

April 2008 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

The Halfway House by Diana Thurbon

The house on the corner began in a conventional way, as a home to a mum, dad, and two kids. Perhaps the suburban isolation got them down. Nobody knew, because nobody spoke to them; but six months after the family moved into the house it was back on the market. The *Bruce Grant* board went up, and the family left. That was when the house changed its character and gradually changed all the people who lived in the court and crescent.

Sitting square on its concrete slab in a neighbourhood where the gardens were unlandscaped and the concrete power poles soared above a few scruffy street trees; the house was unremarkable. The three bedroom brick veneer was a brick pea in a suburban pod. This was not a place of 'MacDonald's mansions' and artificial lakes. These houses were inconspicuous in their sameness. The only noteworthy thing about the corner house was the towering Spotted Gum tree in the backyard that had somehow escaped the developer's axe. The tree was home to cawing crows, numerous cooing feral doves, chattering sparrows, starlings and a pair of magpies. It was a happy busy tree; a homely counterpoint to the sad deserted house.

The neighbours in this multi-cultural working class suburb on Melbourne's south eastern fringe were neighbours geographically and that was all. No sense of community bound the residents for whom life was mostly concerned with keeping their jobs, worrying about petrol prices and stressing about rising mortgage interest rates.

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Cars parked both in the court and the crescent were mostly older Holdens and Toyotas. There was a pale blue 79 Volvo and a dirty white 85 Mazda. At the bottom of the court there was an old Honda Civic with no back wheels. It had been squatting perched up on some stained timber blocks for more than a year; its orange paint was faded and spotted by sap and bird crap. There were no SUVs or shiny Chrysler cars to be seen.

After a while, quietly one night, the house was unobtrusively occupied again. The neighbours only realised people were living there when they noticed a light left burning in the roof every night. Some of them reckoned the new people were growing dope up there.

The residents began to observe with amazement tough and weird looking people at the house. For, in this unremarkable suburb, in this ordinary court, in this dull house, came to live the most unusual and bizarre collection of people that could be imagined. The neighbours, who had scarcely spoken to each other before, got into the habit of chatting among themselves about the strange residents of the corner house.

One day, one of the residents, Dave, commented to a few of the others- “Another new weirdo moved into the halfway house today.’

The expression caught on and soon everybody was calling the house that. Every month the halfway house appeared to have a new resident - always male, body pierced and heavily tattooed. Perhaps the new occupants overlapped with the old. It was hard to tell them apart: they all seemed to have a similar look about them. One

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day a police car came and was parked outside for a long time. After that the light in the roof went out and was never seen to burn again.

“Must have been hydroponic dope in the roof for sure,” said Mick to Tran, his next door neighbour. It was Thursday evening and they were wheeling their bins out to the kerb.

“Yes, you are right mate,” said Tran, “I smell ganja -*can xa*, know smell smoke. One night I took the dog for walk, went past there.”

The next event at the house was the saga of the unregistered cars. The first two cars arrived on a truck and were pushed into the back yard by three men from the house. Nothing unusual about that, but then, every week for eight weeks, another unregistered plate-less car arrived. Mushrooms that popped up overnight-they were always there in the morning when the neighbours backed their cars out of their driveways and headed off to work. Jim who lived opposite on the other corner, reckoned the men from the house were illegally driving the cars there themselves in the night. Nobody heard or saw a truck on the nights the cars arrived.

Carlo, who lived next door to the house and drove the old Mazda, wondered if they were stolen cars being done up, changed, and re-registered. So did Dave, but Tim, Carlo's neighbour on the other side, didn't think so, because nothing happened to the cars. They were just collected. Soon the backyard of the halfway house was bursting at the seams. Four cars which wouldn't fit in the back were parked and arranged on the patchy front lawn, bonnet to boot, bonnet to boot.

“Like some crazy museum collection,” Tim reckoned to Tran and Mick.

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One sunny spring day a young boy with a bleached fire-break haircut, tongue ring and tattooed knuckles left the house and wandered down to Peter and Jan's place at the bottom of the court and asked Peter if he wanted to sell the orange Honda without the wheels. "I can give you a hundred bucks mate if ya want."

Peter said, "No mate thanks for the offer but."

"Yeah OK then," the boy shrugged and wandered back to the house on the corner.

"He probably offered you more than it's worth," Jan said to Peter.

Peter explained later to some of the others, "It would trouble me to see the old Honda turned into some weird museum piece - besides I'm gunna fix it up and Dave up on the crescent is gunna help me. He knows about cars."

Summer came and went and the neighbours continued to speculate about the corner house and its occupants. They'd recently got into the habit of having back yard summer BBQ's every two or three weeks at each other's homes and the halfway house was an endless source of conversation as they popped their tinnies and inhaled the scent of frying spices or onions on the warm evening air. Dave told them he kept a list of the make, model and colour of the cars. Mick thought privately that it probably wasn't a very useful list as none of the cars had number plates. Carlo took photos with his mobile phone but then mostly deleted them. Eventually most of the cars disappeared the way they came - quietly and at night. The odd looking residents too, seemed to disappear with the cars until it appeared only one was left.

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Things were quiet at the house for a while; the remaining occupant was rarely seen and kept to himself. Then, one day the city council workers came to the court with a cherry picker and chain saws and cut down a nature strip gum tree opposite the halfway house. The tree, through some desperate and unusual growth spurt the previous spring, had had the temerity to reach the tangle of power lines above its head. This had come to the attention of some local government bureaucrat; the tree had been inspected, borers had been detected in the trunk and the tree had been waiting for a death sentence to be carried out for several months.

The day of the tree's demise it was raining and the court was deserted. Nobody came to watch as the council workers demolished the delinquent tree. They mulched most of the branches with the big chipper on the truck but kindly sawed the best of the timber into neat logs, leaving them in a pile for the owner of the house behind the nature strip.

