

Clearing the air

The skinny woman rapped against the wooden edge of the front door, brushing the little boy and the dog into line behind her. She peered through the dimpled¹ glass panels, suddenly impatient to have this done with.

5 Lyn had watched the little procession wind its way up her driveway. At the front trotted a young dog, faltering² slightly at each step to pull up the foreleg with the bandage above the paw. Next came the skinny woman, her pregnancy pushing tightly against her t-shirt, her hand stretched back to the little boy who shuffled and kicked at stones. The air was filling with heat and the leaves of the trees were turning downwards. The green haze that had built across the paddocks³ would be gone soon.

10 The skinny woman saw movement through the dimples, a wobbling⁴ shape that shifted into human form as it reached the door.

“Come in,” said Lyn, smiling rigidly⁵, opening the door wide.

“You stay here, Jess,” the skinny woman barked at the yellow dog, and it turned to look for a shady spot, dropping down between a set of glass doors and a large pot holding a cumquat tree⁶.

15 Lyn stepped out of the house, disappearing around the corner, reappearing with a dog’s bowl full of water. She placed it next to the pot. The dog sniffed it then put its head back down, looking at its bandaged leg then laying its muzzle gently on top of it.

The two women moved silently into the house, Lyn leading the way, the little boy trailing behind. Lyn gestured to the kitchen table, moving some papers to the sideboard and straightening the tablecloth.

20 “Just sorting out some accounts⁷,” she said. “Have a seat,” she added, while she herself turned to the bench and turned on the kettle.

“How long have you had that dog?” she asked, as if she didn’t know.

“Six weeks,” the skinny woman mumbled, wanting to be past the small talk. “Got her from McQueen, over at the truck yard⁸,” she added reluctantly.

25 “One of his dingos⁹?”

“Yeh. Her mother’s a dingo.”

“They’re clever dogs,” Lyn said. “Mooneys down the road had one for years. What happened to her leg?”

“Gashed it¹⁰ getting through some barbed wire. Had to have stitches.”

30 “Pricey!”

¹ matterede

² tøvende

³ marker

⁴ let vaklende

⁵ (her) anstrengt

⁶ *cumquat tree*: citrusræ

⁷ regninger

⁸ *truck yard*: lastbilværksted

⁹ vilde hunde (Australien)

¹⁰ *Gashed it*: Rev det

“Yep. It’s the boy’s dog.”

The little boy leaned against his mother, draped¹¹ over her legs. “It’s too hot for that,” she said, detaching him and placing him on the floor. “Where’re your cars?”

35 He stretched his legs out and felt in the pockets of his too-big shorts, pulling out three scratched little cars, lining them up next to him on the floor and slowly running them back and forth in turn, as if to test they still had their wheels.

“Milk?” said Lyn and the skinny woman nodded. “What would he like?” she asked, looking down at the boy. “I’ve got cordial¹².”

40 The skinny woman nodded again, and Lyn put the mugs of tea on the table with a plate of biscuits. She poured cordial and water into a plastic cup, added a cube of ice, and put the cup down on the floor next to the boy.

“Don’t spill it!” the skinny woman cautioned the boy. He put down his cars and picked up the cup, sipping and clinking the fast-melting ice against the sides.

The women looked at each other across the table. Lyn smiled.

45 “How are you going?” she asked. “How’s the baby?” She nodded at the skinny woman’s belly keeping her at a distance from the edge of the table.

“Ok,” she responded. “Look,” she said after a pause, her throat tightening¹³, “I’ve heard what you’ve been saying about Drew.”

Lyn felt the back of her neck stiffen, all the way up into her head.

50 “What do you mean?” she asked.

“You’ve been saying things. That he sits around all day when he says he’s building the house. Smoking dope. You reckon he’s useless. You’re spreading it everywhere. It’s bullshit. He’s done heaps on that house.”

55 She looked quickly down at her boy. A steady brrrrm brrrrm came from the floor as the cars sped on the smooth surface.

“Deb.” Lyn stopped, then started again. “I don’t know what to say. That’s not true.”

“It’s none of your business,” Deb interrupted, louder. “It’s none of your business what we do. What Drew and I do.”

Brrm brrrrm, and the slide of small wheels on concrete.

60 “I know. It’s none of my business,” Lyn said, nodding. “How would I know anyway?” she added. “I never go down there. It’s none of my business.”

65 The last time Lyn had dropped in on Deb it had been cold, maybe winter. Deb hadn’t welcomed her, but she’d gone in anyway. There was a tarp¹⁴ where the roof should have been, and Deb and the boy had huddled over a one-bar heater¹⁵ connected by a series of cords to the one power point in the room. Lyn handed over some soup – Thanks for taking it! Made way too much! Freezer is full! – and got home quickly, back to her fireplace and her plump¹⁶ sofa and her house that kept out the wind.

¹¹ liggende

¹² saftevand

¹³ (her) snørede sig sammen

¹⁴ presenning

¹⁵ one-bar heater: lille elektrisk varmeovn

¹⁶ (her) bløde og dybe

“Clarrie goes down there,” Deb snapped¹⁷. “Clarrie’s down there all the time. Reckons he’s ‘helping’. I reckon he’s snooping, wasting everyone’s time.”

70 The little boy stood up and looked at his mother, then at the table. His eyes caught the biscuits, and his hand reached towards them. “Ask!” his mother said. “Please?” he said, looking at Lyn.

“Of course,” she replied, holding the plate out to him. They were only custard creams¹⁸, but he took one and cradled it like a precious thing, nibbling at it, licking the crumbs as they formed along the edge.

