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Queensland Branch

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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION  
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Highly Commended in the Open Division

Marilyn Chalkley

*Sing yourself free*

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2021c

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*Sing yourself free*

It's not what you expect really. Waking up one sunny morning next to a dead girl.

Her hair is sticking out of one of those free sleeping bags Jamila hands out on cold nights. Curly, blonde, with dark roots. Seems to be the fashion now, to show the roots. To have stripy hair.

I know death. The stillness. The cold hand. No breath on my little hand mirror. I hold it up to her mouth, just to make sure. Thelma gave me that mirror. Round, it fits in the palm of my hand. It's got daisies on the back. 'A girl has to have a bit of self respect,' said Thelma. She wasn't really a girl, no more than I am. 'If you sleep on the streets, just check your face, to see you haven't got a smudge mark on your nose, a bit of dirt on your cheek. People don't give money if you're grubby.'

I laughed at that. Begging's not my forte. Busking maybe ... 'Common as muck,' my dad used to say. I suppose that's what I am now.

Anyway ... I don't know what to do.

I could just take my shopping trolley off and leave the girl behind. But that wouldn't be right, would it? She might be here for days, and start to smell. I could ring emergency. 000. But I don't have a phone. Hard to keep it charged with my sort of life. Anyway, who would ring me?

Once upon a time, Jay would call on my birthday. Regular as clockwork, 25 April, same as Anzac Day. I remember that because he would always say, 'Happy Anzac Day, Mum!' And I would always say, 'it's not a happy Anzac Day –your great grandfather was at Gallipoli, and he was never the same again'. And Jay would say – 'Oh Mum! Anyway, Happy Birthday! We're all going to Bondi for an ice-cream.'

And I would say – 'have a lovely time. Give a kiss to the boys for me.'

And put down the phone on my loneliness. But that was when I had a phone, and a house. I used to toast myself in port. My best friend was that port. Still is, when I can afford it.

That was a pretty house. I had a pink rose that climbed all over the pergola and flowered in spring. New Dawn, the name of the rose. When it rained there were pink petals everywhere, like at our wedding. I used to wheel Jim out in his last days. He died there, under the roses, quite suddenly when I was making a cuppa. Nice way to go, my friends said. Nice for him.

I don't know what to do.

I'll just sit here and have a quiet drink and try and work it out.

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I should check who she is. She might have a mum who's missing her. And a bit of cash. I'm sure she wouldn't mind giving it to me. She was high as a kite last night. She said, 'do you mind if I doss down here?'. And giggled.

I said, 'OK'.

'What's your name then?'

'Daisy', I said.

'What a funny old-fashioned name,' she said but her voice was all blurred and she was hard to understand.

'I'm Fizz,' she said. And giggled again, and spun around, waving her arms in the air. 'Daisy, Daisy give me your answer do. I'm just crazy ...'. She had quite a good singing voice. I should know. Then she crashed. And now she's dead.

...

Fizz was Felicity Gillard. Bit posh. Like ... who was it who had that name? Can't think. Nice green leather, and there's a fifty dollar note in there. It's folded up really small and I almost missed it. The wallet was in her pocket.

I wrinkle my nose. I can smell the vomit on her sleeping bag.

Julia, that's who it was. Our first female PM. I felt quite proud when she got in. I sang in front of another Prime Minister once. But that was in the last century.

I could treat myself with that \$50. Give a toast to Fizz. No. On second thoughts, that's a bit tacky, Daze. No toast. I call myself Daze these days, on account of my continuing condition. 'That's funny,' Thelma used to say.

Thelma always found the humour in things. Not that she would have found it funny being knocked down by a drunk driver. On the other hand she might have – up there at

the Pearly gates, saying to St Peter ‘what comes around, goes around Pete’. She didn’t have a lot of respect for authority, our Thelma.

I’ll never forget that scream. ‘Don’t leave me, Thelma,’ I wept. I was holding her hand, kneeling on the cold edge of the pavement. It was dark, but I could see the blood. It shone in the streetlights and dripped onto the road. Swirling down into the drains mixed with the rain. Her life going down the drain. That idiot had swerved over the kerb, hit her then drove off. They never found him. I bet they didn’t try. Who cares about an old homeless woman? Thelma was bent, and wrinkled, with wicked blue eyes and white hair like ice crystals. How could she leave me?

I talk to her a lot, when I’m walking, muttering away, looking like a mad old woman. Sometimes I like to think I hear her voice. It would be good if I could hear it now. I look up at the flyover, the dismal grey concrete. The cars are noisy, but Thelma is silent.

Ice. That’s a shocker. I’ve seen it on the streets. Young men raving, hitting out, killing people. That young man who went wild one day and stabbed his best friend. Jamila, the one with the headscarf, the one who gives me soup, says ‘keep out of their way. Daisy. Hide. They’re dangerous.’

That’s why I’m here, under this flyover with the cars roaring overhead. I think that’s why Fizz was here too.

I don’t know what to do.

Maybe I should talk to Jamila?

She’s never ever tasted alcohol, that Jamila. Hard to imagine.

Suddenly a phone rings. Jesus, Fizz has a phone. Goes with having \$50. She must be new to life on the streets.

It sounds like it’s coming from inside the sleeping bag. I don’t want to put my hand in there again. Gives me the creeps.

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It’s locked of course. But you learn a thing or two living like I do. That Sudanese kid was good. Who would have thought? Nine feet high, and this beautiful dark bronze skin. Kooshin is his name – like Cushion. Cuddly sort of name for such a thin bony lad.

He’s good with phones. ‘Just put your finger on this button and it knows who you are, Daze.’ Sounded just like Jay. You wouldn’t know he was born in Africa. Haven’t seen him for a while. He’s always afraid of the cops, said they picked on him something terrible. Where are you when I need you Kooshin?