Nobody was home that day. In fact none of the neighbours were around at all. So nobody saw the current occupant of the halfway house cross the road and collect the logs. What they did see when they came home that night was very extraordinary, even for the house. All along the perimeter of the property about two metres apart were strange log sculptures consisting of a large log as a base and one, two, or three logs balancing upwards in wonky towers.

Jim, whose wife had planted the departed tree, and who owned the property behind the raw stump, reckoned by rights the logs were his. So he squared his shoulders and, urged on by his wife, went to knock on the door of the house to put his

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case. He banged the front door knocker and waited. Soon a large man answered the door wearing a navy singlet and stained jeans. A barb wire tattoo necklace and a surly scowl emphasised a rather unwelcoming visage.

“What do you want?”

“It’s me timber mate,” said Jim bravely.

“Who says?”

“The Council engineers said I could have the wood. I asked ‘em last week,” he prevaricated quickly.

“I was planning on building a decorative post and rail fence - you know add a bit of value to the property like,” scowled the occupant.

“Well I tell you what - you keep the big buggers,” said Jim compromising quickly, “and I’ll just take the small logs home. You’ll still have the ten big logs for your fence mate.”

Settled in this Jim was happy. When he went off to work that day he asked his missus to be sure to get the small logs. This she duly did, except for the last six because it started raining and she didn't want to get wet collecting wood they didn't really need anyway. This left the strange construction along the edge of the lawn looking even odder with only four towers left and the rest of the ‘fence’ composed of large base logs devoid of their upper stories.

The next day the four remaining towers had sheets of red paper placed between the logs. That evening half a dozen residents stood yarning on Jim’s nature strip. Everybody looked at this odd spectacle with even more amazement than they’d looked at the first wobbly towers. Jim explained about the “decorative fence.”

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Patrick, who lived on the crescent in the house opposite the court had an eye for the dollar and muttered darkly “Doesn’t do much for property values.”

Carlo said “What property values! Round here? You must be joking mate.”

Carlo's wife, Donna, said “It’s certainly unusual.”

“Bizarre!” said Dave.

Akram who'd moved into the court with his wife just a few weeks back, scratched his beard and looked bemused.

Jim said to his Missus, “what y' gunna do about them last six logs?”

“I dunno,” she said, but as it rained all the following day and the next day, she did nothing. The day after that the sun came out and a large gold street number was nailed on one of the logs and more red paper appeared.

The neighbours stood chatting that evening on the footpath. They were all enjoying the show at the halfway house.

“Got me tossed,” said Carlo.

Tran said “It’s some kind of *feng shui*, I think. Everybody know red paper is lucky. Maybe the arrangement of the logs is to direct the Chi.”

“Yes that sounds right,” said Jim’s missus, who had a pack of Tarot cards and fancied herself a bit of a spiritual New Age type. “Do you know much about *feng shui* Tran?”

“No, not very much, but it is very interesting. It help bring good fortune to your family.”

“I’ve got a book on feng shui. You can borrow it, if you like Tran.”

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The next day flowers appeared on the log structures in front of the house. In the morning two red and two white roses sat on top of the four remaining log towers. By the evening they were in what Dave's wife said, were cemetery flower vials, and taped to the logs.

“It’s territorial,” said Dave to Akram and Pete, “Like a dog cocking its leg - he don’t want Jim’s missus to take those last six logs for sure.” So the strange ‘decorative’ boundary stayed. Every couple of days the flowers were changed. Other than that nothing happened, until two more logs appeared to replace a couple of the ones that Jim’s wife had removed from the sculptures.

“He’ll need a few more logs than that to put the whole thing back how it was,” said Mick to Akram.

One Saturday evening shortly after, they were all enjoying a Vietnamese dinner at Tran’s house when they heard the unmistakable shrieking Whiiiiiiiiirruum whiiiiiiiiirruum whiiiiiiiiirruum whiiiiiiiiirruum whiiiiiiiiirruum of a chain saw coming from the house on the corner. They made it outside in time to see the big spotted gum tree in the back yard of the house come crashing down on its roof.

Everybody did the right thing. They phoned the police and the State Emergency Service. Tran offered the stunned bloke, who was staring at his handiwork and swearing loudly and repetitively, some beer and still warmish spring rolls.

Mick said “Bugger of a way to get some logs.”

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Most of the other men said comforting stuff like: “Too bad mate,” and “Rotten bloody luck.”

As the smell of wet sawdust overwhelmed the comforting smell of ginger, garlic and peanut oil, the women began to notice the cold seeping through their clothes in the damp night air. They left the men to watch the SES at work in the way that men do; went back in to Tran's place, drank more wine, and cracked up laughing.

Eventually everything settled down and the neighbours called it a night and went off to their beds to lay awake and talk over the evening's dramatic events with their spouses.

Sometime that night the last occupant of the halfway house must have quietly disappeared, or been taken away, because they never saw him again.

Very early one morning, two weeks later, a loud crashing and clunking woke the local dogs and all the neighbours as a huge skip was delivered to the deserted house. Then the tradies and gardeners arrived. The roof was repaired, the funny log fence with all its strange accoutrements went, the last unregistered cars disappeared, and the skip filled up with junk and was hauled away. Finally the grass was cut, the house was cleaned and painted, and the *Bruce Grant* real estate sign went up on the front lawn again.

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A month later a family moved in. The neighbours noticed a man, woman, two normal looking little kids and a tabby cat. Nobody ever knew what they were like, because nobody bothered to speak to them. In fact, nobody spoke to anybody much in the court or in the crescent anymore. There was nothing much to talk about - they were all too busy getting on with their lives, hanging onto their jobs, paying their bills and stressing over their mortgages.

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