

October 2005 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

The Leap Year Man

By Jim Murphy

It's a lost cause, thought Tom, but his years in the police force had taught him that occasionally miracles happen. He reread his letter, which said simply -

“Dear Boris. Thanks again for your wonderful season in our team. Please come back and play for us next year. Your friend, Tom Ahern.”

Tom smiled to himself - the Leap Year Man was weird, but Glengubbie, both town and football club, everyone acknowledged. He recalled the afternoon in early March, when the entire fantasy started.

As football coach he had been watching from over the fence as the young hopefuls went through their early training exercises. Young, enthusiastic and without talent! It's going to be a long season, he thought. Myra's right, I should have given it up last year.

He thought of the once-famous Glengubbie Football Club – premiers 1997, with Tom Ahern at full-forward kicking 112 goals, the highest ever in the history of the competition. But then came 2003 - second last, with 38-year-old Tom barely able to run. It couldn't get any worse, he had thought. Wrong! Year 2004, the team was winless, and Tom, the old crock at full forward, kicked just 32 goals. Not a bad effort really, considering the entire team only kicked 55 for the year.

The Football Club mirrored the little town, once busy and prosperous, but now a fading relic. No jobs, no future, nothing but idleness, vandalism and fights. The only growth industry in the area was making and repainting the 'For Sale' signs that mushroomed in the town.

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Tom coached the football team because no one else wanted the job, and the club had no money anyway. Only masochists came to see Glengubbie play. Young fellows straight out of secondary school joined up to play for a year or two, and then drifted away. The honour had long gone.

Tom thought bitterly of Alan Masters, the talented young forward from last year's team, who this year "couldn't find the time". Who could blame him, after Paddy McLean - the best elbow in the competition - had broken his jaw and knocked out half his teeth? And not even reported! One more year, and that's my lot, thought Tom.

Next afternoon found him in the local pub on police business. As he walked through the bar he noticed Alex Peters watching a replay of an AFL game. Alex, now middle-aged, had been a star footballer, the first aborigine to win the competition's best and fairest award. He spotted Tom.

"How's the team this year, Tom?" he asked, "Got any good recruits?"

On the TV screen one of the many AFL aboriginal players was dazzling the opposition with his skills.

"Tell you what, Alex, send me one of them and I'll be happy."

Alex laughed. "It'll cost you, Tom," he replied. "Another pot?"

Tom grinned and bought the drink.

He forgot the incident until next Thursday's training, when a voice behind him said, "Tom Ahern?"

He turned to see a tall well-built aborigine standing behind him.

"You need a footballer?" asked the Koori.

Tom smiled. "I certainly do. Where have you been playing?"

"Nowhere, but I reckon I can get a few kicks."

"What's your name, son?"

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“Boris O’Neill.”

Funny name for an aborigine, thought Tom.

“Okay, Boris,” he said, “Our rooms are over there. Let’s see what you can do.”

Five minutes later the team watched amazed as Boris displayed his dazzling skills. It was only a training run, but he moved with all the grace and agility that seems to be inherent in aborigines. Tom felt a faint glimmer of hope for the season ahead.

“You’ll do fine, Boris,” he said after training, “But first I have to register you as a player. Just fill this form out – or,” he hesitated awkwardly, “would you like me to help?”

Boris seemed to understand the implication as he took the form. “No problem, Tom. I’ll do it now.”

Several minutes later he gave it back to the coach, who read through it.

“Address, Boris. Post Office Box 00, Calconga? Post Office boxes all have numbers from one up. Zero can’t be right, what number *is* it?”

“Two zeroes, Tom,” Boris replied. “It *must* be a double zero, a single one won’t reach me.”

Tom shook his head imperceptibly and continued with the form.

“Calconga? Never heard of it, mate. Where is it?”

A long way from here, but you can reach me there, no trouble.”

“Where are you staying, Boris? What if we need to contact you?”

Boris smiled. “You can’t. I live, well, sort of everywhere and anywhere. I’m a reliable nomad, Tom.”

I’m making no progress here, thought Tom, but he ploughed on.

“Date of birth – 29/2/81. That’s not right! 1981 wasn’t a leap year, Boris.”

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“It was for me. Believe me, I’m a Leap Year Man.” He was smiling broadly, “I’m only six years old, only six birthdays.”

Tom tried again. “Boris, leap years are divisible by four, eighty one isn’t. It must be 1984 that you were born.”

Boris was emphatic. “No! Definitely 1981.”

“Okay,” said the bemused coach. “I’ll send the form in.”

