

April 2007 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

Finding Candy Pepper by David Gibb

Frankly, I'm buggered.

My knees throb, my ears ring, my back's bent, my dodgy prostate compels me to take a leak every hour, my heart's irregular and so are my bowels. So I'm pretty damned grumpy. But, hell, I'm eighty three. What do you expect?

My memory, though, is so sharp my doctor reckons I must be sleeping in the knife draw. It confounds him because both of my carotid arteries are more than fifty per cent blocked, but he just shrugs and advises me to keep drinking plenty of red wine. At my age that's about the only kind of medical advice I'm interested in hearing. But sometimes my keen memory is a curse. It raises things best left buried. Which it did last summer when, urged on by my nagging bladder, I hurriedly took the freeway exit into Sanderston while on the way to somewhere else.

I parked the car opposite the pub and hobbled as fast as my knees allowed to the public convenience. Then, appropriately relieved, curiosity got the better of me. The day was a typical February scorcher, but all the same I dragged myself slowly up one side of the street and even slower down the other.

Progress had placed its none-too-subtle hand just about everywhere in Sanderston but it didn't fool my memory. Not one iota. Almost all the grand original limestone buildings I'd last seen in 1941 had been converted into something else. The old courthouse had become a franchise bakery. The drapery shop was now a DVD outlet. The former butcher shop had been transformed into an internet café, while the once chock-a-block hardware store had been miraculously converted into an alfresco bistro with the oh-so-predictable chrome tables cluttering up the footpath outside. But no amount of

Finding Candy Pepper

tasteless tacked-on modernity could hide from my cataract shrouded eyes the fact that Sanderston was still the same weather-weary wheat town I'd known sixty years ago. It was all a bit depressing and enough to drive a man to drink.

I didn't resist.

The pub was stone-wall cool and had somehow dodged the attentions of the makeover merchants. Except for Fox Sport playing on a wide screen the place was top-toe 1940's, and so was the barman. He was a scrawny bloke with Elvis hair and a deeply lined, put-upon face that told me he expected life to treat him with disdain and was rarely disappointed. He asked me what I wanted to drink by raising an eyebrow.

'A glass of your finest red, young man,' I said, relieved to have reached the bar without falling over.

The barman looked at me sideways, no doubt thinking I was taking the piss. I wasn't.

'Fair enough,' he said. He sauntered to the other end of the bar where he produced a Kaiser Stuhl cask from which he carelessly slopped my wine into a glass. He drifted back to where I was propped up, plonked the glass down hard enough for a couple of precious mouthfuls to spill and then just stared at me. I stared back.

'Five bucks,' he eventually said.

'I could buy the cask for ten,' I countered.

'Not in here you couldn't.'

Finding Candy Pepper

I knew I had a five dollar note in my wallet, but figured bad manners earn their own reward. So I fished around in my trouser pockets, pulled out some coins and clattered them onto the bar.

‘That should just about cover it,’ I said.

The barman sneered as I turned away and wobbled my drink outside, where the heat bouncing off the footpath was more inviting than the simmering attitude behind the bar. I creaked myself down at a sun-split wooden table that was a minefield of carved initials and baked-on chewing gum. I sipped my wine, idly watching the locals rattling about their business in shabby utes and dust-coated four wheel drives until a small aircraft droning high overhead drew my eyes to a once-familiar sky.

And damn it, the sound of it flew me straight back to 1941 whether I wanted to go there or not.

I was eighteen years old then and a fully-fledged pain in the arse because the Royal Australian Air Force had selected me for pilot training on Number 3 Course, Empire Air Training Scheme. I thought I was God.

Life was pretty simple. It consisted of learning to fly a weary, oil-stained Tiger Moth and trying not to die doing it. The aim was to stay alive long enough so that the Air Force could send us off to die somewhere else.

