

April 2006 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

Veronica's Chook by Michelle Lopert

You want to hear the truth? The truth is, I wanted my husband dead and would have killed him myself if I had the strength. Or hired someone to kill him if I had the money. He punched me savagely after my second miscarriage, fist-pounding my flesh to make me more fertile.

The swelling of my lips stifled my rage against this eternal war that plagued our country, turning men into barbarians. 'He fights for freedom but he keeps me prisoner.'

'Daughter,' my father sighed. 'You must learn to keep silent and obey your husband.'

'He's not like you, father. He's mean and bossy and I won't be silent.'

I'd fought against this arranged marriage but no one listened to my protests. Girls were invisible. Trapped in my marital prison, I lay awake each night hoping for hideous accidents to befall him, praying that the war would kill him and release me.

But the war killed my father instead. Now nothing would tame my husband's fury. I grabbed what money I'd stashed away and fled for my life. My plan was to put big distances between us, preferably a couple of continents and an ocean or two. And that's what I did.

Alone, orphaned and in a strange land, I was Jane Eyre, my favourite novel. My husband had accused me of living in a world of fantasy so I was determined to survive off my wits and prove him wrong. Father said I was a stubborn chatterbox with good language skills so I had some positive characteristics. Thanks to BBC Radio, I spoke English fluently by the age of five and read all the classics by the age of twelve.

Veronica's Chook

Back in my country, a fifteen-year old girl wandering the streets without a male relative would be scooped away and punished. But here, alone in this wide, parched continent, no one bothered me. Though kindness and humour greeted me, I was still fearful. The newspapers were full of tales about desperate refugees who threw themselves at the mercy of an uncaring government. Stories of those who were locked away in barbed-wire prisons till their brains fried with hopelessness and grief. What I needed now was a home, not another prison, somewhere to rest my blistered feet.

And then it happened. I turned a corner and the house of my daydreams loomed before me like a towering monster, a majestic and imposing mansion straight out of a Victorian novel. The brass plaque on the front gate said *Thornfield*, the name of the house where Jane Eyre found employment and fell madly in love with the master, Edward Rochester.

Every day, I hid behind the hedges, studying the residents and pretending they were my family. In my head, I was the real Jane Eyre but the growling in my stomach reminded me that I was just another homeless, hungry girl in search of a decent meal. I sneaked into the backyard and pilfered food.

From a caravan nestled in the corner of the yard, a young man, most likely the caretaker, stepped out each day to tend the gardens. A mottled patch of burnt flesh on the side of his face spoilt his dusky beauty but added an aura of mystery. He moved slowly, deliberately, often stopping to lean on his pitchfork and stare into space. Sometimes he sat under a tree reading, eyelids drooping. I wiped tears from my eyes, remembering my father and the way his glasses slipped down his nose when he fell asleep reading.

Veronica's Chook

I crept around the estate, crouching in the leafy gardens like a feral cat, craving human companionship. In a moment of carelessness, an unguarded sneeze alerted him to my hiding place. Our eyes met and he smiled like he'd been waiting for me.

'Come in, I'll make you something to eat.' His voice was deep and gentle. He held the caravan door open. 'What's your name?'

'Jane.' I blurted out the first name that had come into my head.

He tilted his head. 'Ha, *Jane Eyre*, eh?'

My heart did a somersault. He'd obviously read my favourite novel. 'Yes, *Jane Eyre*. That's me. So what's your name?'

'My name's Eddie.'

I tilted my head and imitated him. 'Ha, *Edward Rochester*, eh?'

He laughed and in that instant we became friends. I stepped into the caravan and gasped at the books piled on the table, lining the walls, spilling into his life. He swept the books aside and prepared me a meal while I studied his brooding face. Unable to suppress my curiosity any longer I asked about the burns on his neck and cheek.

'An accident I had in the merchant navy.' He turned away too quickly.

My father was right. I could never keep my big mouth shut.

Eddie handed me a plate. 'Here, toasted cheese and tomato, the twins' favourite.'

I didn't know who the twins were but hunger lowered my defences. I bit into the sandwich then instantly spat it out.

