged up the stairs. The bird flew off at the movement, but it came back a short while after and resumed its vigil.

Loretta greeted him at the door.

“So you've finally made it home.”

“Yeah. Got here as fast as I could. You should've seen it. Some idiot double parked in Westgarth. Where are the cops when you need them, eh?”

“Great.”

“Made a choke point. Caused the whole two lanes to back up past Smith Street. I mean, what kind of idiot does that?”

“Did you get the car booked in?”

“Not yet.”

“Haven't you heard that rattle? It's getting worse!” she said.

“Yeah, I heard the rattle.”

“You have to get it fixed, Henry.”

“I know.”

“It'll just get worse. It won't get better. You can't let those things go!”

“I don't intend to. I've just been a bit busy at work.”

“You said that last week. Can you get the stupid thing in this weekend?” she asked, “I don't want it conking out when taking Tim to soccer.”

“Is he still playing soccer? I thought he quit.”

“Have you been living under a rock? He's your son, Henry. Take an interest in what he's doing!”

“I would if he'd say more than two words to me.”

“Well maybe if you made more of an effort he would!” she said, and that was the end of that matter, “I don't suppose you happened to get the milk and bread I asked you, hmm?”

Henry's stomach sank a little. The sodding milk and bread. There was still a quarter of a litre left in the fridge, and there were a few English muffins in the pack. More than enough for breakfast the next day. What was the hassle?

“No. No I didn't. Look, can I at least put my stuff down?”

“I specifically asked you to get milk and bread!”

“Well, I'm sorry, alright, I was a little preoccupied what with the coming merger. I've got to be ready with a counter-offer if we get rejected.”

“Again with the merger! Geez, haven't you got that sorted yet?”

Henry simmered, “No. No, I haven't. It's still in the balance.”

“How *much* in the balance?”

“A slight tip could send it either way.”

“But doesn't your commission depend on it going through?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess I hadn't thought of that,” he grumbled, “All this time I thought I'd get my commission without it but now it's all so clear to me.”

“No need to get snarky.”

“I'm not getting snarky. Look, it's touch and go. We make an offer, Gibson makes an offer to rival it. They can't go much lower, I'm sure of it, but neither can we,” he explained, “It's a matter of who blinks...”

“Well maybe if you spent less time screwing around in that garage and more time working on the case you'd have nailed it by now.”

Henry held his hands up, “What? It's not a matter of *hours*. It's now entirely up to the customer.”

Loretta dismissed him with her hand. That was the sign that the conversation was over. He could pursue it, of course, but it would end only one way, with Loretta belittling him into feeling like dirt. He would then say something that he would regret, she'd say something back. They wouldn't speak to each other for a few days, then, little by little, the conversation would creep back from the edges of civility.

The tone would settle, the icy air would thaw and familiarity would reveal its ugly face once more.

Keeping silent was just a way to shorten the whole cycle. It was just efficiency and, with the month he had had, he decided he didn't need the strain.

“I'll go and get some damn milk and bread,” he sighed as he put his jacket back on.

“There's no point now. You're already home. The point was to pick it up on the way – oh, forget it. Seriously! You never listen! It's like I'm talking to a brick wall, only a brick wall is actually *good* for something.”

He gripped his keys but, somehow, they slipped from his grasp. They fell, clattering to the ground. He rolled his eyes, waiting for the criticism to come flying his way.

And it came. Stupid, useless something or other. He wasn't really listening.

He let it wash over him as he bent over to pick up his latest mistake from the floor. Something in his wrist snapped, like a cable under tension – *Ping!*

Nevertheless he was bent over, and his hand was right there

ready to grip the keys. With an effort he tried again, but his hand slipped. He swore and tried once more but his fingers refused to clasp properly.

He gritted his teeth, finding it intensely painful and difficult to perform such a simple task, "*Son of a bitch!*"

With a snap, a crunch and a clatter, his hand fell off from his arm, lying, twitching, next to the keys. He blinked, looking from the empty, bleeding stub on the end of his arm back to the wriggling fingers on the floor.

He could see bits of bone, nerve endings and blood vessels, raw and angry. Then the blood oozed out, covering everything in a bright red sheen, obscuring the rest of the flesh.

"Ah, Loretta?" he started, but she was already well into another tirade.

"...and there you are hunched over like a fool. What's with you, anyway? It's like you're *trying* to act like an idiot!"

"Loretta?"

"What kind of pathetic excuse for a man did I marry..."

"Loretta!" he shouted.

"What? What is it? What now? What amazing, stupendous achievement have you suddenly accomplished?"

He pointed to his hand, still twitching, as it lay on the floor.

"What? You've gone and busted your hand, eh?"

"Uh. Yeah. It seems. I mean. Shit, look at it!"

"Yeah, and I can see it, Henry, and I can see it's making a bloody mess all over the floor. Something else for me to clean up. Great. Thanks. I was hoping for more work."

"But..."

Her eyes narrowed, "Look, just go and get the damn milk and bread, alright? Can you do that at least? It's really simple. Go to store, pick up milk, pick up bread, pay money, come back home," she snapped sarcastically, "And try not to kill anyone on the way out."

"But..."

"But what?"

"My hand!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Henry, get over it!" she cried, picking it

up by the middle digit like it was a dead rat, “Here. I’ll put it somewhere safe and you can pine over it when you get home.”

He looked at his stump, still bleeding out.

She threw a handful of napkins at him, “And mop that up when you get back. Shit, it’s like I’ve got three children in this place.”

“Yeah, but how am I supposed...”

“And don’t take all night!”

Henry got into the car with a huff. This was all he needed. His hopes of having a quiet night, and relaxing a little, having a beer in front of the cricket, went out the window.

He tucked the napkins around his stump and folded the jacket arm over the top to keep it all in. He was overly warm, but he didn’t want blood to get all over the seats. That would be just something else for Loretta to have a go at him for.

Driving was a lot harder than he remembered. He liked to use both hands while driving, he realised, and being reduced to just one hand and a bloody, napkin covered stump was almost impossible.

“Good thing this has got power steering,” he grumbled as he turned the corners, pressing his stinging stump against the wheel to hold it in place.

Vermilion blotches dripped onto the wheel, running in little rivers to fall onto his pants. He made a mental note to get a few napkins to clean up the mess when he got back.

With a whole load of concentration he made it to the supermarket in one piece. Even at that time of the evening it was full of people buying slabs of beer and cartons of coke, jealously guarding their trolleys and running them into the legs of others, only to leave them in the vacant spaces in the park.

By the end of the night the trolley to car ratio would be out of natural balance, and the team of trolley herders would do their best to wrangle the iron-meshed beasts of burden and corral them into the stalls.

He fought to get a spot next to some overflowing charity bins. The seagulls were wheeling about in the orange glow of the overhead sodium lamps. The crows were pacing about the shadows, poking at this and that, using their talented brains and beaks to weed out any

scraps of food that might have been discarded in the empty fast-food bags that littered the place.

Wearily he got out, trudged to the store and pushed his way through the doors into the stark, fluorescent lights. He squinted at the sudden brightness, keen to quickly get his milk and bread and get out.

His thoughts kept returning to his hand, lying there on the ground without an arm to move it about.

In his mind's eye he could see Loretta staring at it, annoyed that it would be taking up space and dripping grisly fluids. He shook his head and marched on. The sooner he got home, the sooner he could get to mending his hand, the better.

He picked up a half squashed loaf of bread, checked the use-by date and grunted. His stump couldn't hold the loaf properly. It kept slipping and rolling. He grunted again. Without his other hand he would have a right time getting the milk. He rolled his eyes, turned on his heels and fished about for a basket that hadn't been commandeered by the oafs.

"Hey, mate. That's mine," called a voice as he bent over to pick up a mangled red basket.

He looked back, seeing a seedy, wire-haired man striding over.

"There's nothing in it," Henry said, pointing to the basket.

"That's mine."

"Look, I need a basket. My hand, you see, it fell off."

"That's mine, mate."

"I'm not your mate..."

But the man grabbed the basket and yanked it from Henry, who dropped his loaf onto the floor.

"It's mine. Piss off!" he said, turning sharply around and walking away.

Henry watched after him for a bit, then gave up. There was no point arguing. It would only mean that he would have to spend even more time under the cold blaze of the fluorescent tubes and among the rambling hordes of evening grocery shoppers. There would be another basket somewhere. It was only a matter of finding it.

After a bit of scouting he discovered one under a crate of

potatoes and dropped his bread in. The slices had all moved to one side of the packet, so he took a few seconds to tidy up the loaf and make it presentable.

He then made his way to get a two litre bottle of milk, ignoring the strategically placed advertisements goading him to purchase the latest energy drink. He zipped around the big display of tinned tuna that was piled up over his head.

He couldn't ignore the Sample Girl, smiling broadly, shoving a tiny tub of tinned spaghetti under his nose.

Inside the tub the mixture looked like a stew of lumpy brains. The scent of tomatoes and herbs did nothing for the appearance. He recoiled a little.

“Huh?”

“Try the new Heinz Max Mix?”

“Ah, no. No thanks,” Henry said.

“It's got whole wheat pasta in it. Give it a try.”

