

## Other People

Richard was burning toast when someone knocked. Brent most likely, wanting to return the DVDs. Richard frowned. He hated early-morning callers but as he walked to the door his mood shifted and he decided on a comic reception. He quietly took hold of the handle and yanked the door open with startling speed almost sucking his visitor into the hall. It was old Emily from next door. She stood on the mat in corduroy slippers and a sunrise-pink dressing gown, her white hair matching the sheen on a neighbour's roof. She seemed not to notice the novel reception. Richard focussed and noted the trembling; the flush of her soft cheeks.

"Dick! Please come quick!" she said. "I think I've killed Arthur!"

For two years now Richard had specified *Richard*, not Dick, but that sort of information never seemed to get through to Emily. It was as if she had a built-in spam filter that blocked certain data: football, government policy, swearing on TV and Richard's actual name.

"I had a brother named Dick," she said once, "but we lost him in '79."

"Did you send out a search party?" Richard didn't really say that, but those words fused into a joke that he retrieved later to entertain his mates. They down their beers and kill themselves laughing.

For Richard's liking, Emily was far too much like his own mother – unaware of the world's bigger issues, adhering to a half-dozen recipes she'd worked out in her twenties, repeating the same conversations, the same anecdotes, the same expressions every time he spoke to her – and that was always by phone, his mother still occupying the house in Clunes that Richard grew up in. He couldn't blame his father for leaving, for driving away that night while he was still asleep. "I'd have left her myself," Richard told him years later. His father frowned. Richard added, "Not that I don't love her, but we've got nothing in common. You know how you just never connect to some people?"

"Don't neglect her," his father said. Yeah right; as if he was an authority in that department. Anyway, Richard had his own life to lead. Everybody does, and there is only so much you can squeeze in. It was a simple fact: you just can't build your life around other people.

Emily said that she and Arthur had met just before the War. Then Arthur enlisted and he was sent away for what might have been years. Fortunately, Emily said, Arthur had both legs smashed by a land-mine and came home early, otherwise their relationship might not have lasted. And now, into their fifth decade, they were still together, keeping to themselves, "keeping out of harm's way". There were no children and Richard wasn't surprised. He couldn't imagine Arthur parenting anyone the way he hobbled around with those two walking-sticks.

Then one day an ancient split-cane fishing rod appeared above the side fence.

“Can you use this?” Arthur said through a gap in the palings. “I’m not much use anymore and you might as well have this rod, son. No good to me.”

Richard took Arthur’s antique fishing rod and while he was standing on the fence he had a clear view of the backyard. Across the lawn, he saw Arthur’s cockatoo. He’d heard that bird often enough but this was the first time he’d set eyes on it. It sat passively in the corner of Arthur’s big chicken-mesh aviary with hardly a decent feather on it.

“First we thought it was them bloody cats that traumatised him,” Arthur said. “But one night we came out and found Cocky talkin’ to ‘em through the wire! Them cats come into the yard to catch the mice what run the gauntlet to get to his seed. We reckon Cocky likes them cats. Maybe he trades ‘is feathers with ‘em! And he talks like a fishing wife... a fishwife... a fisher’s wife; whatever. He’s a bloody good old bird that.”

And now Emily was on Richard’s doorstep and something had happened. Richard followed her out onto the footpath and felt the damp concrete under his bare feet. Emily pushed her front gate open and it gave its familiar squawk, a low-tech signal of pending visitors used by households all over the suburbs. Immediately Rusty started up in the passageway – the other sound that Richard knew better than his own ringtone. For a small terrier, Rusty’s bark pierced the weatherboard walls of both their houses, permeating the structures like rising damp.

“Get down the back!” Arthur would usually yell at him. “Rusty, get down the back!” And then it was Cocky’s turn. “Rusty, get down the back!” the bird would repeat as clearly as the man himself. “Get down the back! Get down the back!”

But on this morning, when Emily opened the front door, the dog did not stop its piercing yap. Richard winced; was Emily deaf? Down in the kitchen a yellow bulb cast light on an irregular form. Arthur was on his back, a leg bent unnaturally beneath him. One arm was stretched out towards the chrome leg of a table, a puffed hand rested palm upwards as though holding a delicate seed. His two walking canes lay across him like the first sticks of a funeral pyre. A cigarette, freshly rolled, rested by his elbow. The pattern of the lino, little wedges of red, grey and black, seemed scattered around him. A tin of Havelock had slipped from his breast pocket and rested against his collar.

Emily took a seat by the table. She was talking but Richard heard only the rhythm of her voice, the visible completely overwhelming it. Arthur’s face was the colour of a wild plum, his cracked lips were parted and the grey edge of false teeth grinned disconcertingly. Richard put his ear to the old man’s chest, felt the warmth of his flannelette shirt, saw the food stains, caught the whiff of nicotine. But he

could find nothing of the heart; nothing of the soft thud that was so unnaturally pronounced in his own body. Emily was still talking.

