

The introductions are over quickly. Trevor sits down in the spare chair in Mrs Sermon's lounge. Not that anyone would seriously describe it as a lounge. The chair presents a posture hazard, as expected, but he is also at risk of being crushed by cliffs of newspaper collapsing on him. Every surface in the house is sticky. The woman is kind of crazy. She has been talking about him without once addressing him.

'So,' says Mrs Sermon, 'has your lodger been settling in comfortably?'

'Yes, Mum. Trevor, that's his name.'

Trevor clears his throat. Elizabeth has remained standing; there isn't room for a third chair.

'Um, Mrs Sermon, I am only, ah, renting the room for a few months.'

Elizabeth shakes her head at him.

The old woman isn't very old-biddy-like, and she smiles the smile of conspirators throughout history. Without once looking in his direction.

'It's all right, dear, I practised free love as only the Orange People could do it, I went off to live in Poona with everyone who was sexually enlightened, so there's no need to be discreet.'

'About ... what?'

'I'm very pleased Elizabeth has found someone. It's been so long.'

Trevor is peering at Elizabeth now, who is nodding at him like someone on happy pills, smiling and doing something fussy with her hands. *God, how slow is he? What a set-up. This is worth much more than a few pints.* Elizabeth is looking so cheerful and yet desperate he feels tempted to hold her to some of her own implications. *Jump into her bed?*

'What happened to your father, Trevor?' asks Mrs Sermon. 'I know fathers are as weak as piss, excuse the expression, with hers (she flicks her head towards Elizabeth) clearing out years ago and, from what I've heard, yours did too.'

‘It was Yvonne’s father who left,’ says Elizabeth, ‘not my dad. *You* left.’

‘No, no, you’re wrong.’

‘My father died,’ says Trevor. ‘Or he went missing, presumed dead. A death without a body, it confuses everyone. For thirty years. Then, a week or so ago, he re-appeared.’

He stops. She is looking past him rather than at him, unfocussed. She begins rubbing her nose and keeps it up for longer than usual. She has been inspecting Trevor as closely. His rounded stomach and his shaven dome. Perhaps he has been something powerful in an earlier life before falling back. There is something unfinished about him. But he is strong, he sits still, he is a good man.

‘Oh,’ she says, finally. ‘Well, that’s ... bad luck.’

It makes him laugh. Bad luck is the least of it.

‘What was your name again?’

‘Trevor.’

‘Ah yes. Trevor,’ she says. ‘You should eat less. You’re fat.’

They are travelling in the grey EH across Ballarat to the shops and what Elizabeth still thinks of as Dan Murphy’s as if denying to herself it’s actually Woolworths. The lure of cheap booze quashes any deeper principles. Her mother shuffles on the red vinyl bench seat in the back and complains about its lack of support. Trevor is in the front. If he could, he’d project himself completely out of time and space altogether. *Elizabeth owes him.*

‘Well, your father had taste,’ he does say, ‘maintaining a car like this. You have to let me drive it one day.’

From the back seat he hears the old woman muttering.

‘He was a loser,’ she says.

Elizabeth turns around to address her mother.

‘Now, now, *towards the heart*, remember. *Love and compassion.*’

‘Oh, shut up.’

‘By the way, Mum, changing the subject, did you see the news item about a hoarder dying in a house fire? It was horrific.’

‘Never seen a house fire. The pub I had burnt down after I’d left. They said bikies lit a barbecue in the front bar.’

‘The hoarder shouldn’t have died. The fire crew couldn’t get into the house to save him, they had to break windows to get access. It was his own fault.’

The old woman clears her throat and says:

‘No one was fooled about that fire, they knew he wanted to collect the insurance. The place never made a profit after I left.’

‘Because of all his rubbish, Mum,’ stresses Elizabeth. ‘Being in the way of access, and then catching fire. The fireies couldn’t find a path through the house. All those stacked rows of newspaper – just imagine it – a maze of flames inside the house.’

‘A house fire, dear? Some people are so careless.’

‘Another man was found in a mummified state hidden under his junk inside his house. He’d been there for ten years.’

‘Obviously he wasn’t a nice man or someone would have found him.’

Trevor finds the old woman’s obliqueness amusing. The fire image is pretty good, all the same. But then so is the mummy.