She pushed it further under his nose. His face turned red.

“I can't. Um, you see, I've only got one hand. The other fell off...”

“You'll find the tomato sauce is a different recipe! It's great!”

“Cheers all the same. I got to get home,” he replied, giving her a side step.

“No need to be rude!” she said under her breath, then smiled broadly at the next glossy-eyed shopper, “Try the new Heinz Max Mix?”

Henry hustled to the counters. The attendant had left her post to sell cigarettes on the adjoining counter. He waited impatiently for her to return and start scanning his items.

“Hi, how're you? Just this?” the flighty attendant asked, not even bothering to look up.

“Yeah. Just that.”

Her reply came out mechanically, “Would you like anything from the Mars range from only a dollar?”

He shook his head, “No. No thanks. Just this.”

She scanned his items, “That's seven dollars forty. Do you have a rewards card?”

“A what? Hell. Oh, uh, hang on.”

The person in line behind him rolled her eyes, then, not content with the pace, verbalised her feelings, “Should've had the card ready. Other people are in line. Oh, geez. He's only got one hand. Bloody cripple. I should move to another line.”

Henry fumbled about, trying to work his hand to get his wallet out from the opposite pocket. His stump was throbbing in pain, but he could feel the burning stare of the patrons in line as he tugged at the lump of black leather.

“Sorry about this,” he muttered to the attendant.

“No worries,” she replied.

“Had one hell of a day,” he said, wiggling the top out.

“No worries.”

“My hand came off, even.”

“No worries.”

Eventually he worked the wallet enough for it to slip out and spill onto the counter.

“Sorry. Shit. Sorry,” he murmured.

Cards and coins were everywhere. The attendant blew a hair from her face as she watched the man in front of her scramble to put it all away with one hand.

“Seven forty,” she repeated, filling the spaces of his grumbles.

“I knew I should've gone in the other line. Damn cripples,” muttered the lady behind, “Got no business in a supermarket. The other line's already done.”

He bit his lip. It would do no good to cause a scene. It was more prudent to simply pay for his goods and go. With a shaking hand he handed a note to the attendant who had the change ready for him before he knew it.

“Two sixty change, have a good night,” she rattled off, putting his bag on to the bench and immediately scanning the next items, “Hi, how're you? Just this?”

Garage

The house was quiet, Loretta was watching her television shows, and the kids were wherever the hell it was they went on a Thursday. Paula would be gas-bagging on her phone to Jackie or Kathy or whoever was the latest BFF, and Tim would be stuck, slack-jawed, in front of the games console.

A quick look back at the various glows from underneath the bedroom doors that lined the hallway confirmed his suspicions.

He tossed the groceries away, checking the pantry and fridge for any sign of his hand. He looked in the freezer. He even checked the oven.

“Where's that hand?” he asked himself, looking over the bench and table.

He sneaked a peek into the bathroom sink and laundry, coming up with nothing.

“Loretta?” he called, looking into the lounge, “Loretta?”

“What, Hon?” she asked, looking up from her phone.

Its stark screen lit up her face with a white glow contrasting with ghastly shadows, as one might do with a torch when telling a scary story. She used to be beautiful, inside and out. She used to do her hair in the morning, and hug him when he came home in the evening.

They would talk about the preceding day together, make plans for the following and then kiss each other goodnight so that they could tuck themselves into bed.

Now the face looking back up at him was a stranger. A stranger with hollow eyes, wispy hair and a second chin from eating too many Tim-Tams. A stranger whose voice no longer held the love for him as it once had.

“What?”

“Where's my hand?”

“Wherever you left it,” she replied and looked back to her phone, “Did you get the milk and bread?”

“Huh? Yeah, I got the stupid milk and bread.”

“Don't get snarky. What type?”

“I don't know. Moo juice. Came from a cow. At least, I hope it did.”

“I meant the bread, Henry. What bread did you get?” she asked, flipping through a Facebook post.

“Pfft. Bread.”

She looked up, her eyes half-open, piercing. She wanted an answer, not sarcasm.

“I don't know. Bread. Had pumpkin seed or something.”

“Timothy can't eat pumpkin seeds.”

“Well, maybe it wasn't the pumpkin seed one.”

“Why did you buy the pumpkin seed bread? Bloody hell, what brand?”

“Helga's, I think. Is it important?”

“Geez, Henry! Do you have to screw everything up? Timothy doesn't eat pumpkin seeds! Was it on special?”

“I don't know. I didn't check.”

With a heavy breath, Loretta looked back at her phone, filling the air around her with icy annoyance.

Henry smacked his head, “Well. Hell. Whatever. It's bread. So, anyway, where's my hand?”

“Wherever you left it.”

“Where was that?”

“You put it somewhere,” she said with a dismissive wave.

“I didn't, remember? *You* picked it up and put it somewhere and I went to get the milk and bread.”

She didn't respond.

“Loretta?”

The phone got lowered in anger, “*What*, Henry?”

He insisted, “My hand?”

“I don't know, Henry. It was in the kitchen sink last time I saw it, OK?”

“Kitchen sink. Right. Thanks. Thanks a bunch.”

Back in the kitchen he looked closely at the metal sink. There was clearly no hand in there. There was, however, a distinct bloody trail that led from the sink, over the bench, down onto the floor and out the cat-flap.

“Bloody cat!” he cursed, opening the door and shooing it away from the pinkish-grey and red lump on the ground.

He picked up his hand, inspected the marks where the cat had evidently nibbled at it, and took it outside to the garage.

With a flick of the switch, there was the plinking sound of the fluorescent tubes starting, a couple of tantalising flashes and then the darkness within was lit by the steady white glow from above.

It was his sanctuary. No matter what happened in the world outside, his garage looked and smelled and felt exactly as a garage should. There was a mixture of turpentine, and kerosene, and wood shavings, and mouse droppings, and engine oil and a faint odour of stale beer.

It was disorderly. There were bits and pieces everywhere. Half finished projects were stored on the shelves; half baked ideas that, in a better world, would have the care and attention and time and money and resources they deserved to be fully realised. More likely than not, Henry mused on more than one occasion, they would disappear with time. They would be forgotten. They would rot.

Anyone coming along would look at the various piles, scoop them up and turf them unceremoniously into the bin.

He had wondered, often, how many other garages out there had ideas tucked away on shelves that never saw the light of day? How many others had the same ideas that lived in his garage? How many garages would it take to solve the world's problems?

An infinite amount, he had concluded, since one garage couldn't even solve one man's problems. Maybe it was because the ideas were dispersed, and that they could never be realised if they were not drawn together into some sort of *super-garage*. Perhaps. But that was just another idea, another idea to live on the bottom shelf next to the half-empty paint cans and stiff paintbrushes.

He looked at his hand. It still looked like it belonged on his arm, even though it was greyish with daubs of blue and dried up a smidge. A bit of care and attention, a bit of healing over a few days and it should be right. But it would need to stay on his arm, that was given. No coming off again. The blood had to go through the veins, not get soaked up by a clump of napkins.

First he tried just holding the wrist to his stump, pushing and squeezing a little to get it to stay, but it fell off each time. Stupid cat. Probably nibbled too hard at the tendons or scratched at the cartilage. He peered closely, pulled a few sticky cat hairs from the veins, swore and brushed some bits of grit that had wormed their way into the flesh.

“Stupid, bloody cat,” he said out loud, “Should've got a dog.”

A bandage. That might work. But the only bandages he had were in the bathroom, and if he walked past Loretta she would nag him to do something or other and that would be the end of his night. And he really needed to get his hand back on.

“There must be something,” he muttered, searching through the cupboards and on the shelves for an idea, “Newspaper? Nah. Toilet paper? Mm, maybe if I used a whole bunch... Nah. Rags? I could tie them end to end. Give that a shot.”

He pulled out a bag of rags and got to working knotting the ends together. It was difficult going, tying two corners together with only one hand. His stump had no dexterity, and was barely able to pin down the material to make the knot tight. He tried putting one end of the rag into the bench vice, which helped some, but after ten minutes of pain and sweat, he gave up.

“Useless. Absolutely useless,” he grumbled, abandoning the project and resuming his search, “Ah. Glue.”

A half empty tube of Tarzan Grip was applied to the edges. He waited until it got tacky, then clamped his wrist to his arm. He sat down, holding it on, until the prescribed five minutes was up.

“Looks good. Hmm. That might just – aw, man!”

It flopped forward a little, dragging tendrils of red-stained glue. The tugging started the flow of blood again.

“Bloody thing! What else is there?”

It was at times like this that Henry wished the Hardware store was open. He loved going in there. It was like his garage, only orderly. Everything was fresh and promising. There was so much potential lined up in neat packages on all of the shelves.

The Hardware store was a primordial garage, a proto-garage even. Ideas buzzed around in a humid jungle of tools and materials.

Projects beckoned to be undertaken. There were bits and pieces of just about everything that could be used to create or fix or improve just about anything!

Every visit he was sure to find something that struck his fancy, something that wanted him to take it home and play with it. But the problem was that there were so many possibilities there all vying for his attention that, although many projects were started, nothing ever got finished.