But first, he thought, I’ll doctor it a bit, without telling him. On his computer he put his own home as Boris’s residential address. He then keyed 29/02/81 as the new player’s date of birth. To his amazement the computer accepted it. He brought up his own record, and tried to change his date of birth to 29/02/81. ‘Invalid Date’, said the computer. Tom’s curiosity grew.

Glengubbie’s first match was away from home, and a mere twenty diehard supporters and officials made the trip, to see Boris gain an incredible 45 possessions. He marked, kicked accurately with both feet, hand-passed, and propelled Glengubbie to its first win in two years. He was chaired off the ground by his teammates. Tom limped off after kicking six goals. Then followed a seldom-heard and excruciatingly bad rendition of the club song, which sounded like opera to the tired coach. The pub at Glengubbie had a very busy Saturday night, the publican turning on a free keg for the boys when they returned.

“It’s the least I can do,” he told Tom. “It doesn’t happen often. I’ll do it whenever you win.”

“That will prove expensive,” Tom prophesied.

He noticed that Boris was missing. “Did anybody see him go?” he asked, but nobody had. Boris had melted away in the crowd.

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The next match was on the Glengubbie oval, and a curious one hundred plus spectators turned up to see whether the previous Saturday's miracle could be repeated. They were impressed - a thirty point win! Boris was again best on ground, and Tom had kicked four goals.

Not only the football team was changing - the town was following suit. Spirits rose, with everyone wanted to talk to Tom about his team. Boris became a celebrity, but nobody could find him, since no one knew where he lived. He appeared at training on Thursday nights only, never Tuesday. "I am," he said, "too far away to be here on a Tuesday."

Which prompted Tom to ponder, where *did* he live?

On Thursday after training he offered to drive his new star home. Boris accepted, asking, "Which road do you take?"

"The north road, I'm three K's out of town."

"Just drop me two kilometres out, Tom," he directed, and after a short trip said, "This'll do nicely."

There were no houses nearby, just a few in the distance.

"Which place is yours?" Tom asked.

Boris laughed, "Take your pick."

Tom drove away, watching Boris intently in the rear vision mirror. He was standing by the side of the road, waving. For a split second Tom glanced at the road ahead, and when he looked back Boris was gone. Tom's curiosity, already aroused, grew to an obsession.

Next day he decided use the police computer system to track his elusive star. Not one Boris O'Neill was born within three years of February 1981. Eventually he keyed the 29th of February 1981. "Invalid date," said the machine, as Tom had predicted.

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He then tried the postal address, Box 00, Calconga. “No such suburb/town,” said the computer. Tom then rang the farm owners who lived close to the spot at which Boris had alighted. No one knew him, except one old farmer who followed the football news.

“Your new star, and you don’t know where he lives?” he asked disbelievingly.

“Yes,” Tom laughed, “Bizarre, isn’t it?” and hung up quickly.

After five matches Glengubbie was undefeated. Boris was the team’s spark, but the team itself was on fire. Round six saw them playing at Colgulla, the ground of last year’s premiers, whose team included their dreaded elbow man, Paddy McLean.

After Thursday’s training Tom made sure Boris knew all about Paddy’s wayward arms.

“No trouble, Tom,” Boris grinned. “I’ll be ready for him.”

But Tom *did* worry. Paddy suffered from ‘white line fever’. When he ran onto the field he changed from an easy-going plumber into a total thug. He never strayed into the back line, where Tom had been waiting for years to clobber him, but loitered around the midfield, preparing to deliver his infamous late tackles. And his targets, when hit, stayed down. At the after-match drinks Paddy would always buy a beer for his victim, reminding him that ‘what happens on the field stays on the field’.

A huge crowd, including over three hundred Glengubbie fans, arrived to cheer on their teams. Tom watched and waited as Boris weaved his magic, and the visitors went to an early lead. Late in the first quarter Boris marked, and a split second later Paddy arrived on the scene, forearm extended. Boris went down, stunned, and the umpire awarded a fifty-metre penalty, bringing him well within scoring range. Tom watched with pleasure as Boris kicked a nonchalant goal, and then pointedly thanked Paddy for his assistance. Don’t overdo it, son, Tom thought.

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Paddy seethed. At the first available opportunity he launched a ferocious tackle at a Glengubbie player, and Tom winced in anticipation. But, miraculously, Boris appeared, unseen by Paddy, who ended up on the wrong end of the best shirtfront Tom had ever seen. Paddy went down so hard he bounced, and was assisted, semi-conscious, from the field.

The whole team lifted. Paddy returned to the field in the last quarter, his side trailing, only to be decked again - and by a first year player. Tom was overjoyed – his team had found spirit. We could go all the way now, he thought.