'Soap?' I pointed to the yellow rubber.

Eddie laughed. 'Cheddar cheese. I'm no gourmet cook.'

Veronica's Chook

‘No, you’re not but I could teach you.’

That’s how I came to live at *Thornfield*, cook the meals and meet his pale family. Other than Eddie, they all appeared like an over-exposed photo. His stepmother, Hedda, a gaunt, elegant woman with porcelain doll skin, a look considered very beautiful here, was boss of the house. A female in charge was unheard of in my country. It was hard to guess her age because her face was rigid with makeup and her skin stretched taut as a cat.

Once, I overheard her on the phone. ‘Her cooking is divine. Let’s hope this one doesn’t go walkabout.’

Walkabout? I soon learnt what the word meant and she had to be kidding. I’d walked halfway across the earth to find a paradise like this, free of bombs and beatings.

Eddie’s father, Floyd was a square, robust man with big hands and vacant eyes. He thumped around the house in a bullish manner, very much like my husband. Sometimes I could hear arguments erupting from the master bedroom, Floyd lashing out at his pale wife but he never beat her. I would have killed him if he did. The medicine bottles and pills beside his bed told me he was a sick man.

The silent six-year old twins, Veronica and Vanessa were inseparable. I couldn’t tell them apart let alone figure who they belonged to. Expelled from school for reasons I couldn’t fathom, they now lived in front of the television, their red glazed eyes staring like zombies. I hugged them often till they squealed with delight. I swear, Eddie looked jealous. Between shows, they tumbled outside to play with chickens, their pets.

‘Do you love chooks?’ They pressed the flapping beasts to their chests.

Veronica's Chook

'Chooks?' I rolled this new word around my mouth. 'Yes I love chooks. But lightly roasted with garlic and limejuice.'

Eddie grinned.

'Bart likes when you stroke him like this.' Vanessa ran her index finger down the bird's throat.

'Homer likes being picked up and cuddled like this.' Veronica gave me a quick demonstration then shoved the bird in my arms. I fumbled and swore while the twins covered their mouths and giggled.

'You'll have to improve your chook etiquette.' Eddie performed a chicken dance and made the twins roar with delight.

Over the months, the distinct personalities of these feathery creatures intrigued me. I was becoming half human, half chook just like the twins. Perhaps I'd gone a little bit crazy living here but no one was crazier than Hedda's troubled son Oliver. He was all sullen destruction in a lanky fourteen-year old body.

'What are you doing?' I asked as he hunched over the dismembered telephone.

'Checking inside the phone, what's it look like?' He acted as though he alone carried the burden of the world's idiocy.

'Why?'

'To kill the tiny people who live there, who listen to our conversations.' He challenged me with his steely mass-murdering gaze.

'Maybe those tiny people come from a place where life isn't as peaceful. Are they harming you in any way?'

Although he looked at me like I was nuts, he was no different than the twins, he responded well to kindness.

Veronica's Chook

One day, Hedda and I were returning with the shopping when we heard the piercing crack of a gun. Hedda dropped the groceries and scrambled to the house, shouting Floyd's name.

Gunpowder fumes settled like a fine mist at the base of the stairs and up on the landing, Floyd and Eddie were embraced in combat over a gun. Floyd roared and snapped commands, expecting soft-spoken Eddie to obey, to slink off and lick his wounds, ego-bruised and fearful, fleeing to the private space inside his head. But Eddie cursed and defied his father for the first time in his life.

Hedda hurtled up the stairs two at a time and planted herself between the two men, trying to push them apart with her pale, scrawny arms.

'You brute,' she screamed at Eddie. 'How could you shoot your father, your own flesh and blood?'

She obviously hadn't visited my country. Flesh and blood meant nothing. Men killed their wives, their daughters, their in-laws, anyone who dishonoured the family.

'I didn't shoot anyone,' Eddie yelled back. 'For Christ's sake dad, give me the gun. You're in no fit state -'

The twins huddled in the doorway, clutching their ears and whimpering. I wanted to go up and comfort them but not while two grown men tussled over a loaded gun with one hysterical woman in the middle.