He just didn't have the resources. Or the money. Mostly, he didn't have the time. It was sad, and he felt terrible that he should start a project, promising it that it would get his unreserved attention, only to shelve it away when he had to stop and drive Timothy to football.

Or was it soccer? No, he'd given that up. Or it was tennis that he'd given up.

He shrugged to himself and carried on. He had a job to do.

In a little bit he came upon some gaffer tape.

“That ought to do it!” he laughed, brushing off some dust, pulling out the tab and dragging out a metre, “It'll get stuck on the hairs, damn it, but I can live with that for now. So long as the beggar stays on.”

Positioning the hand in the bench vice, he wound the clamp over it and practised aligning his arm. After a bit of an adjustment and another trial run, he was ready.

He positioned the wrist carefully on his stump and stuck a little bit down, then carefully wound the gaffer tape around until it came back upon the other side. He wound it again and again, overlapping a little up and a little down to make a decent repair.

He unclamped the hand and inspected his handiwork, “That might work. Yeah. Hmm, maybe not. Not quite.”

The hand was wobbling and flopping about a bit if he shook it, and he worried to think what could happen if it got a hard knock.

“Reinforcement,” he decided, “That's what it needs.”

Any sideways movement would knock it off again, he determined, giving it a little wiggle.

He gently tugged his wedding ring off his hand and popped it

in his pocket, then peeled a wrap of tape off. He weaved it in between his fingers, double wrapped it around the thumb, then secured it tightly to the wrist with a flourish.

“Job done,” he said to himself, giving the hand a shake.

It refused to so much as wobble. Confident that it would hold for the night, and the day after, he sighed. It was time to leave his garage, now that he now longer had a valid reason to be in there. Inside beckoned, so he got up and went to turn the garage light off. The absence of the bright white light and fifty Hertz hum was the garage's way of saying goodnight.

He stepped out of the door into the backyard, ready to head back indoors. But he paused.

It was still outside. The breeze was barely blowing at all. The crickets were chirruping merrily. The moon, as he looked up, was looking down back at him. Was that a smile?

A memory of life as a young boy, standing on the grass on a night much like tonight, only so long ago, came swimming through his head. It wasn't so much of a memory as a smell. Or a feeling. Or a sense of wonder of it all. He didn't care to think too much about it, rather he was content to let it be whatever it was and concentrate on the bright disc ruling the sky.

The moon was the same moon he had looked at all those years before, and his eyes were the same eyes that had gazed upward in wonder. It was the wonder of what lay ahead, of all the possibilities, of all the amazing achievements and accolades and discoveries he would make.

The moon, shining brightly, had reflected down upon him an assurance that the world was a benevolent place, a wonderful place, a magical place. The moon could see everything, it could see all across the world, it could see through time, and what it saw was good.

Something black scuttled next to his foot. He bent down and caught it, a cricket, and held it up in his hand to inspect it. The white of the moon reflected off its shiny, black armour. Its antennae twitched nervously up and down as it pondered just where it had landed up.

Only a second ago it had been moving across a flat, hard

surface. Now it was sitting on something soft and pink. It hadn't been eaten, that was evident and thoroughly welcome, but the surface upon which it was standing was anything but normal. It wasn't grass, it wasn't dirt. It wasn't clay or concrete or rock. And there was an enormous pair of eyes looking down upon it.

A unmistakeable, alien smile projected itself onto his face as Henry studied it, feeling the prickly sensation of its feet as it stomped about on his skin, the tickling of the antennae as they brushed his fingers. When he was a tacker he would pick up bugs and snails and all sorts and look at them closely, wondering what life was like as an insect.

Back then he could be an insect. He could crawl under his sheets where it was warm and dark and pretend he was in a hole in the ground. He could zoom around the backyard as a superhero, and ride his bike to the end of the suburb to scour the paddocks for discoveries.

Back then he could believe in his dreams, that they would be worth following.

He put the cricket, confused and disoriented, down on the grass, where it scurried away underneath the dark blades to get on with its chirruping.

“There you go, little feller,” he said, then stood back up to look at the moon again.

“Henry!” Loretta called from behind the flyscreen, “Henry, Love! Hey! What are standing there for? Come inside before you get eaten by mosquitoes! Stop your gawping and come back in!”

His memory was interrupted. His mouth dropped to a frown, then to a scowl. The moon had lied. It had lied all those years ago, and had lied to him ever since. It was lying to him now.

It made sense, of course, because there isn't any air on the moon, and without any air, how can anyone tell the truth?

He gripped his left wrist, patting the tape down hard on his wound, and trudged back inside.

Work Again

Henry found getting up the next day harder than usual on account of his aching arm and lack of sleep. The lack of a second functioning hand made simple tasks like buttering toast a right chore.

There were still no coffee pods in the container. He was still unshaven. Gingerly sliding his shirt sleeve over his arm and clumsily tying his shoe laces just took too long. By the time he left the house, he was already frustrated.

He had made a cursory check in the passenger side of the car for his teeth, but came up empty handed.

Traffic, in its sardonic way, revelled in his discomfort and refused to yield even slightly out of sympathy. Everything was just taking longer. Every motion was agonisingly complicated.

As a result, Henry was late. Genuinely late. By anyone's watch or clock or telephone.

It wasn't surprising, but it was concerning. With a bit of luck, Mister Miro would not see him come in. It had only happened on a few occasions before, only a few times. Henry crossed his fingers as he crossed the road, scuttling a little faster than he should to get past the great, stooped statue and through the doors.

Miss Fisher looked up, "Hi, Henry."

"Hi, Miss Fisher. How're you?"

"Fine thanks. How're you?"

"Can't complain. No one listens."

"That's good."

He did a quick sweep with his head. No Big M in sight. He was short, though, and could be behind a cubicle on the opposite side, ready to spring out.

"You need something, Henry?" Miss Fisher asked, adjusting her spectacles.

"Just, ah, just looking for, ah," he faltered.

"Mister Miro is currently on the second floor," she said with a wink, "You're in the clear."

"Uh, that's not –"

"You're welcome. But you'd better hurry."

“Ah, thanks. Um, thanks Miss Fisher,” Henry said, scuttling away.

He skulked along the cubicle partitions, like a commando behind enemy lines, leaping across the gaps and whipping quickly around the corners.

The troglodytes in their cubicles hardly dared to watch him as he went, in case they should be implicated in whatever he was up to. It wasn't normal behaviour, not at all, and such actions were sure to draw the attention of Mister Miro. They burrowed their noses into their monitors, shuffled their chairs about a little, anything to appear deeply concentrated in their work.

He was almost to the point of reaching his sanctuary, only one more block to go, when the photocopier kicking up gave him a start. He turned sharply around. There was a crack and a pop, and his leg buckled.

“Shit!” he groaned, reaching out to put his coffee on the desk before he dropped it, “Geez, that hurts!”

Geoff, eyes almost wide enough to be called open, looked over the partition, “That sounded nasty, Hank. You bust your knee or what?”

“Knee, ankle, one of the joints. What's the difference?” Henry replied, hauling himself up to his chair and rubbing his leg, “Either way it's screwed. Aw, geez. Look at that!”

His foot was hanging out at right angles, limp. He grunted and groaned as he tried to get it to wiggle even a little bit.

“Good thing the car's an automatic, eh?” he laughed, rubbing his limb to get some sensation into it, “I wonder what else can go wrong?”

He clicked on his applications and watched as the familiar progress bar appeared.

“You're in the wars, then?”

“Yeah. Never rains, eh?”

Geoff pointed to his hand, “What happened there?”

“Fell off.”

“No kidding?”

“No kidding.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

Geoff whistled and raised his eyebrows appropriately. He was a good listener, was Geoff.

Henry went on, “Made a right mess. Couldn't get to put it back on straight away, but. Had to go out and get bread and milk.”

“Figures.”

“And when I came back, the cat had had a go at it!”

“It's a fine thing you've done there, Hank,” Geoff said, examining the gaffer tape, “Looks like a proper job. Is it holding?”

“It's good enough for now, but there's still a little give when you move it like this.”

“What did Loretta say?”

“About what?”

“Your hand.”

Henry sighed, “Not a lot. She got me a plastic bag to put over it in bed so it wouldn't leak on the sheets.”

Geoff shrugged, “Makes sense, I guess.”

“Yeah. But every time I moved the bag rustled. Had to sleep on the couch because I kept waking her up. And it was sticky and sweaty. Hardly got any sleep at all.”

“Well, hopefully that'll hold proper, you know.”

“Yeah, I hope so. You think it's getting pink yet? I can't tell. It's like everything is going ping these days. Lost my teeth...”

“Still haven't found them?”

“Nah. They're in the car somewhere. I'll find them when I get two seconds. But then my hand goes and falls off. Busted my toe yesterday. Won't stay put. And now my leg! Oof, that smarts!”

“Looks like it's starting to swell. You want I should get some ice or something?”

“Thanks, Geoff. You're a real mate. I'd better check on the merger status first, but,” Henry replied, stealing a glance at his monitor, “Hopefully I can't do too much damage doing that.”

“Sucks to be you - *whoops*,” Geoff said, quickly sitting back down at his partition.