It was a two hour flight up to Sanderston from our training base and along the way we got grotesquely airsick, pathetically lost and considerably frightened. As the blast

Finding Candy Pepper

furnace heat of that war-tainted summer swelled the crops, invisible thermals sucked us up and slammed us down again with enough stomach-lurching viciousness to make the fabric-covered wings wrinkle. The sky above was so blue it made our goggled eyes ache. While we battled to maintain a respectable heading, hold altitude and prevent our meticulously folded maps from being ripped into the roaring slipstream, our instructors either shouted incessantly or sat silently perplexed in the rear cockpit.

So sighting Sanderston's silver rooftops and the massive grain silos sitting at the elbow of the town's bone-dry watercourse was always a great relief, although that's when things got really frantic. We then had to locate the makeshift landing strip in a paddock on the edge of town, judge the wind, keep the speed right, side-slip in and hopefully settle our barely-tamed Tigers onto the stubbled dirt without bouncing or careering into the barbed wire fence at the other end. Our reward for all that nerve-twitching effort was finding Candy Pepper waiting for us.

Even on the most blistering days she'd be perched beside a stock of fuel drums on the back of a battered flat-bed truck, her gaggle of chipped enamel mugs and urn of scalding tea at the ready. Every last one of us on Number 3 Course was desperately in love with her. Tall and tautly slim, she had a tranquil, deeply tanned face dominated by startling blue eyes and succulent, pouty lips, all flawlessly framed by a thick black waterfall of hair that poured shimmering to her shoulders. She invariably wore a man's shirt buttoned to the neck, baggy overalls and scruffy work boots and, although there was absolutely no hint of them through this attire, she was unanimously declared to possess better curves than a Spitfire. That was bloody high praise, believe me.

We staged through Sanderston several days a week to refuel as we gradually

Finding Candy Pepper

unravelling the mysterious art of navigation and, when our instructors deemed us capable of knowing where we were most of the time, they let us loose to range across the sprawling farms unattended. This sent us all slightly mad, like some rigid order of airborne priests unexpectedly released from celibacy. Our arrivals at Sanderston continued to be frantic, no longer out of raw inexperience but from the sheer exuberance at believing we were pilots at last. Each of us was achingly aware of Candy Pepper as we arrived, convinced she was watching our progress as pilots and men. We were too young and deluded to think anything else.

To impress her I invented my own hair-brained landing approach. It required an easterly breeze and a healthy dose of stupidity. I'd arrive over the town well below the regulation one thousand feet, then fly downwind in a fast descent that set the bracing wires thrumming and gave me a handy reserve of speed for what came next; a very low, gut-wrenching turn out over the watercourse. This caused me to briefly disappear behind the towering silos and was said to make onlookers anxious. I had no time for anxiety because I was too busy preventing a wing from hitting the looming structures as the wind wildly swirled and swooped around their concrete curves. I flew, for one spine-tingling moment, close enough to observe the startled flapping of the pigeons that roosted precariously under the parapets. When I straightened up, the strip loomed dead ahead. Then it was power quickly back, lots of tap-dancing on the rudder pedals with the boundary fence beckoning, and a rewarding rumble as the wheels settled firmly with an impatient puff of dust. At the time I thought it was hugely heroic but later, after blokes I knew had died doing less, I realised it was nothing more than a third-rate trick performed by a first-rate fool.

Finding Candy Pepper

Full of myself, I'd taxi the Tiger up to the truck as Candy walked towards me, beautiful enough from a distance but simply devastating as she deftly mounted the wing beside me before I'd even switched off and dragged the leather helmet from my sweat-soaked head.

'Oh, hello,' I'd say in the buzzing hot silence, pretending surprise at seeing her there in that pathetically blasé way so often used by teenage boys.

'Tea?' she'd ask.

'Lovely, thanks.'

'How do you like it?'

Of course she actually *did* remember how I liked my tea, but was just playing hard to get. 'The same way I like my women.'

'That's right, black and sweet.' She'd say it with a light laugh and a knowing look.