75 The heat was creeping into the house, hitting the glass doors and windows and radiating inside. Lyn wanted to close the curtains and shut out the sun. Instead, she wrapped her hands around the mug of tea.

“Clarrie takes stuff down to Drew when he finds it. Building materials. He’s always picking up offcuts¹⁹ down at the tip shop²⁰. Boxes of tiles. He found a nice door the other day.”

80 “We don’t need that crap. We don’t need crap from the tip. What do you think we are? Another rubbish dump?” Deb twisted in her seat, looked down at the boy holding the last corner of his biscuit.

“He only takes good stuff,” Lyn replied, tired of this conversation now, wishing she could just say – ‘It’s not me! It’s everyone in town. We all know what’s happening.’ This wasn’t clearing the air at all. 85 That’s what Deb had said. Let’s clear the air. The air was just filling with sharp splinters of accusation. “We used stuff from the tip ourselves when we were building here,” she added, her voice wearing out as she said it.

The two women looked at each other. Lyn shifted her gaze first, searching the room for comfort, looking for support in the photos of her children on the wall, all three of them beaming out from 90 under graduates’ caps²¹. If only she could find the right thing to say. But then, why did she care about this woman and her boy and her unborn child and her stupid husband who was running her into the ground while he sat around pretending to build them a house that would never be finished. There were limits to neighbourliness. He’d go off and leave her one day, leave her in a house with no bathroom and a tap outside the back door where she’d have to fill buckets to bathe the baby and do 95 the washing up. Then Lyn would be stuck, like last time, trying to find ways of helping that Deb wouldn’t bristle at²² – a loaf of bread she bought by mistake, a surplus of beans from the garden.

The little boy stood up and reached for another biscuit.

“No more!” his mother snapped. “We’re going home.”

100 She stood to leave, and Lyn rose too. “Please don’t go,” she said, wondering why the words were coming from her mouth. “Please, let’s clear the air.”

Deb stared at her, felt the pull of sympathy²³, an unreliable basis for anything.

Before she could reply, a low growl came from the dog outside. Both women turned to look. Through the glass doors they could see the dog standing up slowly, the dark fur along the ridge of her back rising, her head focused on something beyond the pot. Both women quickly moved towards

¹⁷ sagde vredt

¹⁸ *custard creams*: sammenlagte kiks

¹⁹ resttræ

²⁰ *tip shop*: genbrugsstation

²¹ *graduates’ caps*: studenterhuer

²² *bristle at*: blive rasende over

²³ *felt the pull of sympathy*: (her) følte sympatien

105 the doors. The dog kept its gaze fixed as the head of a brown snake²⁴ appeared, with the rest of the body swiftly following. It was big. Well over a metre long, its body as thick as a child's arm, its small head darting. It was a pale one, almost pink.

"That's the one I saw yesterday," Lyn said quietly. "Don't worry. It was more scared of me than anything. It turned tail²⁵ when it saw me in the garden."

110 But as the snake's head hit the glass of the double doors and its body curved up against the surface, they heard the front door slam. Outside, the little boy was running, yelling. "Snake! Jess! Come 'ere!" The dog switched its gaze to the boy then back to the snake. Her pose widened²⁶ and she started to bark. The snake turned too, to stare at the dog. Lyn watched, paralysed by the scene unfolding on the other side of the glass – the snake whipping around to face the dog, the dog
115 confronting the snake, legs spread, pouncing²⁷ forward and back, the little boy rushing to grab the dog, the snake rearing up and then Deb was there behind the boy, pulling him backwards and screaming, "Jess! Away!". Then Lyn was out there too in the beating sun, taking the sobbing boy from Deb and bringing him kicking back into the house, watching Deb catch the scruff²⁸ of the dog's neck and pull her towards the front door.

120 "Bring her in!" Lyn shouted, holding the door open with the boy on her hip, and Deb rushed in with the growling dog in her arms, keeping its flailing²⁹ head and snapping mouth away from her face.

They watched the snake coil³⁰ and crash against the doors, as if it could melt right through into the house and corner them all there. Three times they watched it weave its way along the length of
125 the doors, gaining some sort of traction³¹ on the smooth glass, slithering up and dropping back down, its movements losing momentum until it finally fell off and glided away.

The women, the boy and the dog sat on the floor together, the heat of the sun pounding³² them, its glare in their eyes. The boy crawled off Lyn's lap and into his mother's. Deb loosened her grip on the dog, and it drooped to the floor with its head on its bandaged leg. [...]

130 "Are you ok?" Lyn asked, looking at Deb, stretching out a hand. She saw her splayed³³ legs, cheap sandals with broken straps, toes falling out. A protruding belly, arms cradling the limp boy. She saw her face relax and quiver, her eyes screw up³⁴, her mouth fall open. She saw the sheer exhaustion of someone who tries to pretend her fears won't be realised.

Deb opened her eyes. "Yep," she said. "I'm baking here," she said, standing the boy up and
135 pushing herself up from the floor. Lyn stood and held out her hand again. Deb reached up and took it, felt the dampness of her own hand in its strong grip, and let herself be helped up.

(2020)

²⁴ *brown snake*: meget giftig slange

²⁵ *turned tail*: stak af

²⁶ *Her pose widened*: (her) Den gjorde sig større

²⁷ angribende

²⁸ nakkeskind

²⁹ fægtende

³⁰ rulle sig sammen

³¹ *gaining some sort of traction*: hvor den fik fat

³² (her) bagte ned på

³³ spredte

³⁴ *screw up*: tæt på tårer