Mister Miro's corpulent face loomed through a gap in the

partitions a way over. It was incredible. Geoff, after working at Atlas for so long, had the uncanny ability to sense when Big M would be wandering the cubicles, even if he didn't have a direct line of sight.

It was a super-power, it was. Some superheroes can lift cars, others can see through walls. Geoff had the power of prescience.

Henry snorted to himself as he thought about the other super-powers in the office. There was Janice. She had the power to stop conversations with her presence. It was like whenever she entered the room, the notion of talking about anything more significant than the weather just felt wrong. And Philbert could turn any joke around on the teller.

Perhaps everyone had a super-power. That was a pretty cool idea. Perhaps it was up to everyone to figure it out. Henry began to wonder what his super-power might be, but his thoughts were interrupted by Mister Miro's tapping foot. He looked up.

“Oh, hi Mister Miro.”

He replied coolly, “Hello, Ludlow.”

“How're you doing this morning?”

“I'm well, thank you, Henry.”

“Good to hear.”

“But I could be better.”

Henry did his best to hide the annoyance that was growing on his face. Not once had Mister Miro asked how he was doing. Not once did he ever show the slightest bit of concern for his well-being.

His hand had broken off, damn it! It was evident. It's not like he wandered around with blood stained gaffer tape as a fashion statement, or sported a buckled knee as a trend. Surely to goodness Big M could take two seconds to pull his head out from his rotund buttocks and take stock of how the people around him, those *underneath* him, were feeling.

“You know why I could be better?”

“I couldn't give a rat's arse, Big M, you pompous, fat wanker!”

That was what he desperately wanted to say. Instead, Henry only shook his head. He was an employee, and as an employee he had to be submissive and accept that Big M's title was higher than his.

Even if he was a pompous, fat wanker.

The only reason Miro and he even spoke, he had surmised, was because of the job. In any other setting he and that balding, pale, flabby-faced cretin would never have had anything to do with each other. The job thrust them together, held them together like opposing magnets.

He shuddered. That was a terrible metaphor. That would imply that they were alike, he and Miro. And he was *nothing* like him.

“You know why?” Miro pressed.

Great. He wanted a verbal response. And he would not stop until he got it. He wanted that little piece of audible submission that reconfirmed what both of them knew, that Miro was his overlord and master so long as his tiny, black heart was beating.

“Why?” Henry managed.

Mister Miro paused, a little for effect and a little to let Henry's meek response stay in the air for just that bit longer. He licked his lips, leaned in and rested his arm on Henry's desk. Henry made a mental note to clean that spot afterwards.

“Because the merger hasn't gone through yet.”

Henry stopped himself from swearing, and he stopped himself from punching Mister Miro. He didn't, however, stop his eye from rolling in its socket, slowly turning with a soft, spongy sound until it stopped, looking at the inside of his temple.

“Ooh. Oh, wow!” Henry moaned.

Mister Miro continued unabated, “It's been a while, Ludlow, too long in my opinion. Mergers shouldn't take this long. It's not rocket science. Why, if I had taken control of it, I could have pushed it through a month ago.”

Henry held his hand up and clutched his eye, “We only *began* negotiations a month ago.”

“Nevertheless, I would have accelerated the process. I would have pushed! You know how to push, don't you, Henry? It requires effort. And I think that's why this is taking as long as it is,” he said, thrusting his finger at Henry, “You're not putting in any effort! I'm looking at you, and you know what I see?”

“Can you give me a minute with this?” Henry asked,

scrounging for a tissue to sop up some of the juices that were spilling over his lid.

“No, Henry, you can deal with that later. Gosh, I'm imparting my wisdom to you and you're busy putting on your make-up.”

“Hell's bells! There's something wrong with my eye, sir!”

“There's something wrong with your whole attitude! If you had a different attitude, we wouldn't be having this discussion.”

“What? Mister Miro, the merger isn't going to magically go through if I hassle the client. That'll just piss them off.”

“See? You clearly don't understand what's required to get the job done. You haven't got the nous, the gumption, the instinct! And that's my fault.”

Henry, doing his best with a coffee stained napkin to hold his eye steady, looked back at Miro, “Your fault?”

“You're not a go-getter, Ludlow, you never were. And I knew this. I thought you could change, but you can't! I thought giving you responsibility might make you grow,” he seethed.

Henry stood up, “Mister Miro, my eye is really bugging me.”

“Sit! Sit down!”

Henry paused. His head was in pain. His hand throbbed. His leg was screaming at him. And Big M was just staring at him. He didn't care for Henry, that was obvious.

Just five minutes, Henry thought, five minutes of peace and quiet. Or five minutes alone in a room with Big M and a cricket bat. Either way would be good. Either way would yield satisfactory results.

He obediently plonked back down.

“Good boy. So, if you're listening... you are listening, aren't you?”

“Yes, Mister Miro.”

“I've reassessed your position on the merger. I've spoken to the Board. This can't go on any longer. I'm putting Roger on the case with you.”

“Roger?” he gawped, “Roger? But he'll...”

“Get the job done, I know. You could learn a thing or two from him.”

“But the client will respond any day now! He's got no input! It's a finished affair. Sir, there's nothing he can do or say that could possibly alter the outcome. The ball is in the client's court.”

“And when the response comes through, I think you'll find that it will be a favourable one. Roger has done this kind of thing before, you know.”

“I don't believe this!” Henry began, but he was cut short by Big M's famous victory voice.

“*Believe it, Henry!*”

“If you put Roger on... that will split the commission!”

“Money? Is that what your motivation is?”

Henry was fuming, “But – but I've done all the work!”

“Really? I've seen you sitting on your butt and complaining a lot. Doesn't sound like work to me. I've had you coming in late every day for a month. That's not work,” Mister Miro said, “Roger, on the other hand, comes in early. Roger knows when to push the client and when to back off. Take notes, Henry, he's worth at least two of – oh. Oh, pick that up!”

Henry's eyeball had wiggled its way out from its socket and popped out, flying in an upward arc. Henry had snatched at it as it flew through the air, but he only succeeded in knocking it over the partition.

“Really, Henry! You're a disgrace to the firm. How do you expect to function without an eye? And what's that smell?”

“Probably my hand. You see...”

“Get yourself sorted, Henry. And the next time I see you, I want you to be shaved!” Miro ordered, storming off.

Geoff peeked over the partition and handed Henry his eye back.

“Thanks, Geoff,” he said, brushing his eye off and attempting to insert it into his socket.

“Don't mention it. No, really. I had to fish it out from behind my monitor.”

“Explains the dust.”

“You nearly got it in my coffee.”

“Sorry.”

“Pah. You should know better, Hank, answering back to Big M like that. Anyone would think you *wanted* to share your commission with Roger.”

“I didn’t – I don’t. I worked my butt off for this merger. It’s consumed my bloody life! What’s wrong with this world, Geoff? Why can’t something just go right for once?”

Geoff nodded sagely, “Things go right all the time, Hank. Just not for the right people.”

Henry made a couple more goes at getting his eye back in. After the third attempt, with a push, a shove and a squeeze, it noisily sucked in, bringing his eyelids in with it. It was a few more minutes until he had it happily sitting still.

“You alright?” Geoff asked, handing him a fresh coffee-stained napkin.

“You know, I envy that damn statue out the front.”

“Really? Why’s that, Hank? He’s got to carry the world. That’s a pretty tough ask.”

“Yeah, but everyone can *see* that he’s carrying it, you know. It’s pretty bloody obvious. You won’t catch anyone asking him to drop the Earth and go get some sodding milk and bread, you know? And if he complains of a bad back, people would nod and say, ‘Well of course!’” Henry explained.

“And it looks like he gets plenty of exercise and fresh air,” Geoff mused, “Still, I reckon having pigeons poop on you all the time wouldn’t be all that great.”

“Ha ha. Yeah. Yeah, I reckon that’d be pissing him off.”

Henry looked at his hand. The gaffer tape was getting loose around the edges and had picked up some fluff and dust. He pulled a few of the looser bits off and tried to pat it down. The corners refused to stay and spitefully flipped back up.

“Still. I reckon I’d do a sight better if I wasn’t stuck behind this stupid monitor all day. A man needs exercise, you know. He needs to throw spears and wrestle and stuff.”

“You reckon you could bring a deer down?” Geoff asked, “Or a kangaroo? How about a rabbit?”

“Dunno. I’d give it a try, but,” Henry said, smiling to himself,

“It'd make a decent change from this.”

He pointed to the cubicle that surrounded him on three sides. Geoff nodded, shuffled his finger under his nose, and let Henry ruminate.

“You know, it's not carrying the World on your shoulders that does it, Geoff,” Henry said finally, “Because that's what we were bloody well built for. It's the little things. It's the friggin' little things that wear you down and grind you to dust. Mark my words. That statue won't get squashed, it'll have little bits chipped off it. It'll have the rain wear it down. The acid in the bird poop will rough up the surface. It'll have a crack that forms up its butt that'll grow bigger and bigger until the bugger splits wide open.”

“I hear you, mate,” said Geoff, “I hear you. Say, do you want to head over to pub after work?”