At the after-match drinks he noticed that Boris had a beer in his hand; the first time he'd seen him with a drink. Then he watched in amusement as Boris gave it to a very subdued Paddy, reminding him that 'What happens on the field stays on the field, doesn't it, mate?'

After the defeat of the reigning premiers, Glengubbie erupted. The party raged long and loud at the pub, the local girls having discovered that their footballers were worth knowing. But Boris was never there.

While the party was in full swing, Lenny Teague, a reporter for the area newspaper, confronted Tom.

"Tom," he said. "What's wrong with this Boris bloke you've got? Why can't we photograph him?"

Tom was nonplussed. "You can, any time," he said.

Lenny shook his head. "Twice now we've taken pictures of Glengubbie in action. We've published them, all except the ones with Boris in. Would you believe he disappears from the pictures? No, I know it sounds crazy," – Tom was laughing – "but any picture of Boris fades, his image simply disappears. That's why we haven't put a photo of him anywhere in the paper."

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Tom took his Polaroid camera to Thursday's practice and persuaded Boris to pose. He slid the picture from the machine, and the star's face smiled back at him. 'Lenny's crazy,' Tom thought.

Also at training last year's star, Alan Masters, re-appeared, having 're-arranged his schedule' to enable him to play. Several other former players joined him. Suddenly there was intense competition for a spot in the side. The Glengubbie juggernaut rolled on – into the finals and into the Grand Final. The population had discovered football again – five hundred fans rolled up to every game. The chook raffles made money, the re-activated ladies auxiliary sold drinks and food to the supporters, and the after-match celebrations added to the coffers. The town was on the map again, and the locals knew it. Hosting the Grand Final was the icing on the cake.

But for Tom, the enigma remained. Who was Boris? Where did he come from? Where did he live? North of the town, Tom had thought, but a couple of his players told him that they had driven Boris east. Once again he had travelled for two kilometres, got out and disappeared. Did he live in the open? He couldn't, Tom thought. If you live in the open you get dust in your hair, your eyes, your clothes. Boris was always clean. He wore everyday attire, but was always neat and tidy. Definitely not the clothes of someone who lived in the wilds!

Mysteries aside, Tom was a happy man. He promised his long-suffering Myra that he would retire – definitely – after the season. He had kicked ninety-seven goals, and was hoping for the magic "ton" as well as the premiership. Every player had lifted, and Boris no longer dominated. The side developed talents Tom never dreamed it possessed.

The town lifted its game, too. Civic pride soared, and the number of 'For Sale' signs diminished. Jobs were generated - at the pub, the milk bar, and the petrol station.

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Five thousand people jammed into the town for the Grand Final. Both motels and the pub were full. ‘Come To Bubbly Glengubbie’ read the banners over the roads into the town.

The match itself was dull, unless you were a Glengubbie fan. Like so many finals it was one-sided. Glengubbie dominated, Boris starred, and Tom had kicked two goals by half time. Only one more for his century! The opportunity didn’t come until the last five minutes of the game, when Boris passed to him. All he had to do was run, hard, for fifteen metres, but as he did his right knee gave way. He marked the ball, and, in total agony, insisted on taking his kick. He hit the post, collapsed, and was carried off. A pain-killing needle and a pair of crutches had him on his feet as the siren sounded. Glengubbie had risen from wooden-spooners to premiers in a season. The fans and the team were delirious, and the awful club song re-echoed around the oval. The exhausted players formed a group, and eager supporters with cameras clicked away madly.

The celebrations raged well into Sunday, but there was one absentee – Boris. He had disappeared again, but not before saying goodbye to Tom.

“See you next year, Boris?” Tom said, but Boris shook his head.

“You don’t need me, Tom, these guys are good.”

When the team photos were developed there was a gaping space where Boris had stood. He had become a space. He was strange, quite strange, people claimed, shaking their heads. Tom retrieved his Polaroid picture, only to find a scene of the oval – no Boris in sight!

I have his address, Tom thought, I wonder can I reach him. So he wrote his letter. He felt helpless and hopeless as he addressed the envelope, ‘PO Box 00’, stamped it and placed it in the outward basket. I can’t just sit back and do *nothing*, he thought.

He was stunned when he received a reply two days later.

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“Thanks for your note, Tom, it was a great season, wasn’t it? I’d like to play again next leap year – that’s 2009. I’ll only be seven years old, you know. Best wishes for 2006. Boris.”

Even more amazingly, three days later, another letter came. It was his original one to Boris, still unopened, and marked, “**NO SUCH ADDRESS – RETURN TO SENDER.**”

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