Something was wrong. Floyd's head drooped and his body toppled forward. He crumpled to the floor in a heap, clutching his chest while Hedda called the ambulance.

Floyd glared at Eddie and pointed to the window, gasping for breath. 'Enemy soldier, shot him -' Like he was reliving some army battle in his dementing brain.

Veronica's Chook

Eddie ran outside and returned, his eyes wild. 'Dad, you killed a man.'

But Floyd was now unconscious, Hedda was sobbing and the twins were screaming.

I ran upstairs to the twins and gathered the terrified girls in my arms. The smell of gunpowder was strong in their bedroom and the buzz of drama was still spinning around the house.

Distant sirens grew louder. We huddled at the window like a three-headed monster and watched the flashing van glide up the driveway. Ambulance jaws gaped open and gobbled up their grandfather.

Tears streamed down my face. Suddenly I was six years old and strangers were whisking away my mother, never to be seen again.

Hedda went with Floyd to the hospital and Eddie stayed behind, waiting for news. He sat by the phone, tapping his foot. Oliver came home from school and hovered around the fridge. He slammed it closed, walked past Eddie muttering and wandered about the house dazed.

'Where's mum?'

'Your mother's at the hospital,' I said. 'Your father collapsed.'

'He's not my father.' Oliver kicked his school bag across the room and walked away.

The house, tainted by murder and tragedy, was eerie and my mind swirled about in turmoil. If police were involved, I'd have to disappear and yet I desperately wanted to stay. *Thornfield* was my asylum.

Hedda returned from the hospital in a slump, looking even gaunter, her proud peacock posture reduced to a sad shuffle. I made a pot of tea with Oliver's angry rap

Veronica's Chook

music thumping through the walls and a jumble of words about heart attacks and surgery.

As I walked in with the tray, Hedda was pacing the floor. 'Eddie, did you phone the police?'

'Not yet. I covered the body -'

Hedda froze. 'Why the hell not?'

'I was worried about dad. What would happen -?'

'Nothing will happen, you fool. He shot a burglar. The man was trespassing.'

'A burglar, in the middle of the day? Geez Hedda, I think dad's lost the plot -'

'You're going to go on again about his dementia,' Hedda snapped. 'Well you're wrong. It's just stress -'

'What stress?'

'You lot. A man his age shouldn't be living with his grown up son and his grandkids. It's wrong -'

'So it's *our* fault dad went and killed a total stranger?'

I placed the tea on the table and moved away.

'You're almost thirty, Eddie. You should be out there in the world with a job, married, having kids. Not running home after the first setback -'

'You call this a setback?' Eddie pointed to his face. 'I call it a disaster.'

'You survived, didn't you?' Hedda said quietly. 'Be thankful. All the others died -'

'Oh, thanks for reminding me. As if I haven't gone through years of guilt over it all.'

If only I could stop their petty arguing and make them see how good life was here.

Veronica's Chook

'I'd like to speak to the police ...'

Hedda's words sent me spinning. Police. They'd snoop around and tell the Department of Immigration about me. They'd lock me in the desert prison, leave me there till my brain shrivelled.

I ran to my room, shoved a few clothes and Eddie's tattered copy of *Jane Eyre* into my small overnight bag. I took one last look at the house I'd grown to love, sneaked out the back gate and disappeared from their lives.

At the age of sixteen I was homeless again. With all their flaws, this strange pale family had consumed my life. Away from *Thornfield* my mind was heavy with loss. I cried for my father, for Eddie, even for the twins. The bad stuff in my life oozed out in lakes of salty misery.

I found work. A cooking job on a cattle property kept me busy from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week and rendered me black and invisible. Every night, I drowned in silent seas of tears and only Eddie's copy of *Jane Eyre* kept me sane.

I was close to seventeen when summer came around and lured me back to *Thornfield*. It was Eddie who I desperately wanted to see again. I breathed deep to calm the thumping in my chest and knocked on the caravan door.