The thought of a quiet drink in a dark bar, with no other sounds but the clanking of glasses and the rambling cricket commentator to interrupt his thoughts, was quite possibly the closest thing to heaven that Henry could think of at that moment.

“Yeah, I would Geoff. I truly bloody would. More than anything,” he said, letting out a resigned sigh, “But I can't.”

“That's OK, mate,” Geoff said, sitting back down in his cubicle, “Neither can I.”

Home Again

The Friday night traffic was shockingly bad. A tram had collided with a truck somewhere out of the way. Or maybe it was a fallen telephone pole. Maybe it was a fire. Who knew? The announcers on the radio acted like they had a hunch, but they were just reading off a screen.

A detailed report would be on the news later that night for sure. It was something big. Everything on that side of the city got diverted. Diverted through a bunch of back-roads, through suburbs that showed Henry that his pathetic dwelling was clearly not up to the standards of what a proper house in a proper suburb could be.

Traffic was like that.

The starling was not there when he arrived. The fence was empty. Even the wattle-birds had gotten bored and went back to their nests to rest. It was far too late for all of that. Birds can only wait around for so long.

"I'm home," he announced, dragging his foot across the threshold.

"I'm home," he said again, shambling into the kitchen.

"Dinner's cold," Loretta said, storming past him, "It was hot an hour ago."

He appealed, "I sent you a text! I told you I'd be late!"

"I'd already started cooking. It's over there, help yourself," she said, taking her phone out and flicking through it, "I'm sick of this."

"Sick of what?"

"Gary Thompson is never late."

"I'm not Gary."

"He and his wife *always* have dinner together."

"I'm still not Gary."

"I know. If you were, you would've been here. We could have had dinner together like a regular family."

"You think I don't want that?"

"What *do* you want, Henry?" she asked pointedly, "What the Hell do you want?"

"Silence," he replied honestly, "Just a moment of pure, damn,

sodding silence.”

“Whatever.”

Henry scooped up some brown goop from a pot and slopped it onto the plate.

“Braised steak and onions?”

“Yeah.”

“From a can?”

“You got a problem with that?”

He did. He really did. He really, truly did. But he did not wish to cause an argument. He wanted that even less. Arguments were not conducive to silence.

He relented, “No. No problem.”

Food was food, after all. And, with an English muffin, it made a decent enough meal, even if it was a bit military. Justine Thompson, he thought, would have made it from scratch, with fresh ingredients. She would have adjusted the recipe to use a little less salt, a few more vegetables. She would have ensured it was piping hot, with rice and maybe a salad.

And she would never have used a can.

He decided not to voice his thoughts and, instead, tucked hungrily into his meal. Cold or from a can, it did not matter in the end. It was food and he was hungry. Very soon he was sopping up the remnants with the last bit of muffin.

The empty plate looked up at him. He looked down at it. His eyebrows furrowed. Surely he had just eaten a meal. He was no longer hungry, which made sense. So why couldn't he remember even eating it?

He sat, staring through the plate, through the table, down through the tiles, past the floorboards and away underneath the earth. It was cold and dark down there. Cold and dark, and *silent*.

Loretta looked up from her phone, “So how's the merger coming, Hon?”

Henry dropped his fork and held his aching eye, “I don't want to talk about it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I don't want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

Well, that was a tough question, and it would involve more thought than Henry could muster. He tried to evade it.

“It's complicated.”

That reply had never worked, no matter how he applied it. Still, it was all he had in his arsenal.

Loretta countered with another toughy, “Have you fluffed it?”

Henry looked longingly at the plate, hoping that he could have had another mouthful to ruminate on. The few crumbs that remained wouldn't have made a nibble.

“No. I haven't fluffed it.”

“Good, because we need the money. The credit card is due soon. And there's school fees on top of that.”

“Uh-huh.”

And that was the end of it. Henry went to the fridge, got a can of beer out and sat back down. Loretta moved the can away.

“What? Loretta -”

She asked, “So why don't you want to talk about it?”

So that wasn't the end of it.

“Like I said, it's complicated.”

“So I'm an idiot? I can't possibly understand?”

“No, it's...”

“What, Henry?”

His eye flipped upward, rolling about to show the red-webbed sclera, “Roger has been put on.”

She hit the table, “So you've fluffed it! Geez, Henry!”

“I haven't fluffed it! Roger's just been put on to help out, is all.”

She squinted at him, “What does that mean? Is he going to take the commission?”

“It'll be split.”

“Split? How long has he been on it?”

“He just got put on today, alright,” Henry moaned, trying to work his eye back around with his finger, “Look, can I just drink a beer in silence?”

“So how much will he get? It won't be fifty-fifty, surely! You've been on that forever.”

“I know, I know.”

“So what'll he get?”

“I don't know. It's not up to me. It all depends on what that dumb-arse Miro says.”

“Why? What's he got to do with it.”

“He's my boss. He loves Roger. And he hates me. So he'll probably do what he can to screw me over on this one,” Henry lamented.

“Well he can't! You shouldn't let him!”

“What can I do?”

Loretta scowled, “You can be a bloody man, Henry. You can tell him what's what! You can tell him that you're not going to let that Roger guy take all the credit.”

His shoulders slumped. No, she didn't understand.

“Yeah. That's what I should do. Can I have my beer now?”

“No!” she said, putting it back in the fridge, “You drink too much as it is! That's why you haven't got the merger through yet.”

“Oh, is that why?” he mumbled.

“Yes, that's why! You need to stop being such a lazy bum, and start working!”

He appealed, “I *am* working. I work every day. I've never stopped working!”

“Then what are you doing now?”

“I *was* about to have a bloody beer and a sit down for five minutes!”

He pushed his jaw forward, hearing an audible click as it threatened to dislocate. He gently pushed it back into place. For a second there was a moment of golden silence. Outside his cricket began to chirrup merrily. Loretta went back to her phone.

He wiggled the finger of his left hand to see if there was any life in it yet. He inspected it closely. It felt soft, too soft, and it looked dull and grey.

No beer. Fine. He was going to have a sit down anyway, but he needed a beverage of some sort to do that. He boiled the kettle, made a coffee and sat back down.

A dazzling flash of hair, sequins and glitter that was Paula,

Henry's daughter, whizzed past the table and stopped at the fridge. Her elevated heels tocked on the tiles in her haste. She was dolled up, hair puffy, make-up slathered on.

“And where are you off to tonight?” Henry asked.

She looked up from the fridge door, “Jackie's.”

“Studying hard, I hope?”

“Ha ha.”

“No, really.”

“Ha ha.”

Henry's eyebrows dropped, “That's not an answer. Are you studying?”

There was a microscopic pause before she answered. She used that time to brush some of the hair from her face and feign a smile.

“Of *course*. What else would we be doing?”

“I don't know. That's why I'm asking.”

She replied curtly, “Well it's none of your business.”

“It is my business. I'm your dad.”

“It stopped being your business when I turned sixteen.”

“Ah, right. The whole age thing. Look, Pea, time has got no bearing on whether or not I'm your dad.”

“I never said you weren't. I said it's not your business.”

“Right. None of my business.”

“That's right.”

Loretta looked up from her phone, “Henry! Shut up!”

“What? All I want is to know what's up with our daughter.”

“She's fine, Henry. Leave her alone and shut up.”

“Don't you want to know what she gets up to at Jackies?” he asked.

“None of your business,” Paula interjected.

Loretta added, “She's old enough to take care of herself.”

Paula huffed from the room, taking a drink with her. Loretta was staring at him.

“Alright. Fine. Sue me for giving a shit.”

“Shut up. And fix your eye up, already. It's giving me the creeps.”

“Stupid thing keeps rolling about,” he explained, pushing it

back so that it pointed forward, “I don't know how to fix it. Gosh, this coffee tastes like crap.”

“Then make a pod.”

“We haven't got any. There are no pods left.”

“Then why didn't you get some at the supermarket?” Loretta grouched.

Henry looked down at the brown liquid. It was tasteless. The jar was pretty fresh, he was sure, and he had put sugar in it, but it was as if he was drinking a cup of hot water.

“What coffee is this?”

“Moccona. The same you had yesterday.”

“Tastes like crap.”

“It's the same you had yesterday. Did it taste like crap yesterday?”

He sighed, “I don't know. I can't even remember yesterday.”

Loretta blew sharply over her bottom lip and went back to looking at her phone. Henry got back to his coffee. Tasteless, odourless, it was all he had, so he drank it, grimacing with each mouthful. He had a chance for a sit down and, by golly, bad coffee and no beer wasn't going to stop him!

“Oh, for Pete's sake, Henry. I can see you, you know. If you don't like the coffee just throw it out!” Loretta said.

“It's almost finished, anyway,” he said, swirling the bottom and looking at the little brown flecks that got lifted, “May as well see it to the end.”

Paula called back from the front door, announcing, “I'm going now!”

Henry snorted, “Great.”

“I need a lift!”

“Great.”

Loretta whacked his arm, “Hey! You're always on about not spending quality time with your daughter.”

“Huh?”

“Give her a lift!”

“Only a few minutes ago she didn't want to even tell me how she was doing.”

“That's because you were prying!”

“I was not! I was asking – Oh, screw it,” he grouched, leaving the grubby remains of the coffee and grabbing his keys, “I know how this is going to end.”

