

# Spilled Milk

*Spilled milk reveals many years of silence.*

This story is based on true events, as is all fiction. In 1950s Australia, in a small and rapidly growing suburb of Geelong, a place called Norlane, there was a little old pub, built of bluestone, now painted a dirty cream, red corrugated iron roof, a couple of red brick chimneys, and a very old public bar, complete with a pock marked linoleum bar counter and vintage old taps. The bar room was about the size of a two car garage, which appeared big early in the morning at opening, but by 6 o'clock at closing time, patrons were packed in like sardines, elbow to elbow. As you might guess, there was no shortage of brawls when the men jostled each other to make it to the bar to order drinks for themselves and their mates. And the din of men talking and chortling was huge.

Hidden away at the far corner of the bar was the only man sitting in this bar made for standing. This was the special stool that the pub's owner had put aside for good old Joe Smith, the painter. The noise of the bar made no difference to him. He sat on his stool, stared straight ahead across the bar counter, eyes dreamy, maybe focused on the only picture in the bar of the young Queen Elizabeth, hanging above the refrigerator that kept the beer cold.

Joe was a special kind of painter, crucial to the Ford Motor company that stood across the road from the pub. Every day, now going on fifteen years, Joe showed up there for work, dressed in paint splattered overalls, nothing except underwear underneath (so one supposed), because it was so hot when he donned the plastic coated outer garment that covered him head to toe. It was his job, as was one other who worked with him, to spray-paint the bodies of the cars as they passed along the production line. The paint in full spray was, of course, toxic so he breathed through a contraption that was most likely an adaptation of the old gas masks they used in World War I.

Joe and his mate (to whom he spoke rarely) painted from eight in the morning, ten minutes smoke-o and a cup of tea at ten,

then paint again until lunch at twelve, a sandwich his wife made him every morning, and a quick run across the Melbourne road to the pub for a couple of beers then back to work at twelve-thirty. Then they painted until four, knocked off and sprinted across to the pub to drink the rest of the day until closing at six. This had been Joe's routine for the last fifteen years. He was very proud of his work, drove his painter mate almost crazy because of his insistence on attending to every small detail. He would not allow any blemish to go down the line. Every car, he said—that is when he spoke which was rare—must be perfect. Would you want a new car that had a paint blemish on it? He would ask. Not that he himself ever had a car. He couldn't afford it. And anyway he was happy enough sitting at home, doing his garden and coming in and having a beer by the telly.

Because the paint fumes were so toxic, even when you wore all the protective clothing and masks, Ford had a rule that a painter could only work at that particular job for fifteen years, and that was it. They were then reassigned to some other part of the production line. Of that, though, Joe would have none of it. He was a painter and that was all he was. No standing at a production line doing the same thing over and over again, having to listen to all the gossip of the other men.

So Joe retired when his fifteen years were up. He always said he would. This meant that he had lots of time to spend in his garden, and that was what he did every day. After breakfast at eight he went out, rain or shine and worked on his garden. The front full of rose bushes and geraniums and the back full of seasonal veggies. Usually, he worked at the front in the mornings, broke off for morning tea at ten, returned to the front, hoping there would be no people walking past that he would have to talk to. At midday, off he went to the pub, just ten minutes' walk down North Shore road, sat in the corner on his stool and socked down a few beers, in the winter often a few glasses of Abbotsford stout to keep him warm in the garden when he returned home, always at about one. He allowed this small change in his routine, and indeed, sometimes even made it one-thirty.

Missus Joe as she was known to all up and down the street, did not drink. They could not afford for both of them to spend money on drink, she announced ceremoniously every day, or at least to Joe it seemed like every day. She especially upbraided

him when he came home after lunch and she could smell (so she said) the stout on him.

“You’re not a bloody invalid, are you? So what are you doing drinking that muck?”

Joe simply ignored her, or seemingly so, though he did grunt, a small grunt, one that she would not detect, since she was too busy rummaging around in the kitchen cupboards, complaining that she could not find what she wanted.

“Why don’t you build me some new shelves for the kitchen instead of bugging around in the garden and drinking your beer?”

“And why don’t you go fuck yourself?” Joe muttered to himself.

“Did you say something dear?” said Missus Joe, a sarcastic smile and tilt of her head.

Joe turned away. He could not bear to look at her. Compared to the cars he painted, she was truly ugly. And away he went to the garden. Afternoon was veggie time, where he spent a lot of time laying out the garden in very straight rows, nice little paths between each bed, each bed bordered by rows of empty beer bottles pushed into the soft dirt, bottoms up.