“Call the ambulance,” Richard said, stopping her in mid sentence. He held Arthur’s wrist, surprised by the way the skin slipped like a scrotum on the bone beneath it. He moved Arthur’s canes; as light as the stems of dried flowers.

Emily put the phone down. “They’re coming,” she said. “Will he be alright, Dick? Will he be alright?” Richard felt a tremor in the old man’s arm.

“I think he’s still with us, Emily. But there’s nothing we can do until they get here.” She seemed not to hear. Richard locked Rusty in the laundry and opened the front door wide. When he came back, Emily said, “I thought I’d killed him, Dick. He was just sitting there drinking his tea and he felt a pain. I gave him one of my Mucaines – for the heartburn. Then he started a sort of fit and I thought he was choking. So I started hitting him on the back. Then he just fell out of the chair, oh Dick I haven’t killed him have I?” She tightened her face, wincing at white knuckles pressed in her lap. “Do you think it’s his heart, Dick?”

The two men, with the confidence of the uniform, hardly touched him. One of them went out for the stretcher while the other held a large pad and wrote the details. When he spoke, he addressed his clipboard.

“I’m afraid he’s gone, Mrs Kramer. Don’t worry. We’ll look after him now.” Richard looked at the old man again and frowned. How had he not recognised the signs of lifelessness?

When they were gone, Emily boiled the kettle and poured them both some tea, the cups rattling violently on the saucers, Rusty scratching at the laundry door. Emily looked out the window. Suddenly she said, “He wouldn’t marry me Dick. Forty-five years I lived with him. Forty-five years, and in all that time he wouldn’t marry me. Now what will I do? It’ll all come out now... I’m not a Kramer at all! I must have asked him every year for forty-five years and he never would. Such a stubborn old fool! I never asked for much. I haven’t got much. No children. Will I be able to stay in the house, Dick?”

“Of course you will, Emily. It’s your house as much as Arthur’s.”

“No, it’s all in Arthur’s name. It was *his* War Pension, he always said. Everything’s in *his* name.”

“Doesn’t matter Emily. The law says it’s yours now.”

“But his family, Dick. They never liked me. And Arthur promised them all sorts of things if ever anything happened to him.”

Arthur’s relatives began to arrive the day after the funeral. Richard, in his lounge, watched them through the yellow lace. They brought trailers and vans and marched into

the house as if they owned it. He had never seen them before, not once in all the time he'd lived there. He saw cardboard boxes carried out. Then a tall man struggled past the gate with some garden implements, a power saw and a telescope. Richard watched a middle-aged woman and a man carry out a leather armchair and strap it to the roof of a Volvo. Someone changed their mind about a bentwood chair and left it on the verandah.

Richard sat down on his big springy couch, the one his mother gave him from the family house in Clunes. He'd grown up with that big piece of clunky furniture. As a child he would lie on it, facing the wall, and just stare for hours at the grey toile fabric, entering its pattern of fern fronds and flowers, seeking out the exotic birds repeated across the expanse of that big padded landscape. Immersed in the motifs as a six-year-old he could hear his mother laughing crazily at some stupid thing his father had said while the music played loudly on their stereo. What was that song? So long ago and so much happiness. What had gone wrong?

Richard dialled the number. "Mum? It's me, Richard."

*Thought you were dead!* she said breathing heavily into the receiver. *Just watering the plants. Got my first flower on the Christmas Lily today. Happens every year almost to the day. It just knows I look after it. My Little Companion, I call it, and every year it blesses me once again with its beauty.*

"That's great, Mum." Richard remembered the last time she told him that exact story.

*Heard anything from your father?*

"He's in Newcastle now. Said he might come down at Christmas. How are you Mum? I mean, are you well?"

*Course dear, couldn't be better.*

'I thought I might come down and see you one weekend.'

*Whenever, love. We're all busy, aren't we? Busy, busy, busy.*

"We are Mum, but I guess we should find time to keep in touch."

*Whatever, love. Can't build your life around other people.*

That night Richard couldn't sleep. And in the morning he decided to call on Emily next door. The street was quiet now, the air still, and across the way the retired maths teacher was tinkering in the garage. Richard heard the tap, tap, tap and a clatter as he put down the hammer. As soon as he touched Emily's gate he heard Rusty running in the hall and as reliably as the sun setting, he began his hysterical yapping. It was almost as if the dog had known for years that other people would one day come and change things in the house forever.

Emily came to the door. Then he heard Arthur's voice. Richard and Emily stared at each other through the flywire. They just stared and listened to Cockey starting up in the big chicken-mesh cage that the old man had built in the corner of the back yard. "Get down the back! Rusty! Get down the back!"

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