“Shut up, Henry.”

He got into the car, grumbling all the while.

“What's gotten into you?” Paula asked, “You're always pissed off these days.”

“Nothing!” he snapped, “Absolutely nothing!”

He started the car, checked his seat belt and reversed to the road.

“Right. I'm driving, see? Everyone's happy?”

“Whatever,” Paula replied.

“Where are we going?”

“I'm going to Jackie's. You can go wherever you like.”

“Where's that?”

“Brunswick.”

He cried, “Brunswick? Oh, come on! That's twenty minutes away.”

“That's why I need a lift.”

“So that's another hour out of my life, then?”

“It's twenty minutes.”

“Up. Then twenty back, then add in an extra bit for the drop off and that's if this heap of junk doesn't conk out on the way.”

“Let's get going, Dad.”

Henry asked, “So I'm a bloody taxi service now?”

“Do you want me to take a taxi? It'll cost, like, fifty bucks.”

“Suits me fine, so long as you're paying. Couldn't you take a train?”

“At this hour? Come on, let's go. I'm supposed to be there in twenty minutes.”

And that was the end of the discourse. Henry tried to talk about various things on the way, about the weather, about school, about his work. Each attempt was met with silence or a grunt or a non-committal response.

At the Nicholson Street lights, Henry looked over at his

daughter. It might have been only last week when she was a bopping, bouncing little girl, keen on getting into this and that, stumbling to take her first steps, fumbling over her first words.

Now her chubby little arms had been replaced with ultra-tanned sticks. Her dazzling eyes were hidden under layers of make-up. Even her cheeky smile had been transformed to a smarmy snarl, coloured a fake, ruby Maybelline red.

The world, Henry realised, was changing her. The world consumes everyone, one nibble at a time.

“Do you remember, Paula, a bit ago, I used to push you around in the wheelbarrow in the backyard? We'd go around and around, and over bumps and under the clothes-line until I got tired,” he asked, “You never got tired. I did all the pushing, you'd do all the laughing.”

“Huh?”

A little smile crept to his face, “You'd hop in, whether there was dirt or dust or sand in there or whatever, you didn't care. You'd get in and brace yourself so you didn't fall.”

He laughed a little.

“And then, if I didn't start pushing, you'd look back, all impatient like, and would be like, 'come on!'”

He let the smile linger on his face for a couple of seconds. The lights turned green.

He prompted, “Remember that?”

“No,” she said, “Why?”

The smile reluctantly melted away from Henry's face and slithered down to hide under the driver's seat. He swallowed the memory. Somehow it tasted a little bitter.

“Nothing. I guess I was just...”

“Ew! Gross!”

He started, “What? What's up?”

“That's just gross,” she said, holding up a white and red item in her hand, “Is that a – a tooth? Is that a tooth? Oh, there's another one! Ew!”

“Ah, sweet. I was looking for those – crap! Aw, geez, *no!*”

Paula had wound down the window and flung the teeth out into the night, wiping her hands on the car seat. Henry pulled over

carefully.

“Damn it, I needed those, Pea!”

“What were they doing here? That's gross. I had to touch them!”

“Am I that repulsive?” Henry asked.

“Just keep going! I'm going to be late!” she stormed.

“Can you please go and get them back?”

“Ew! No! I'm not picking them up again. And they're on the road, now.”

“Pea...”

“Just go!”

Henry engaged the gear and pulled back onto the road, making a mental note of the houses.

“I needed those, Pea!” he grouched.

“Turn into that street there. Just pull up over here!”

“Where's the house?”

“Just pull up.”

“Which number?”

She insisted, “Just pull up.”

“Oh. You don't want to be seen with your old man, is that it?”

The perceptible pause was enough for confirmation, “Just pull up.”

He sighed, indicated, pulled over and let her out.

“What time am I picking you up?” he asked dutifully.

“You're not.”

“What?”

“I'm sleeping over.”

“Hell you are!”

“I've already told Mum. She said it was fine.”

“You didn't tell me.”

“*Good night, Dad!*” she called, hitching her backpack on her back.

“Come back here – Aw, shit!”

Henry slumped back into his seat. He could go after her. He could make a scene and pull her back to the car, kicking and screaming.

He watched as she walked briskly up the street. She was confident. Independent. Society and the Law said that she was old enough to make decisions for herself. They said she was a grown woman who was capable of making rational choices.

On the topic of his role as a guide, a mentor, as her dad, they were curiously silent.

Still, maybe he could compromise and bring her home at, like, eleven.

Or, he thought, he could go back home and not worry about it. If Loretta said it was okay, then she must know something he didn't. Maybe that Jackie girl was the responsible type. Maybe they were just studying.

His illusions were shattered when she turned into a house with the porch light on, and was greeted at the door by an unmistakably male figure. They kissed.

“Son of a bitch!” he growled, revving the car engine.

Paula looked back, frowned, gave a cheeky little wave and went inside.

His stomach boiled. His kidneys squirted juices. His eye rolled sideways and his abdomen tore open, spilling the hot acids and adrenaline over the car seat and all over his pants.

“Aw, damn it! Damn it! Son of a bitch!” he yelled as his stomach and liver nosed underneath his ribs and pushed their way through the rift.

He poked the escaping bits here and there to keep them inside, but his abdomen was crumbling to pieces. His seatbelt was the only thing holding it all together. If he unbuckled, he feared, he would lose it all. There was nothing for it but to go home and try to get the mess sorted out.

Garage Again

Henry never did find his teeth. He had turned the car around, retraced his route and looked out from the window where he thought they might be. He wanted to get out, use his phone as a torch and find his dentine articles, but the risk of losing his stomach and intestines was too great. Entrails were more valuable than teeth, any day of the week. He stayed in the car, wound the window back up and drove slowly home.

Getting back into the house was difficult. As soon as the seatbelt came undone, Henry's abdomen gave way and his stomach fell out. He had caught it inside his shirt, but the flimsy piece of material was not much of a support and it was getting soaked in a sea of succus and blood.

He hunched forward, holding all of the bits and pieces in as best he could, hoping that nothing had moved so much that he wouldn't be able to figure out how to put it all back again. He needed to go straight to the garage and avoid Loretta. It was better to get it all fixed and tidied up before anything else.

Overhead the gentle flapping of fruit bats sounded as they made their way from tree to tree. Normally Henry would stop and have a look at their dark shapes drifting overhead, blocking out the stars as they went, but he was in no position to lift his head up. Instead he went, head down, pressing his stomach contents in with his bad hand, leaving his functioning hand free to unlock the side gate.

Upon the concrete was a dark patch that drew Henry's attention. He hobbled over and squinted, looking down at the mass with his good eye.

“Oh.”

There were ants. Lots and lots of ants. There was a marching trail that led from the grass to a black mound and back again. In the twilight he could see them trundling mandible to abdomen, dutifully working away to do whatever it was that needed to be done.

He pressed his stomach in harder and leaned in a little bit closer. It was a dark cluster, warped and twisted. The massing ants

prevented him from seeing just what it was they were pulling and tearing at.

“Oh,” he said again.

There was a leg protruding at a rude angle from the pile. It was a black, spiky leg, spindly and shiny. It was thick and bulbous at the top, tapering down to a strong joint, terminating in a narrow stump. It was the leg of his cricket.

It was under there, Henry realised, underneath the rippling coating of insects. It was being chewed at and pulled apart, bit by bit, nibbled and chomped and sliced into little pieces to be dragged back to the nest. The long, smooth, twitchy antennae had been yanked off and taken away. Its tough carapace had been breached. Its internals were now at the mercy of an efficient demolition team.

“Bastards,” Henry said, “Leave him alone!”

He flicked at the mass, dislodging the ants. A few clung on, some crawled up his hand, the rest scattered in panic.

Henry held the corpse up and looked at it. It was light. Too light. There was nothing left inside it. There was no chirrup, no wonder, no confusion. It would never stomp about or scuttle or twitch any more.

There was nothing left but the dull, black armour and some sinewy bits holding the flaky mass together.

An ant, having missed the memo, popped out from a hole that had been bored in the side and looked back up at him, shaking its head and showing its mandibles.

He dropped the cricket. The ants had already got what they wanted. They might as well have the rest. With a mighty effort he hauled himself back to his feet. He needed a second to steady himself on his good leg. He shambled to the garage and turned the light on.

He stopped, peering into the room.

Something was different. It was his garage. It was the one in his backyard, filled with his memories and junk and unopened packets of nails. All of that, it was still there. It was definitely the same garage. But *something* was different.

It was the smell. That was it! There was no smell.

There was no smell! Where was the kerosene? Where was the

cut wood? Where was it? Had someone cleaned up or something? No, surely not. Even if everything within had been removed, the smell would remain.

It had been there forever and now it was gone.

His hand slipped, his stomach dropped out and spilled the braised steak and onions on the floor.

He grunted, picking it up, "Bugger!"

He put his stomach down on a bench and opened a cupboard. Inside was an array of bottles, each containing a different aromatic.

He opened up a container of methylated spirits. He licked his lips in anticipation, brought the bottle to his nose and sniffed.