I discovered after a bit of nervous prodding that she and her father ran Sanderston's only motor repair business. They were also the local Shell agents which apparently wasn't the best thing to be when there was a war on. This, she said, was because the Government wrote you a very forceful letter saying you were herewith required to supply the Empire Air Training Scheme with Shell petrol and oil at a nominated landing area to facilitate the transit of training aircraft until the cessation of hostilities.

'The Government wouldn't know if its tits were leaking.'

I'd never heard a girl say anything so crude and was enormously impressed. It made her even more desirable. As she set about preparing my tea, surrounded by the rich

Finding Candy Pepper

dustiness of a crop approaching harvest and the sticky aroma of hot oil on aeroplane fabric, I became obsessed with the possibility of unbuttoning her shirt while Mr Pepper's mechanic, a scrawny lad we all knew only as Ellis, bustled about checking the oil and reeling out the refuelling hose.

After one of these showy arrivals, however, I'd just climbed out of the cockpit when I felt a fizzy sensation in my head and saw the dirt rush up with alarming speed. Then the lights went out. When I groggily came around I found myself lying on my back with my head nestled in Candy's lap. It wasn't an unpleasant place to be, even if I had no idea how I'd got there. I looked up into her gorgeously concerned face and thought I must've died and gone to heaven.

'You fainted,' she said. Her voice echoed strangely.

'I never faint,' I mumbled.

'First time for everything. Probably just the heat.'

'But I never faint,' I insisted.

'Let's just say you tripped then.'

'Yeah, I must've tripped.'

'And broke your nose.'

My fingers were pins-and-needles tingly as I brought them up to my face. I was dismayed to feel a bloody, snotty pulp where my nose usually was. And then I vomited right in her lap.

'Whoops,' she said, amazingly unperturbed.

Ellis poured chilly water directly from the truck's canvas waterbag all over my battered face, which revived me enough for them both to help me up into the cab. While

Finding Candy Pepper

Ellis stayed behind to keep watch over the Tiger Moth, Candy drove me into town to the doctor's home where, after plugging and taping my now decidedly crooked nose, he very firmly pronounced me unfit to fly. As a thunderstorm of pain brewed inside my head, I overheard him make a phone call to the medical officer at my training base. Someone, he said, would fly up to collect me.

So there I was stranded in Sanderston, but it could've been a hell of a lot worse because Candy returned in the truck to collect me wearing a pair of elastic-sided riding trousers and smelling deliciously of lavender perfume.

'You look better,' she said. 'But not much.'

'Sorry I mucked up your overalls.'

'That's alright.'

'Not exactly the way to win your heart,' I ventured.

'Didn't know that's what you had in mind.'

'You're the prettiest girl I've ever met,' I blurted, still dizzy and not thinking too straight.

'You must've damaged your brain as well as your nose,' she said with a taut little laugh. 'Come on, I'll show you around.'

She drove me slowly along the main street, pointing out the courthouse, the drapery, the butcher's, the hardware store and various other buildings, all the time giving me amusing little potted profiles of the people who waved and called out her name as we crawled along the road.

'Geez, you've got a lot of friends,' I remarked innocently.

She frowned across the cab at me. 'You certainly *are* the city boy, aren't you?'

Finding Candy Pepper

I didn't mind the reference to the city, but the boy bit really stung. 'I just meant...'

'It's a country town,' she patiently explained. 'Everyone knows everyone else. Sneeze and the whole place says bless you. Fancy a lemonade?'

'I haven't got any money. We're not aloud to carry coins when we're flying. They can jam up the controls if they fall out of your pocket.'

'My shout and hang the expense. I'll charge it to the Government. Stupid bastards won't feel a thing.'

She parked the truck and took me into a pokey little milk bar run by two elderly ladies in flowery aprons. We sat in there together, not saying much, idly watching a squadron of blowflies performing touch-and-go landings on a war-ration display of jam roly-pollies. We had two lemonades each, which soothed the hammering in my head, while the apron-clad biddies stared and whispered.

'It'll be all over town that I've found myself a boyfriend,' Candy said. 'With the emphasis on boy.'

'I wouldn't mind,' I said, ignoring her dig. 'Especially if it was true.'

