



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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## THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

2023

Highly Commended in the Open Division

Penny Carroll

*The Doll*

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## Penny Carroll

### *The Doll*

“Alright, ladies, take a deep breath, in through your nose and out through your mouth. *Abhhh.*”

The workshop leader, Eve, is a petite woman with blond curls that fizz around her face. She’s wearing a colourful kaftan and gold jewellery; her lips are suspiciously plump. If I didn’t know better, I’d assume she was a Bondi trophy wife. *Actually, maybe she is a trophy wife*, I think, taking a gulp of air and wiggling on my yoga mat. That’s exactly the kind of person who would organise a workshop as unhinged as this.

“Close your eyes,” Eve says, her voice turning silky. “Picture your favourite place – the place where your worries naturally drift away. Your happy place.”

An image floats in front of my mind: white jasmine flowers massed over fence palings, a lake shimmering in the distance. It’s my childhood backyard.

“What can you see?” Eve drones. “What can you smell? What can you feel?”

I’m lying on my back on our old trampoline, staring at the clouds and breathing in the jasmine-scented air. Cicadas chirp. My eyelids feel heavy; I barely slept last night and I’m starting to drift—

“There’s a person in front of you,” Eve whispers. Her voice sounds like it’s inside my brain. “Who is it? What do they look like?”

A shadow falls over me. I can feel someone is there, but I can’t picture the visitor’s face. *This is ridiculous*, I think.

“Start with the eyes,” Eve insists. “What colour are their eyes?”

*Blue.* The thought is so clear it startles me. I can see his eyes and they’re blue, and then I see his straw-coloured hair pushed behind his ears, his freckled nose and his wide smile. *It’s working.* I see him, leaning against the side of the trampoline in a white tee and shorts, broad shoulders, bare feet.

“Take in the details,” Eve says. “This will be very important for the next stage of the workshop.”

My eyes flick open, my cheeks flushed. He was there, just for a second. The man I’m visualising into being.

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I found the Manifest Your True Love workshop on a flier in my local cafe. “Are you sick of dating time-wasters?” it asked. “Are you done with being ghosted? Do people constantly tell you your standards are too high?”

Well, yes, yes and yes – this is all my friends and I talk about most Friday nights.

“*Call in your perfect match,*” the flier urged in cursive font.

The workshop was billed as a half-day of meditation, mindful craft and vegan morning tea for a cool \$150. I was dismissive at first, but it niggled at me all week until last night, after enduring some truly inane Tinder chat, I’d signed up. What did I have to lose, apart from a bit of cocktail cash?

But now, sitting at a trestle table in a dusty community hall in the back of Bondi Junction, nibbling on a homemade bliss ball and willing my phone to buzz with an excuse to leave early, I’m having trouble suspending my disbelief. Do I really believe that I can conjure my perfect match out of thin air, when all the men in Sydney are enjoying a steady diet of Tinder smorgasbord? So what if I’d just imagined a Grade-A hottie in my childhood happy place. That doesn’t make him real.

I sigh and the woman across from me looks up.

“It’s nuts, right?” she says, eyes twinkling. “But, here I am! Next stop, animal shelter to pick up my new herd of cats.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I reckon I hit a solid ninety on the crazy cat lady scale as soon as I picked up Eve’s flier.”

“I’ve actually heard good things,” she whispers, leaning in. “My neighbour said her cousin’s friend did this workshop a year ago and now she’s married with a baby on the way.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Okaaay ...”

“Hers was a painting, though,” the woman adds, scrunching her nose. “I don’t know – maybe this doll thing isn’t as ... effective?”

Eve claps her hands, her bangles tinkling. “Ladies,” she says, “it’s time! Let’s bring your perfect match to life.” She floats around the tables, handing us each a small, gender-neutral cloth toy and a pack of buttons, wool, fabric scraps and ribbons.

We spend the rest of the morning mindfully crafting our perfect match in fabric form. Eve flutters around, looking over our shoulders and making suggestions or offering embroidery tips. She’s encouraged us to embellish the toys while thinking about the person who appeared in our happy-place meditation and the qualities and values we expect them to “embody”. I dutifully attach strands of yellow wool to my doll’s head and sew electric blue buttons on for eyes, dot the face with a brown marker and stitch on a pink grin. I try my best to think of someone warm and kind and loyal. Someone whose interests and values mirror mine. A dating unicorn.

Eve helps me craft a white T-shirt and black shorts for my doll. The finished product is pretty cute – if nothing else, I figure, I have a ready-made gift for any last-minute baby showers.

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When I meet him on the beach two weeks later, my mind goes straight back to that weird morning in the hall. The doll has been sitting on my bedside table, somewhat forgotten – I’d laughed about the workshop with my friends over drinks that night and dismissed it as a desperate whim the next day. But now, here he is, looking exactly like the man I envisaged: blond, freckled, smiley, barefoot. He’s even wearing a white T-shirt.

I’m sitting on the sand reading a book when he approaches. “Hey, sorry to interrupt. This is a bit weird, but do I know you?” he asks.