‘He was on the floor,’ says Elizabeth. ‘Under piles of junk,’ she adds. ‘By the time they found him they were lucky to be alive themselves. He wasn’t. He inhaled all of his rubbish in the form of toxic smoke. God, what it must have been like ...’

‘And your point is?’

‘Mum, you must be joking. You’re getting worse at collecting. You’re out of control.’

‘What are you telling me this for?’

‘You want to know why? You, a hoarder of newspapers?’

Another minute passes before her mother responds.

‘Well, it would save me fumbling around with the good doctor’s do-it-yourself kit. Would it not?’

‘Would it not,’ says Elizabeth.

She drags at the heavy manual steering to enter the car park, this lack of power assistance the only gripe she has with the car. That and the turning circle from here to the footy boundary.

‘Your house is a firetrap, that’s what. And then, *then*, it’s a person trap. You’re simply not mobile enough and if your place went up it’d be a fiery maze too. You’re my mother and, though you’re as stubborn as (she grunts at the wheel), I’d prefer you ... alive.’

‘Very kind of you, I’m sure.’

Despite her minimalism her mother’s head is nodding and, while it might be from the heat, it’s more probably with suppressed emotion.

Which mustn’t be on Elizabeth’s mind when she curses the old man who has nearly reversed his car into her beautiful car doors. ‘Fuck you,’ she shouts out the window and bangs the horn. Trevor wakes up, straightens beside her. From the back seat they hear her ex-publican mother.

‘Yeah, fuck the old guy,’ she growls. And Trevor laughs. They all laugh.

The old guy pulls back into his parking space then, unbelievably, begins reversing again. They are still behind him. Elizabeth doesn’t just toot again, she holds in the horn inserts on the steering wheel. The old mechanical device keeps blaring and people stop, stare, until the old guy drives in again. ‘What an idiot!’ Elizabeth can handle herself. And doesn’t the old man wish she wouldn’t.

Her mother can walk unaided, just. The walking frame is something she loathes even as she leans on it to keep her balance. It is better that she suffer this and stay conscious of her balance than stumble and fall. Broken hip, end of life. Sign-off for the good or bad doctor. Death in Dan Murphy’s.

Instead, as she wheels herself in slight wobbles, Mrs Sermon waylays the customers with aisle rage.

‘Come on, let me get past. Do you mind? When I was your age I let older people have right of way and I never gave it a thought. Don’t you scowl at me, it looks terrible, if you could only see yourself. What is it with people nowadays?’

The customers know what to do. Like seeing an erratic driver on a highway, people mostly dodge lanes and avoid them. She’s lucky there is such decorum around un-drunk alcohol. The old publican in her knew better when the stuff was flowing. Stern hand needed.

‘Elizabeth. Where are you? Don’t go so far ahead. Where’s what’s-his-name?’

As soon as they walked through the shiny bar entrance Trevor had veered away to the whisky shelves. As he inspects the single malts he can hear her voice carrying above the aisles. Booze may make people excessive and noisy but when they search for it among the shelves they remain modest and quiet. She is wearing loose slacks and her favourite green cardigan, her hair as pinched up as Elizabeth’s used to be and carrying on like a regular, which is no doubt what the customers think she is.

A woman in the shop’s khaki uniform asks her if she needs any help, which means placating the normal people in the shop. Except she accidentally bumps the walking frame and it digs into the old woman’s shin.

‘Ouch!’ she cries, ‘Oh oh!’

And she sits down on the floor to examine her leg. The staff woman bends over her. By now Elizabeth is pushing back towards her mother with her trolley in front of her. Trevor is approaching from behind. It looks like a traffic accident.

‘I want my daughter to come back and ... ah, there you are. This stupid woman has hurt me,’ she says. ‘Look, I’m bleeding. She pushed me down.’

If Elizabeth is ever worried about her mother it doesn’t show, or perhaps she dare not show her pleasure as these out-of-kilter

moments occur. Her mother's obstinacy shines on and off like a wonky beacon.

'You're showing off in public again, Mum. I bleed more than that when I brush my teeth.'

Her mother squashes her mouth down like an old woman without any teeth.

'It's stopped now. I've been holding my shin so tightly my hands are hurting. Don't just stand there,' she says to Trevor, 'help me up.'