Nothing.

Well, it was a clear liquid, after all, so perhaps he had just filled the bottle with water at some stage in the past. Ha ha, that was it. That was it. It was water. He closed the bottle and put it back.

His eye fell on a bottle of blue kerosene and he paused.

He shut his eyes, took a deep breath and opened it, taking a long, deep sniff.

Absolutely nothing. He could feel the air moving through his nose. He could feel his lungs expand as the air rushed into them. He knew that he was sniffing properly. He had done it a few times before.

But there was no smell. He had lost his sense of smell. Inside his skull his olfactory bulb had given up.

"Great. Just sodding well great! Fantastic!"

He opened up another bottle, and another, and another. He pushed his nose into his armpit. He nuzzled some old rags, a half-empty beer can, the dust on the counter, even some old mouse droppings.

Absolutely, positively, without a doubt, stone-cold, motherless nothing.

He threw his hand up, "That's fantastic! What else? What else?"

Slumping into a chair, he brooded for a good while. His stomach, still on the bench, would have to wait for a bit. He was in too much of a mood to make any repairs.

No more would he smell the rains of summer. Visiting the beach, with salt water and fish and chips and vinegar and dead seals, would lack the amusement it once did.

He slumped a bit more.

Whether milk was good or sour, he couldn't tell. He wouldn't be able to smell the hops in beer, or the roast of a coffee. Or the scent of Loretta.

The problem with chairs, he realised, is that they only allow a certain amount of slumping.

He looked at his stained tee-shirt. There was no getting away from it. He had to do something to fix it. Sitting around moping wasn't going to help. He had to soldier on.

Honestly, he wasn't sure exactly how to tackle it. The stomach was all wobbly and squishy. Glue might not be the best method. Sure, it would hold it in place for a bit, while he came up with something better, something more permanent. He scratched his head a little in thought.

Nothing really came to him, so he scratched a little more.

A corset. Well, not a corset exactly, but something like it would be fine. It needed to fit around his midriff rightly and tightly. It needed to be flexible, or he wouldn't be able to bend. It needed to allow him to breathe. It needed to be unaffected by water.

Probably most importantly, though, it needed to be worn under clothes. The last thing he needed was a bunch of nosy interrogators at work, plying him with questions about his gut. The less obvious he could make it, the better.

He scratched a little harder. This was going to take some work. The rags and oily cloths that were in the rag-bag would simply not do. They were smelly. They were old. With the stresses of him flexing, they would certainly tear apart.

He scratched until it hurt.

Rope. Rope was a good idea. It would certainly hold him in, all the bits and pieces. But it was bulky. And it wasn't flexible, not if it pulled taut. He imagined that if he adjusted it to be tight when his lungs were full, the whole contraption would be slack when he exhaled. Similarly, if he tightened it when he exhaled, he would find

it too hard to breathe.

His finger scratched in a fury, burrowing a hole through his skull, down into his brain. He struck an idea. The timing could have been coincidence, or it could have been that his finger probed some vital part of the cortex in its scraping. Either way, an idea was an idea.

He stopped scratching, pulled his finger out of his skull and swore at the mess on the end. Without a proper place to scratch, he would be sure miss out on ideas, and with the thin hole in his head, they might just leak out. He hurriedly stuffed the end of a rag into the hole to keep his idea where it was, holding onto it before it escaped.

“Occy straps,” he said to himself, repeating it over and over so as to keep it fresh, “Occy straps. Occy straps. Where the heck did I stick them? Occy straps. They've got to be around here somewhere. I had a whole packet of them. A whole, bloody packet.”

Cupboard after drawer after shelf yielded nothing. It wasn't until he reached the spark-plugs that he spied the tell-tale hook of a strap poking out the top of a bag a little overhead.

“Aha!” he cried, moving a bundle of used headlight bulbs out of the way and pulling the bag out, “Aha! There you are. I knew I had a bag-o-bungees.”

He tested the bungee cords for elasticity. Satisfied, he took the bag back to the bench, applied a little glue to his belly and fitted it about right. Next he hooked two occy straps together and wrapped them around his waist, holding his bump on nicely. With the primary hooks in place, he wrapped another couple of pairs in a criss-cross fashion, up to his ribs and down to his groin, hooking them securely to each other.

“There. Wait, wait, that's a bit tight.”

The leads were a bit snug, so he swapped a couple over with a different pair from the bag. Running his finger around the inside, he worked the cables a bit to get them comfortable, then stood in front of an old mirror in the corner to view the result.

“Not bad. Not bad. Just wear a baggy shirt and I'm done.”

“Henry? Henry? Are you back? Who are you talking to, Hon?”
Loretta called out from the backyard.

Henry slumped. What now?

“Eh?”

“Who are you talking to? Is there someone on the phone? Is it about the merger?”

“No, dear. Just talking to myself,” he called back.

“Figures. When are you going to clean up in there? That place is a tip!”

“It's fine just the way it is!”

“It's a bloody mess!”

Henry looked around where he was standing. With all the searching he had removed a lot of items from their homes on the shelves and in the cupboards. There was a dark stain on the bench where he had rested his stomach. The rag in his head was dripping a steady pattern of flax coloured goo on the ground.

“Yeah. It sort of is,” he admitted, closing up and turning the light off, shuffling into the backyard, “One day. One day I'll get to it, alright?”

“How about now?”

“I'm a bit tired now. I only just got my stomach back on.”

“It's on now,” she pointed out, “So what else is stopping you?”

“I'm tired, alright?”

“You're always tired. That's your excuse for everything!” she cried, “Do you want to stay in bed all day?”

He smiled, “I wouldn't mind giving it a try!”

“Useless lump!”

“Look, I've had a really hard trot recently, can you just – just back off for a second.”

“If I didn't push you, you *would* stay in bed all day.”

“Humph.”

Henry considered the extraordinary prospect of a day without responsibilities, a day where he was free to do whatever he wanted to do. What would he do with such a day? What could he get up to?

His mind was blank. It had been so long since Henry had even bothered to think about what he might do. It had been an age. A quick look into his pile of dreams found nothing but a few cobwebs and an earwig.

“What the Hell do you have hanging out of your head?”
Loretta asked, breaking his thoughts, “Is that a rag?”

“I scratched a hole in my head.”

“How?”

“I was thinking.”

“Pfft. Looks like you *weren't* thinking.”

“I have to scratch something when I think! And you won't let me grow a beard.”

“So scratch your balls!”

“They're worn them away, Loretta! They've been scratched off. There's nothing left down there.”

Loretta threw her hands up, “So you've gone and made a sodding great big hole in your head. Fantastic. What will the Thompsons think?”

“I don't give a rat's arse what the Thompsons think!”

She leaned forward, “And what's with your hand? Haven't you fixed that yet?”

“It's almost fixed.”

“It's grey.”

“I've been busy.”

“It's starting to smell, Henry!”

“I can't tell.”

“Or you just don't care. I'm going inside. I'm getting bitten by mosquitoes out here.”

Henry was left outside, looking up at the dull clouds that blocked out the moon.

Junk

Walking was difficult with the occy straps on. They worked a treat, but they were riding up a bit, digging into his side and groin, and the hooks rubbed on his ribs. His leg dragged behind him, barely supporting his weight. He didn't care to think how he would shower, or get changed, or sleep. That would be a problem for the future, not now.

Now he needed a serious sit down and a beer, coupled with five minutes of silence. No coffee. No nagging. No television or phones or anything.

He bumbled through the fly-screen door, shambling his way over to the beckoning fridge. He caught Timothy on the way back to the lounge.

“Hey, Tim.”

“Hey, Dad,” he replied, “I died.”

“You what?”

“I died. The round'll go for another couple of minutes. Got fragged in the first few seconds. The other guy's a gun.”

“Ah. Right. A game, right?”

“Just getting a coffee.”

“A coffee? What are you drinking coffee at your age for?”

“I'm fourteen, Dad, I'm old enough.”

“Yeah, sure, but that's not a reason. Take it from me: you've got all the time in the world to drink coffee. You're better off sticking to tea or water.”

“Or beer?” he asked hopefully.

“No,” Henry said, “No beer. This stuff'll kill you.”

“You drink it.”

“Not lately. Look, do your old man a favour, will you? Don't grow up too quickly, yeah?”

“Sure,” Tim said, boiling the kettle, “Whatever.”

“So how's school?”

Tim shrugged, “Boring. Dave got a new Play Station. He's got the new controller and everything. It's really cool –”

“That's not school.”

“That's what we talk about *at* school.”

“What about science and maths and stuff?”

Tim shrugged, poured the water on his coffee and stirred. He pointed to Henry's shirt.

“You've got something coming through,” he pointed out.

“Yeah. Stomach dropped out. Just happened before when I dropped Pea off, you know, so I got some occy straps and fixed it around like this —”

“Cool story, Dad,” Tim called out, skipping back to his room, “Needs more dragons!”

Well, that was interaction. Of a sort. Kind of.

“Heck,” Henry said to himself, “There were whole sentences.”

He remembered, as he picked up his cold can and moved to the lounge, how so long ago he had waited for Timothy to speak. Pea, they used to joke, was doing all the talking for him so there was no need. Sure, he babbled away like any toddler would, but Henry, for whatever reason, would race home every day, anxious that he might have missed out on Timothy's first real words.