Eddie stood there, momentarily speechless. We beamed at each other, our eyes dancing, dizzy and breathless like two swaying sunflowers. 'Jane. I was wondering if you'd ever come back. Every night I searched for you –'

As he babbled away, I stepped up and hugged him, gently touching the scars on the side of his face. He didn't pull away. Instead, he touched my hair. 'You've grown up.'

Veronica's Chook

‘Growing up is exhausting.’ I told him about my job, the strange people I worked for, the red dust and pink sunsets.

There were tears in his eyes and he quickly turned away and made me a plate of toasted cheese and tomato sandwiches.

‘I’ve been dreaming of this,’ I said.

‘What, seeing me again or the toasted cheese and tomato?’

I held up the toast and Eddie laughed.

I pointed to the house. ‘I see Floyd survived.’

‘Only just. Dad’s wheelchair-bound. He had a stroke after the heart surgery. Police tried to charge him with manslaughter but it all fizzled because of his deteriorating health.’

‘And Hedda?’ I said, chewing madly on the salty, rubbery cheese.

‘Hedda got power of attorney so she’s now in charge of all dad’s affairs and the first thing she did was dump the twins into a boarding school.’

‘Oh. How did they cope with that?’

‘With you gone, they agreed to go but they insisted on taking Homer and Bart.’

I stopped chewing.

‘You know, their pet chooks.’ I chuckled. ‘We shouldn’t laugh. Those kids got more love and affection from their chooks than they ever got from their mother or from Hedda.’

‘Those girls would be happiest living in a chicken coop,’ I said. ‘And you?’

‘Hedda’s been on my back about leaving. She’s sold the house.’

I almost choked. ‘How terrible. That’s as bad as the house burning down like it did in the novel. And the police? Did anyone tell them about me?’

Veronica's Chook

‘Hedda mentioned the Aboriginal girl working for us who’d gone walkabout so the police didn’t bother pursuing it.’

I shook my head and wiped the remaining crumbs of toast off my chin. ‘So what are your plans, Eddie? Where will you go?’

Eddie crossed his arms and tapped his foot. ‘I’m not sure what to do.’

Eddie was such an intelligent man, so compassionate and calm but so lacking in confidence. There he was, almost thirty, me only half his age and I wanted to rescue him.

‘What happened to you Eddie? I heard you and Hedda arguing about surviving an accident.’ Once again I couldn’t keep my big mouth shut.

Eddie didn’t hesitate this time. He told me about the explosion on the ship, the death of his mates, his guilt, how he couldn’t look anywhere without seeing potential accidents, dangers and death stalking him.

‘Since then, the only place I’ve felt safe is this caravan.’

I gathered my courage. ‘Eddie. Maybe you and me, we can travel around together. Like brother and sister. Till you get your confidence back.’

‘I’d like that.’ Eddie’s face brightened.

I had a shower while Eddie made dinner.

‘So who was the burglar?’ I asked wrapping my long black hair in a towel.

Eddie shoved a folder towards me. ‘Here, I cut out all the stuff from the newspapers. Seems like we started out as villains and ended up heroes.’

The articles told of an innocent man slaughtered on the doorstep of a retired businessman. Then he was a desperate burglar robbing a wealthy family. Finally he was a notorious Middle Eastern terrorist infiltrating the country. I almost fainted when I saw a photo of the dead man.

Veronica's Chook

'This is my husband.' I dropped the news clipping with its poisoned image.

Eddie stared at me open-mouthed. 'You're married?'

I told him about my arranged marriage and the customs in my country. Eddie was awestruck. 'Well he's dead now so you can stop living in fear.'

I watched Eddie preparing the dinner, both of us lost in thought. 'Your father, bless him, shot my husband. What really happened that day?'

'We'll never know. The stroke knocked out dad's speech.'

I was still elated over my newfound freedom when we left to visit the twins but Eddie was on edge, tapping the window of the train and squirming in his seat. Fear had kept him prisoner of *Thornfield* for years. A luxurious prison but I knew how debilitating fear was. The train hurtled towards the city, its rumbling rhythms deafening the long voids.