Missus Joe, for her part, labored over the kitchen sink that looked out over the back yard. She sang to herself, happy that Joe was out of her kitchen. “If only...” she mused to herself, but forced herself to stop. She washed the dishes over a second time. She had wanted children badly. But it was not to be. They tried, and finally gave up. Joe wasn’t up to it anyway, with all his drinking. It was his drinking that she blamed. Makes men sterile, that’s what her friends at church said. She had thought of leaving him, but truth be said, where would she go? What would she do for money? Get a job, maybe? Not that anyone would employ her so old, and a woman and all. She had pleaded with Joe not to retire. But he would not listen. Once he got an idea into his head, there was no shifting it. “Stubborn old bugger” she grumbled to herself.

And so their gritty life ground on, a grit that seemed to hold them together, yet made a life as two individuals never truly to meet.

One day, it could have been any day, or any year of their marriage, but on this day, Joe came in from the garden, a little earlier than usual because he had pricked his finger while pruning his roses.

“Time for a cuppa,” he mumbled to Missus Joe as he trudged past her into the bathroom.

“It’s not ready yet. You don’t come in this early do you?” She did not expect an answer of course. But she hurried and put the kettle on and got out the cups and saucers and placed a small plate of yo-yo’s, as she always did, at the center of the table. And he always complained, though did not say anything, just made an obvious wince when he got up from his chair and leaned across to get the yo-yo.

“What are you doing in there?” yelled Missus Joe, her voice a rough crackling voice, one that penetrated silence like a bulldozer.

Joe finished sucking his thumb when the bleeding had stopped. He wiped his hands on the towel, noticing that it was smudged and had not been washed properly. He walked steadily to the kitchen and sat down on his usual chair. Missus Joe stood at the stove waiting for the kettle to boil.

Joe sat motionless, elbows on the table, propping up his chin. “Come on! Where’s the bloody tea?” he complained.

On cue, the kettle whistled and Missus Joe made the tea. Her routine was also messed up. She went to the cutlery drawer to retrieve knives and forks and placed them on the table at their respective places. She had to reach around Joe in order to place the knife and fork exactly in the right place. If they were not straight, he would notice. Wouldn’t say anything, mind, but she knew he would be annoyed. Immediately, he sat back in his chair, a heavy wicker chair, and stared ahead. “What’s this for?” he asked, then licked his lips and pushed his tongue against his teeth as though the words were stuck in there. “Don’t need a bloody knife and fork to eat a yo-yo, you silly bitch.”

Missus Joe tried to ignore him and reached over to take the knife and fork back.

“Steak knives too, they are, you silly bugger!” He grabbed his knife, banged the handle on the table, and reached for the fork, pushing Missus Joe’s hands away. She turned to pour the tea in the cups and pushed his towards him. Joe leaned back in his chair, his eyes seemingly out of focus. He now held one of the steak knives in his clenched fist. Missus Joe, struggling to remain calm, went to the refrigerator and retrieved the small bottle of milk. She leaned over him and went to pour a small amount into his cup,

just a tiny amount. She had to hold the bottle steady and be very careful, because if she poured too much, he would be furious and would demand another cup of tea. Holding a bottle of milk, mostly full, poised above a small teacup was a challenge, even though she had done it a thousand times. “In my defense,” she thought, “the bottle is slippery from the condensation on the bottle.” Perhaps it was that thought that tilted the bottle forward, the hand of her aching arm letting go. The milk splashed out into the cup with such force that the teacup overflowed, and tipped over. Missus Joe dropped the bottle of milk on the table where its contents gurgled out and flowed slowly to the edge and on to the lap of Joe’s old gardening overalls.

Joe was a man of few words, everyone knew that, especially Missus Joe. He gulped and his eyes grew wide, pushing at his cheeks swollen from years of alcohol, his lips pursed tightly shut. His nostrils expanded like those of a Spanish bull about to charge. His fist tightened even more on the steak knife and his eyes, no longer dreamy, quickly focused on its serrated blade reflecting the florescent light of the kitchen. His thumb moved down to the blade and tightened. It was an awkward grip. But no matter. He rose from his chair as though thrust by a canon, and lunged wildly with a wide slashing movement, as though pulling open the curtain of a large window. And just as quickly, he dropped down on his chair, exhausted. Missus Joe was standing, pale and rigid with fright and shock, one hand to her bleeding throat, the other leaning on the table to keep her balance. For the first time in a long time, Joe looked at her right in her face, stared into her eyes. From where he sat, she looked like something from Madam Tussaud’s wax museum. But only for a moment.

Her body sagged, then fell to the floor, Joe’s eyes still staring where her eyes had been. She fell with a plop, blood spraying all over the place, a couple of spasms, and she was plainly dead. Joe looked at the floor and was upset for a moment that she had got blood all over the floor. Then he realized of course, that it was none of her doing. No, correction, her end was all her doing, it was just him who finished the job.

*Moral: Punishment delayed, is punishment unleashed.*

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