Now, as a lanky teenager, cloistered inside his room, staring at a screen every night, it was just as hard to get anything out of him that didn't involve the latest X-Box or Play Station.

It was all too much, this parenting thing. Why didn't it come with a manual? Bah! He wouldn't have read it anyway. Real men don't need manuals.

He eased himself slowly into his chair.

“I could use a coffee,” Loretta called out from the bathroom, “I've had a busy day today. And do we have any Tim Tams? Open up a packet.”

“I'm going to have a beer,” he replied firmly, determined to enjoy his cold beverage.

“At this hour? No, we're having a coffee.”

Henry groaned, rolled his one good eye and pushed the rag firmly into his skull in frustration. His comfy chair was no longer comfy. It squashed his misshapen leg, pushed too hard on his back. He appeared like a pile of bloody bits, strangled with octopus straps and gaffer tape, a lump that had wobbled and squirmed its way to

plop itself untidily onto a chair.

“I just want a stupid beer,” he whispered to the roof, “Just one beer and a sit-down!”

The roof remained obstinately blank.

Loretta, coming back from the bathroom, stood in the doorway, arms akimbo.

“Oh, Henry! Henry, look at yourself! Just take a good hard look! You're a mess!”

He fiddled fruitlessly with the tab of the beer can.

“I know, I know.”

Stupid beer can. It remained stubbornly closed, and his nails flaked off as he sought purchase.

“No, really. I've never seen such a muddle of a man before. And you can at least look at me when I'm talking to you.”

“I would if I could get my sodding eye to turn around!” he growled, giving up on the beer and rolling his bulk to face to her.

“Oh, great. So that's broken, too, I suppose. Eh? Is this just a ruse to get out of seeing the Thompsons?” she snarled back, sitting herself on the couch, “Because it's not going to work. You're going there, whether you like it or not, and you'll be polite and listen to Gary and you'll bloody well laugh when he tells his joke about the freighter.”

“Tanker. It's a joke about a tanker. It doesn't make sense if it's not a tanker.”

“Whatever.”

“He's told it enough times.”

Bloody Gary. Always rubbing Henry's face in it. Whether it was his house, or his new cars, or his fancy camera equipment, or the bloody stocks he owned, Gary was always there with his smug little grin and slicked down hair, ready to drop a comment or two to let everyone know.

And then he would tell that stupid tanker joke. It wasn't funny the first time, and it wasn't funny the hundredth time. Yet, each time, Henry would feel a sharp jab in his ribs as Loretta forced him to drag out a laugh to placate Gary's ego, even if he had been saving it up for later, for something more worthwhile.

Henry burrowed his head into his hand. He came up, dragging his fingers down his face, leaving deep impressions. He could not see what he had done, but it felt like his face was melting. His eyes burnt. His nose itched.

He sneezed violently.

His nose gave way, somersaulting off his face. It hit the floor, rolled across the tiles and hid somewhere underneath the sofa.

“Shit,” he said, looking after it longingly, “Son of a bitch!”

His voice sounded queer without his nose.

“Be quiet!” Loretta scolded, “Timothy will hear you.”

“Let him. It's about time he learnt what the world was about.”

“Some father you are.”

His eye threatened to pop out again. He balanced himself on his seat and worked the orb securely back into the socket.

“Can you do me a favour, Loretta?”

“Geez, Henry. I just sat down!”

“Can you help me fetch my nose?” he pleaded, “It's under the sofa somewhere.”

“Aw, come on! Do you want me to blow it for you, too?”

The pin inside him, deep within his chest, close to his heart, the pin that held him all together, began to sheer. He could feel it pulling, twisting, grinding away. With little ticks it yielded, feeling for all the world like a little time bomb about to explode.

The ticks got more and more rapid as the strain became greater. They coalesced into one long squeak.

His shoulders gave a spasm, then slumped forward. He breathed in a shuddering breath, cracking two of his ribs. The pin ruptured with a mighty twang!

He gasped in pain, “Ga! I can't do it any more, Loretta.”

“Can't do what?”

Exhaling was just as painful. He wheezed as his lungs began to collapse.

“You're just sitting there, you useless lump. Just sitting there. Well? What can't you do?”

“I can't... I can't do *this*,” he said, gasping and gesticulating with his functioning hand, “All of this crap! All of this crap that

keeps piling up on top of me! I can't."

"I don't know what you're talking about. But you'd better not try and weasel your way out of seeing the Thompsons, because it's not going to happen. You're coming along and –"

"I couldn't care less about the Thompsons," he snapped, "Why won't you listen to me? Look at me, Loretta! Can't you understand?"

Loretta looked over, a slight show on concern rippled across her face, "What's up, Henry? What are you saying? Is it the merger?"

He stood up, slowly, wobbly, and balanced on his supportive leg. The pain of it all crushed down unbearably upon him. His body simply refused to support him any longer. Another rib snapped and an octopus strap unhinged from his belt, whipped around and flew across the room.

"Careful! You almost hit the lamp!" she cried, but Henry wasn't listening.

Unrestrained, his stomach fell through the remaining straps, clattering to the tiles in chunks. His intestines followed now that there was nothing left to hold them in. He looked down, dismayed, at the mess on the floor. Joining the rest of his lower torso, his bladder weakened, burst and he urinated down his leg.

Embarrassed and in great pain, he apologised.

"I'm sorry, Loretta."

"You can at least clean it up," she scolded, taking her phone out and flipping through her Twitter feed.

As he stooped to pick up the pieces, his leg, which had supported him for so long, failed catastrophically.

His knees buckled. His ankles turned to powder. His jeans bulged in various places, holding in the disintegrating contents as best they could. The gaffer tape could no longer hold the hand onto the wrist and it tore off, flapping uselessly backward.

His stump of an arm struggled to hold his torso from the floor.

"I'm sorry, Loretta," he said sadly, looking up at her from the floor with watery eyes, "I did the best I could."

"Don't be so melodramatic! Come on, get up! Go to bed if you want."

"I can't," he whimpered, flopping about pathetically, flailing

whatever limb was still functioning, “I just – I just can't!”

She frowned down upon him, “So this is it, huh? This is how you decide to be? A useless wretch, lying on the floor?”

“I never meant for it to be like this. Why would I ever have chosen... this?” he said, pointing to the pile of rubbish that used to be him, “If I could do it all again...”

“But you can't, Henry. You can't. So stop it. Stop acting like a child and grow up.”

“But...”

“Just grow up, Henry! Gosh, Mum was right about you! What sort of man did I marry? You useless, pathetic idiot!”

“Loretta! Please!”

“Piss off, Henry. If that's the way it's going to be, then fine, you can spend the rest of your life on the floor. But you can do it somewhere else. I don't want the kids to grow up knowing that their father was a pitiful, worthless lump of shit.”

Bones ground against one another. His vertebrate popped and sagged, grinding his spinal cord in their spasms. The audible sound of crepitus overpowered the faint shooting noises emanating from Timothy's room.

The roar within him, the primal urge to shake the walls with his noise, sputtered and coughed. Only a low, sorrowful wheeze came out.

With a splintering crack, Henry's arm gave out, sending the rest of him tumbling to the floor. The cords and tape and glue surrendered to the overwhelming force of gravity, releasing their load upon the tiles, so that Henry was left as little more than a heap of crushed skin and hair strewn about.

“Damn it, Henry!” Loretta moaned, getting off the sofa and brushing Henry from her feet, “Could you be any more of a screw-up?”

A finger twitched in the pile, wiggling a little and dislodging an ear. It tumbled off the pile to go rolling underneath the coffee table. The torso trembled, giving out one last, mournful sigh, releasing the last of Henry's melancholy over the floor.

“Henry?”

The pile remained still.

“Henry?” Loretta asked, poking a piece of chest.

It yielded underneath her finger's pressure. She gave it a bit of a hard jab, to no effect.

“Damn you, Henry,” she groaned, assessing the mess, “As if I didn't have anything better to do than clean you up!”

Gingerly she stepped over the bits, deftly avoiding the puddles of bodily fluids that had spilled out. It would take a bit to get that out of her moccasins.

The larger pieces she carried to the bin outside, cursing all the while. She moved some bags about to fit him in without the lid staying open, then went back inside. The cat was sniffing about, looking at the remains with interest.

She swished it away, “Shoo! Shoo! Get out of that! Fine, here, have this.”

She tossed a finger out onto the grass.

Heading to the laundry, she fetched the broom and shovel and swept him up as best she could. The teeth were the most annoying as they kept rattling about here and there, scooting over the tiles to lodge themselves into crevices and corners.

Eventually, when the solid pieces were either swept up or thrown into the back garden for the ants, she fetched the mop and sopped up whatever was left. By ten o'clock she was wringing out the last of his fluids down the drain, opening the windows to let the warm night dry the floor. She put his unopened beer back in the fridge, pushed the chair back into position and turned the television on.

“Damn you, Henry,” she grumbled, making herself a cup of coffee, opening a packet of Tim-Tams and sitting back down on the couch, “Damn you!”