'Look, how old are you?' she suddenly asked, a jagged irritation in her voice.

'Eighteen.'

'I'm twenty six.'

'Jesus, you can't be!'

'I am.'

'Bloody hell, next you'll be telling me you're married.'

'I am.'

Finding Candy Pepper

I just about choked. ‘But...but I don’t see any...’

‘Wedding ring? Not the sort of thing a girl wears when she’s up to her wrists in grease and petrol.’

‘I’m a complete drongo,’ I said, my neck and face burning.

‘No you’re not, you’re sweet and I’m flattered, but that’s all.’

‘Of course, of course.’

And with that we returned in embarrassed silence to the truck and Candy drove me back to the landing ground to wait for my ride. When we got there Ellis was sound asleep under the wing of the Tiger Moth.

‘Easy life for some,’ I suggested.

‘He’s thoroughly bored by all this aeroplane business,’ Candy said. ‘He’d rather be tinkering with tractors.’

To all the pilots on Number 3 Course he was just the boy who called us ‘Sir’ and we mostly ignored. Except to say bloody well pull your finger out with the refuelling, and for Christ’s sake stand further back from the propeller when you swing it or you’ll be mince meat, you stupid clot. We could say these things because we were going to be air force officers which, in our opinion, excused just about anything.

Ellis never answered back. He just smirked at us. He appeared underfed and overworked, which he probably was, but down the years another image of him has replayed in my memory. He had the subtle swagger of someone who’s older than he seems, someone who’ll still be safely on the ground with the beautiful woman long after all the puffed-up, pimply flyers have flown away. Ellis, I’m certain, had quickly figured out that even idiots can be taught to fly and that only the worst kind of idiots volunteer to

Finding Candy Pepper

learn in the first place. He was nobody's fool because before very long most of us on that course were presented with our wings and went off innocently to some of the most chaotic places on earth, where we became old men in a matter of months and an appalling percentage of us perished in ways only the savagery of aerial warfare can conjure up.

I eventually found myself in Britain and was given command of a Lancaster bomber at the ripe old age of twenty, mainly because all the older pilots were too worn out or too dead to be Lancaster skippers any longer. The details of all the fear and horror don't belong beside my memories of Candy Pepper, except to say that on countless deadly nights over many a seething German city I thought of her as bombs rained down like whistling death and flak rushed up like devil's spears. Bugger king and country. In my mind I was fighting for Candy Pepper and all the girls like her and it calmed me in the same way that thinking of God apparently calmed others.

A car door slammed and startled me into the present. With the last mouthful of red wine in my glass I proposed a silent toast to my memory and then staggered back inside the pub where the remnants of my small change lay on the bar. The barman was pouring schooners for a group of what I took to be local farmers. He ignored me for a while, and then eventually sauntered up with an eyebrow raised.

'No thanks, I'm driving,' I said. 'But I was wondering.'

'Oh yeah?' He wiped the bar with a tacky towel, avoiding my gaze.

'I was here a long time ago, during the war.'

Finding Candy Pepper

‘Were you now?’

‘I met a girl.’

‘Good on ya.’

‘Name of Candy Pepper. I wonder if anyone in town would remember her.’

The barman flicked his towel over a shoulder, glancing sideways at me with a generous dose of suspicion. ‘You’re one of them pilot blokes, I bet.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘You’re not the first old codger to come sniffin’ around.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, but you’re the first for a few years. Figured you’d all carked it.’

I pointed at my chest. ‘Here sits evidence to the contrary,’ I said.

‘Yeah, so I see.’

‘So what did you tell the others?’

‘Not much. Just took ’em on the same guided tour I’m takin’ you on. Where’s your car?’

‘Across the road. White Camry.’

‘Righto. I’ll be out in a couple of shakes.’

I waited for him in the car with deepening reservations about the chip on his shoulder. He didn’t like being asked about Candy Pepper and didn’t like me on principle. I was just thinking of getting the hell out of Sanderston when he pulled the passenger door open and slid in beside me. He reeked of stale beer and cigarette butts.