So, her hand is curled up under her chin. It's still warm. It's hard to get her finger out, then I press it on the button. The phone springs to life.

Now what?

It's got a picture of a kid on the screen. Dark curly hair, big sad eyes. Baby Fizz. Maybe.

Kooshin said always look in the favourites, and always delete the numbers, so the phone doesn't ring them by mistake.

*Mum* was in the starred list. On the top. Should I ring her?

And say something like, *hello I'm a homeless old bag down here in Melbourne and your daughter is lying dead next to me.*

That would go down well. Even if I said, *my name is Daisy Danville, the jazz singer. Remember me?*

*Who?* she might say. *We don't go to night-clubs. I don't like jazz. Music of the devil, some say.*

Maybe Mum is a God Botherer. Which is why Fizz left. Who knows? It's why I left home all those years ago and had my brilliant career. Cut off from any income or support. A single mum, me.

Common as muck, my dad said I was, choosing to sing all those songs created by black people. He said that. Not me. I know not to say black people. African Americans it is. Might have changed now. Songs like *Strange Fruit*. I wish I could have met Billie Holiday. I loved her voice. Her courage.

So many songs based on music by slaves and descendants of slaves. They sang their way through adversity. Just think of the *Cotton-Picking* song. You get terrible blisters picking cotton, and a sore back, but they sang about it. Lead Belly sang it and Abba ruined it. That blonde band never picked a bale of cotton in their lives.

Then the words they wrote. Billie got famous for singing *Strange Fruit*. Some teacher wrote it about lynching and dead bodies – it was the hardest song to sing. Without crying, I mean.

Now I really don't know what to do.

That call was someone called Jerry, rang at 10.00 am. Whoever he is. Maybe a pimp. You never know. Or a dealer.

That's about my limit on phones. If only Kooshin was around.

Who can I ring? There must be someone. I'd rather not the police.

I don't want to be hauled into a lockup, yelled at, 'stupid old woman, God you stink, pissed as a newt, you can't go rolling down the street causing a public nuisance of yourself. Look at you, you must be 70 if you're a day. No one wants to see your saggy old boobs. Exposing them. What WERE you thinking? You crazy old cunt.' The door clangs shut. The locks click. I groan and scream on that hard plank they call a bed. I sing to myself and they yell, 'shut up! Cut the caterwauling!'

No taste in music, some people.

Maybe I can sing to Fizz. Sing some hymns.

That is something I can do. Sing in adversity. Someone said to me you have to be free to sing. But maybe, just maybe, you can sing yourself free.

I wonder what hymn she would like.

I could try *O Sacred head, now wounded*. Molly taught me that, I've never been one for hymns. She said 'Daze, Good tune, by Bach. You know 'im. Bach?

'Sure, I know Bach.'

Then she told me about the missionaries who taught them Lutheran hymns, some by Bach. They sang them all. Over a hundred years ago it all started, in the desert. In Hermannsberg, her country. Her mum, her aunties. Molly sang them to comfort me sometimes, but I could never understand the words. 'Not German' she said. 'Arrente. Our language.' Beautiful it was. Haven't seen Molly for a while.

I'll start with Bach. Molly would approve. They always have ceremony for people who die.

I glance up to check there's no Ice boys around.

After that, *Amazing Grace*. All the kids know it.

No more booze. Can't sing properly when I'm drunk.

It takes a lot to make me drunk.

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I've been singing for a couple of hours. Now I've got an audience. It's been a few years since anyone heard my voice, except Molly and the cops in the lockup. Under the flyover there's a really good echo. I have to say that it's been sounding pretty good. I'm surprised. All those years of training didn't go amiss. And I've never smoked – tobacco ruins the vocal cords. I look around. They don't know why I'm singing. Fizz is lying at my feet, and I have covered her face. Out of respect. Maybe some have guessed. The ones

who are closer. Then I see Kooshin, and he has one of those African drums. He comes up, says 'hey man'.

I nod at him, mid song. *Pennies from Heaven*. An old song, it seems apt in the circumstances. Then he starts tapping softly, nice beat, good rhythm. I move on to Missy Higgins, *Where I Stood*. Got to see Fizz off with some sad Australian songs. There's lots of those.

Even more people come. There's only one thing for it. Go for that old groaner, Leonard Cohen and get everyone to join in.

*Hallelulya, hallelulya* . . . . I start softly and look around at the people there, my people, and wave my arms, scooping them in, encouraging them. I don't want to speak and break the spell. My voice carries, it always did, and the echo helps. The ones who have been high up scramble down the rocks and the concrete. They gather in closer, nodding to the rhythm of the drum. Someone pulls out a ukulele. He's not very good but it doesn't matter. He strums along, at least he's in time. Then I see a flash of white teeth. Molly! She sits down beside me with her clapsticks, and starts to tap. Wood on wood. Her singing is more like a keening, a sorrowful yearning for something or someone lost.

Suddenly they're all singing. Young druggies. Sad young kids kicked out from home. All those men and women, the ill ones, rocking, wild eyes, sad eyes, slightly strange, a few hearing their voices, grinning and singing, clapping, even dancing! Old men with unshaven whiskers kicking up their heels. A few desolate women like me without homes to go to swaying in time. Rocking and singing. Holding hands. And Jamila, there she is, threading her way towards me but singing her heart out. God I love that woman.

Now I know what to do. To sing instead of drink. Try out the choir Jamila's been nagging me to join. Maybe even do some solos. And perhaps I can keep the phone and ring Jay. On my birthday. It's been a few years. I might even tell him I'm off the booze. If I am.

That's going to be hard.

And Fizz. She's had a good send-off, poor kid.

Maybe I can find out about Baby Fizz. He might need a granny.

Music – no, they can't take that away from me.