Eddie turned to me. 'I know I'm damaged goods and all.' He touched the side of his face with a wan smile. 'But when you turn eighteen, would you ... well ... consider ... you don't have to decide yet ... possibly marrying me? Then you can live in Australia without fear of being deported. I know it's a crazy idea but until then, we can live like brother and sister and I still have a lot of my insurance payout left from my accident and if the twins hate the school, I don't know how you feel about it, but maybe they could come and live with us ...'

Eddie was talking so rapidly that I couldn't get a word in. Finally he paused and looked away in embarrassment as tears rolled down my face.

'Jane Eyre ended up returning and marrying Rochester,' I said wiping my eyes. 'Do you remember that?'

Eddie looked back at me and touched my wet cheek.

Veronica's Chook

'I love you, Eddie. Of course I'll marry you.'

Trying to figure out the chain of command at the boarding school to visit the twins was a bureaucratic nightmare but eventually we managed to bulldoze our way into the system by pretending we were their parents. A black mother, a white father and red-freckled twins. The colour scheme alone shocked them into submission.

The twins were quiet, sending each other secret looks, their faces caged in suspicion. I hugged them and breathed in their cinnamon scent but they didn't cling and giggle like they used to.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Nothing.'

'Don't you like it here?'

'It's okay. *Thornfield's* nicer.'

'As soon as we find a place to live, you two are welcome to live with us,' Eddie blurted out. 'Would you like that?'

That broke the ice. They grabbed our hands and leapt up and down. Veronica leaned towards us with eyes large and conspiratorial. 'We hope Oliver didn't get in any trouble.'

'Over what?' Eddie asked.

'The gun,' Vanessa whispered. 'It was Oliver. He unlocked the gun cupboard and loaded granddad's gun for us.'

'We didn't tell anyone 'cause he would've got into trouble,' Veronica said.

'And we shot that man who sneaked into the yard,' Vanessa continued.

Eddie exploded. 'You what?'

Veronica's Chook

'Don't get mad, Uncle Eddie. We heard Homer screaming and we looked out the window and that man was sneaking around the house, peeking in all the windows -'

'We were going to get granddad but then the man tried to grab Homer,' Vanessa jumped up, reliving her agitation. Eddie and I were swivelling our heads towards each of them as the tale unfolded.

'He had a knife.' Veronica's eyes grew huge. 'He was going to kill Homer to keep him quiet -'

'So I ran and got the shotgun,' Vanessa cut in. 'And we put the gun on the window and did what Oliver showed us -'

'We aimed it at the man and shot him,' Veronica and Vanessa concluded together.

Eddie and I were now speechless. These two little girls had outwitted everyone.

'So let me get this straight. Your granddad didn't shoot the man. You two shot him because he was going to hurt a chook -'

'Not just *any* chook, Uncle Eddie.' Vanessa was outraged. '*Veronica's* chook.'

We listened to the story a dozen times from every angle and even when it was time to leave, we were still overwhelmed and numb. We hugged the twins and promised to collect them as soon as we found a house to live in.

'So what do we do now?' Eddie asked. We were recovering from the shock in a trendy outdoor café.

'Look for a house to live in,' I said. 'And get on with our lives.'

'No, I mean about the twins and the shooting and -'

Veronica's Chook

'Nothing,' I said. 'Who's going to believe that two crazy little girls killed a notorious terrorist to save a chicken?'

'Yes, I suppose you're right. But it's the truth -'

'And what good is the truth if no one believes it?'

We sipped our tea, confused thoughts swooping around our heads.

'We're young and free and there are no bombs falling around us,' I said trying to lighten Eddie up. 'We'll find our own *Thornfield*. And when we do, I want books everywhere and chickens -'

'Books and chooks it is,' Eddie replied dreamily. 'I'm still amazed that dad didn't do it. He was actually protecting the twins.' His last noble gesture from the depths of his dementia. 'And those little devils, they killed a man to save a chicken -'

I squeezed Eddie's hand. 'The truth is, I wanted him dead. Veronica's chook saved my life.'

Copyright © 2006, Michelle Lopert.