As I reversed out of my parking spot he said: ‘Go straight down the main drag and turn left at the Commonwealth Bank.’

Finding Candy Pepper

When I reached the bank and turned, the wheat silos came into view in front of me on the far edge of town.

‘What year were you here?’ he asked. I thought I detected a slight softening of his manner.

‘1941 it was.’

‘Take the next right.’

The indicators click-clicked. ‘Lived here long?’ I tried.

‘All me life. I was born here in 1942.’

‘We just missed each other, then.’

‘No we didn’t. You and all the others have been hangin’ round here for as long as I have.’

A shiver slithered up my back and I changed my mind about him softening. I suddenly needed to take another leak. The silos loomed even larger in the windscreen. I couldn’t quite believe I’d once played chicken with those things, risking my life to impress a woman.

‘Left at the tennis courts.’

That turn took us along the frayed edge of town where a paint peeling parade of shabby fibro houses and deserted business premises scowled out across the first of the vast wheat paddocks. I came to a railway crossing and obeyed its stop sign.

‘She’s me mother,’ he said.

My heart tripped over itself at his use of the present tense. I stared across at him as the car idled. Suddenly I could see subtle reminders, fleeting images of her face in profile. But there was something else, something I couldn’t quite place.

Finding Candy Pepper

‘Would you take me to see her?’

‘No.’

‘It’d mean a great deal to me.’

‘You gunna stay here in the middle of the road all bloody day, or what?’

‘Sorry.’ I hastily drove on over the crossing, thoroughly frazzled. ‘How *is* your mum?’

‘Getting on a bit.’

‘Aren’t we all?’

‘Ninety one, she is. Been goin’ down hill ever since Dad died.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

He dismissed the apology with a shrug, then directed me into a rutted dirt track that ended abruptly at a pile of road gravel and a drooping wire fence festooned with flapping plastic bags. Before I’d even switched off the engine he was out of the car and lighting a cigarette. I followed and when I stood next to him at the fence I realised I was looking out across the old landing ground with the silos towering over it beside the water course. The chaffy smell of grain mingled with the stink of his tobacco smoke.

He stood there silently, looking at the ground and shuffling his feet. After a prickly few moments I looked down as well and that’s when I saw the tiny monument. It was just inside the fence and almost obscured by wheat stalks, a simple knee-high limestone cairn with a faded inscription that startled the hell out of me.

In memory of Andrew Ellis

Killed at this site in the service

Of the Empire Air Training Scheme

Finding Candy Pepper

Erected by his wife Candice (nee Pepper)

July 1942

‘Jesus,’ I muttered. ‘You’re Ellis’s son.’

‘Yep. Son of the mechanic’s boy, the one you all treated like dirt.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t say we...’

‘She blames you.’

‘What?’

‘Not you personally. Your mob would’ve been long gone by the time the accident happened, but there were other courses later and they were all tarred with the same brush. She curses the whole bloody lot of you. For your arrogance, for leering and propositioning her, for the lousy way you spoke to him, for always rushing him. And especially for being too bloody important to swing your own propellers. One of you lot even spewed all over her.’

‘Jesus, that was me,’ I confessed.

‘There you go, then.’

‘She blames us? *Still?*’ The enormity of it swamped me.

‘She’s never stopped.’

‘But surely...’

‘And neither have I.’ His contempt was palpable. ‘Bet you wish you hadn’t asked, eh?’ And with that he walked off, his crunching footsteps quickly withering on the wind.

I couldn’t say how long I stood staring at the cairn and its inscription, but it might have been a good while because my memory was replaying a scene over and over and over. In it, as clearly as if it was yesterday, I saw Ellis too casually swinging those deadly

Finding Candy Pepper

propellers, only half his attention on the job as his idolising eyes kept wandering to Candy Pepper as she packed away the tea mugs on the back of the flat-bed truck. His son was right. I wished I hadn't asked.

And I wished my memory was as buggered as the rest of me.

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