“Um, I don’t think so!” I say brightly. Gosh, a friendly, attractive man approaching a woman in a daylight, sober setting? *This never happens*. In my mind’s eye, the doll winks at me. I shake my head slightly. “I’m Amanda. I live nearby. Maybe we’ve crossed paths at the supermarket or something?”

“Maybe,” he says. “That must be it. I just, this sounds silly, but I feel so, like, *called* to talk to you.”

I blush and gesture at the sand next to me. He flops down and we spend the rest of the afternoon chatting, then move to a nearby bar for a drink, which rolls into dinner. We can’t stop talking – we have so much in common! He walks me home and kisses me on the doorstep. Within a week, Aaron’s name dominates my recent calls list; in two, we’re talking about moving in.

“When it’s right, it’s right,” I crow to my friends.

Aaron is so gorgeous, so attentive, so thoughtful that it’s easy to ignore the doubts that begin needling me a few weeks into our whirlwind romance. He’s kind and charming, but I find myself driving our conversations, which was refreshing at first but is starting to feel draining; he owns a seemingly endless supply of plain white T-shirts – I can’t quite explain why this bothers me; and he’s vague about his career – I think he’s a gardener? At least, my indoor pot plants are flourishing thanks to his care – but he never talks about work or his colleagues or his goals. *These are not real problems*, I tell myself. *You’re too fussy*.

One night after he moves in I show him the doll and he holds it in his hands, studying it, his eyebrows knotted. I bite my lip – maybe he thinks it’s stupid? Offensive, even? A beat later he places it carefully down and flashes me a huge grin. “I knew we were meant to be!” he exclaims.

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For the most part, I’m deliriously happy. Aaron is everything I’ve ever dreamed of. My perfect match in every way.

I have to give it to Eve, her workshop was effective. Of course, I don’t actually believe the doll had anything to do with it. It’s a mindset thing. “It made me open to opportunities, available to the machinations of the universe,” I tell my friends whenever we catch up, which is less and less these days as Aaron has started to grumble when I go out without him.

Actually, he’s become a bit strange about a few things. He hates it when I try to suggest changing up his wardrobe, for instance. I’ve given him striped shirts and khaki tees, nothing too outrageous, but he huffs and says I don’t appreciate him for who he is. He also insists that we don’t need to go on holidays or travel. “Why would we go to Bali, babe, when we live in Bondi!” he argues. And as much as I love his salt-of-the-earth vibe and his gardening prowess, I sometimes find myself wishing that I’d been a *bit* more specific about career when I was making the doll all those months ago. Maybe I should have visualised something more high-powered, like an advertising exec or a smoothie bar entrepreneur, rather than a barefoot drifter. Aaron is quite happy with his part-time lawn-mowing job and his lack of ambition is a box that I can’t help but notice hasn’t been ticked.

I find myself pouring this out to my sister, Lucy, when she visits with my three-year-old niece, Charlotte, one Sunday afternoon.

“Look, Amanda, he’s a good guy. You can’t have everything,” she tells me, one eye on her daughter, who’s started clinking two expensive glass vases together like clapsticks. “Relationships are more than a wish list, they take work— Charlotte! Put those down!”

“She’s okay,” I say, trying to stifle my cringe. An idea strikes me. “Char, if you go into my bedroom over there, you’ll find a little doll you can play with. He’s got lovely yellow hair.”

Her eyes light up and I turn back to my sister, ready to launch into another relationship gripe.

“Isn’t that the doll you made of Aaron? I hope you don’t want that back,” Lucy says.

“Why?”

“Charlotte’s going through a stage: whenever she gets a new toy she really latches on. I’m sorry, but if she likes your doll I am *not* going to battle her for it. I learned the hard way after we had a screaming match at daycare over a headless Barbie.”

“Oh. Well, I guess she can have it. It’s not like it’s magic or anything,” I say, and a nervous chuckle slips out. “Aaron’s certainly not going anywhere.”

She gives me a look, her eyebrow raised. “Careful what you wish for, Mandy.”

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When Aaron’s hair starts falling out and I don’t think much of it. We’re confused, of course – why would a healthy thirty-year-old man start losing clumps of hair? Aaron puts it down to male pattern baldness and I shrug it off. He’ll still be handsome with a buzz cut, I guess.

But it’s not just the hair. He starts complaining of knee pain, wrist pain, shoulder pain. We go to the doctor, run tests, see a naturopath. Everything comes back clear. Nothing helps.

I’m making us an anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, high-protein breakfast one Sunday when he calls out to me in a shaky voice. “Mandy. Mandy! Can you come here?”

I rush to the bathroom and find him on the floor, leaning against the vanity, holding his left arm. Literally. His no-longer-attached arm.

“What the fuck!” I shriek. “What happened?”

He’s dazed, shakes his head. “I don’t know, I was brushing my teeth and it just ... fell off. There’s no blood. It hurt a bit when it came off but now, nothing.”

He's right, there's no blood, just an empty T-shirt sleeve hanging off his broad shoulders. It looks like a bad practical joke. "Is this a prank?" I say warily.

Aaron doesn't respond. He's holding up his arm, turning it, examining it.

