

THE **write** **Stuff**

Seniors Week 2001
Short Stories and Poetry Anthology

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The Arrangement

Overall Winner/First Prize
Humorous
Anne Paterson
North Codrington



When Susan returned, laden, from the shops, Mrs Trump, her neighbour, was cutting off dead roses in her front garden.

“Been shopping?” Called Mrs Trump.

No, she almost retorted, I’ve been boot scooting, can’t you see you silly old woman?

Then carefully, “Yes – stacks of people. Lovely day.”

She closed the door slowly behind her to prevent herself slamming it and dumped the shopping in the kitchen.

“Fancy meeting Maureen again, she’d put on a bit of weight but otherwise was the same pretty girl who had run off with Tom all those years ago. Oh well, I would probably have been no happier with Tom than I am with Jo.”

“Hello love, been shopping?” Said Jo, coming in from the garden.

“No I’ve been fishing, can’t you see?” she snapped. “Mrs Trump asked me the same question.”

Jo smiled and started unpacking plastic bags.

“Oh, do leave it Jo, you’ll put everything in the wrong place.”

“Very well.” He walked into the lounge.

“It doesn’t matter,” she thought, “how unpleasant I am, he never fights back. He’s the nicest, kindest, most generous man I have ever known and he nearly drives me mad. Then, full of contrition, she called “Oh, by the way, I met a girl in town who I used to know. She’s on her own after a recent divorce so I asked her to dinner next Friday – is that OK?”

Jo came back into the kitchen and put the kettle on. “Fine. We could invite Alec over he’s on his own at the moment.”

“Oh yes, she’ll go down well with Alec. She’s blonde and beautiful and quite intelligent also if the job that she holds down in any indication. She’s an enthusiastic gardener too, I understand, so you’ll probably have a lot in common. You may get some knowledgeable feedback for a change.”

Jo grinned, “I suppose she’s not a philatelist as well, that would be too much to hope for.”

“Now that you come to mention it I think she did say something about stamps but I didn’t pay much attention.”

While she put the shopping away Susan thought about Maureen. The rather brassy girl of ten years ago seemed to have softened and matured but the go getting drive was still apparent and “did I detect a hint of the do-gooder”, she wondered.

Lost in thought she absentmindedly poured the potatoes into the onion box and stacked the honey into the tinned fish department. “Alec will certainly find her attractive and Jo will find her interesting – and attractive? She stopped, hand poised over the Muesli jar and Muesli poured over the floor unheeded. “We are quite alike,” she thought, “and we have similar tastes in people.” A kaleidoscope of thoughts tumbled through her mind. “In the old days the thing that we had in common was Tom, but now – I wonder?”

“Tom!” Her pulse quickened and her eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. “I wonder what happened to him after the divorce? Maureen said he is still in Sydney”.

Engrossed in her thoughts she stood for several minutes with the Muesli round her feet, then gave her mind a metaphorical shake and returned to putting away the shopping.

The dinner party was a success and as predicted, Alec found Maureen very attractive and they arranged a visit to the movies the following week. Jo behaved in his usual retiring way until Susan mentioned Maureen’s interest in gardening and stamps. He then became quite vivacious and arranged for her to come round and give her opinion upon his *Grevillia Rosmarinifolia*. Altogether the conversation was interesting and light-hearted, which made up for a rather indifferent meal for which Susan was most apologetic.

As Alec remarked: “Not up to your usual standards, Sue. One usually can’t talk for eating in this house.”

Canterbury Secrets

Third Prize
Jim Gasteen
Alstonville

Before wandering tourists in four wheel drives began plundering historic sites, the banks of permanent waterholes in Australia's back country were rich in Aboriginal and early European history. Here, stone age implements and nardoo grinding stones merged with old spring carts, rusting tins and strange bottles at abandoned cattlemen's camps round lignum swamps and coolabah-fringing ancient streams that seldom flow. These were leftovers of hardy pioneers who carved cattle empires from virgin bush as large as many countries. No roads, telephones or wireless sets for them. From comfortable city backgrounds, tough bushmen emerge. They cut adrift from coastal settlement and for weary months with cattle and wagons, lived off the land as they pushed ever further inland.

Their slow procession blazed tracks through gidgee scrub and gibber plain in search of good grazing land, while heat mirages mirrored sheets of imaginary water to tantalise the thirst of man and beast. Guided by local tribes to permanent water, bullocks were unyoked, wagons unloaded and rough homesteads built with sweat and whatever the bush provided. Determination and grit was their survival kit aided by the old people, the Aborigines, who became the station workforce. Great stockmen they soon became, helping wives and children run huge stations while husbands were away for months on the road with cattle, opening up stock routes as they worked the mobs south to city markets. Bullock teams too opened up tracks, which later became roads as wagons brought essential stores and long awaited mail from settlement hundreds of miles away.

At the junction of long forgotten stock routes are the ruins of abandoned lonely outposts amidst Mitchell grass plain and encroaching desert sand. At the ruins of Annandale station on Eyre Creek near the QLD/SA border, is a bush calendar – a line of grooves scratched deep into crumbling sandstone walls where some lonely wife marked off the days since the droving