I grab my phone to Google an answer but I don't know what to type into the search bar. *Reattach dismembered arm no blood?*

Suddenly Aaron's head jerks back, crashing into the cupboard behind him. *Whack! Whack! Whack!* It's as though someone is controlling him, an invisible puppeteer. I scream, try to hold him still; he must be having a fit. I'm trying to roll him on his side when his T-shirt bulges strangely. I press my hands to his stomach and feel something soft and slimy; entrails ooze between my fingers. My blood runs cold.

Aaron's eyes flicker. He's barely conscious. "The doll, Mandy," he croaks. "Where's the doll?"

I reel. I haven't thought about it in months, not since Lucy and Charlotte came over ... "Fuck," I say, leaping up to grab my phone. Aaron slumps on the floor.

"Lucy? Lucy, it's urgent. Does Charlotte still have that doll I gave her?"

"Hey, Mandy," my sister says. She sounds tired, not in the least bothered by my urgent tone. "Yeah, actually she hasn't looked at it much lately but she's been playing with it this morning. I think the dog found it and now they're having a tug-of-war."

Oh my God.

"Lucy, listen to me," I hiss. "You have to make them stop."

"Ha, are you kidding? Not a chance in hell!" She laughs. "Here, I'll try. Hey, Charlotte, time to stop playing with your dolly!" she calls. "LOL, she didn't even look up. Oof, I don't think there's much point anyway, Mandy, that doll isn't going to last the hour by the looks of it."

I hang up, my heart pounding, mind spinning. Aaron is unconscious now, his guts spilling onto the tiles. *How do I fix this?*

*Eve.* Eve will know what to do, surely. I search my emails and find the workshop receipt, dial the number.

"Hello, this is Eve!"

"Eve, hi. My name's Amanda. I did the Manifest Your True Love workshop a few months ago and I met a guy and ..." I'm rambling. "Look, I don't know how to explain

this, but my boyfriend is ... he's in trouble. He's dropping limbs, his stomach has torn open – it's like he's unravelling or something. Can you help?"

There's a pause then, "Where is the doll?" she asks in a tight voice.

"I gave it to my niece a few weeks ago. Apparently she's been playing tug-of-war with her dog with it."

A sharp intake of breath. "Oh, God. Not again."

"What?"

"You need to get here now, Amanda. Hurry."

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Eve's words are ringing in my ears as I rush to her swanky apartment building in North Bondi. What did she mean, *not again*? Aaron was slipping in and out of consciousness when I left. I didn't want to leave him but what else could I do? I couldn't call triple zero. How would I explain his injuries to the doctors? To the police?

Eve appears at the door before I can ring the bell and drags me inside.

"You don't have long," she says. "You have to do the visualisation again and make another doll."

"Another one? How does it work? Does it have to be exactly the same?"

She shakes her head, avoids my eyes. "I don't know, to be perfectly honest. I usually run that workshop with paintings but some women complained that they weren't getting matches after the workshop so I thought I'd switch to dolls. It's how I met my husband, you see – he's an entrepreneur, very successful, just what I ordered. The others in my coaching group agreed that moving to dolls was a great way to level up. More three-dimensional, you know? And, as long as you don't actually *use* them, it's fairly safe. Didn't you hear that in the workshop? I told everyone to keep the doll in a cupboard, somewhere out of sight, not to share it with others."

I shake my head. "I-I-I don't remember that."

"Never mind," she says, pushing a new cloth doll into my hands. "We'll just have to do the best we can and hope the universe matches you up with the same man so he can recover from his injuries. I have to warn you, though, this visualisation technique is quite powerful. If you're having any doubts ... The universe likes to test us, you see. Sometimes she sends us people who are *almost* right, to help us clarify. To sharpen our vision, if you



will. If you didn't get the right one the first time, I'm sorry, but there's no guarantees you'll be able to save your boyfriend."

I shudder, remembering Aaron slumped on the bathroom floor, his unattached arm draped grotesquely over his lap.

"What happens if I don't see him? If someone else comes through instead? What happens to Aaron?"

She winces. "It's probably best if we don't discuss that just yet."

I let Eve guide me to a pristine white lounge room overlooking the beach. She gestures to a yoga mat spread out on a faded Persian rug and I lie down, close my eyes, try to still my racing mind with deep breaths.

"Think of your happy place," she intones. "Where is it you go when you need solace?"

I smell the jasmine first, feel the buoyancy of the trampoline beneath me. This is good, this is right. It's just like before. I relax a little, wiggle my toes.

"A man is with you," Eve prompts. "What does he look like?"

I think of Aaron, his yellow hair, blue eyes, that smile that made butterflies explode through my chest when we first met. I think of all the white T-shirts piling up in the laundry and swat the annoyance away.

"Where is he," Eve whispers. "Call him in."

I feel a presence then, just like the last time. He's here.

"Hello, Amanda," a voice says. Deep, reassuring. It's him, I can feel it. *He's the one.*

My heart thuds. I turn to look at this man, my perfect match.

I smile. Relief floods through me. This time, I'm sure.

"Goodbye, Aaron," I whisper.