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Irene is breathing hard. She's gripping the brake like a hand.

"How do you feel about it then, Art ?

Arthur looks at his yard... at Brad and Shawn – gloves up, still slugging away, a mite slower now but still full of shit... at Trish, pink and perspiring in her little bra and panties – in soft, unpadded leather, watching his boys... picking up their teeth... They're all right now.

"They'll be all right," Irene says.

"Yeah. All right, then. I suppose I'm on."

And he sits up behind Irene on the bike, his arms around her, his hands just where he's dreamed of, sliding them into the small side pockets over her breasts. He feels that scrap of photo Irene has put back there without knowing why.

She lets the brake go, revs up and they roar away - unnoticed.

"Bloody hell, Irene..." Art shouts in her ear, holding on tight. *"What's happening ?"*

"I dunno."

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Joe reaches the plane as she lands. An old De Havilland DH-83 Fox Moth – the Flying Doctor Service. The door opens up and the pilot appears.

He puts out his hand, too.

"Long time no see."

David Norris

St Bartholomew's, Dinard



The Newsletter Supplement

Easter, 2011

'Easter in Woop Woop'

A short story
by
David Norris

The sun is shining even brighter on Woop Woop, Western Australia on Christmas Day, 1947. The body of Thomas Jones (alias Konrad Schultz) has just been found in the artificial woodland glade on the outskirts of town. He has hanged himself with a couple of wire coat hangers from the pub – and a little assistance from some mates he didn't know he had.

Who and where such blokes could be is a fair poser for the police because poor Jonesy was a blow-in from nowhere. To be honest, he wasn't around Woop Woop long enough to be called Jonesy - or have any mates. He must have wired his own hands up behind his back, then topped himself, single-handed.

In his room in the pub his luggage says nothing about him either. He's left nothing behind. Well, nothing more interesting than an old coat worn so soft it might be human skin, though in fact it's nice cowhide leather.

So Ted, the owner of the hotel as he calls it, finding no money to pay his guest's bill - which has just gone up for all the trouble caused, takes the coat in loo. With plenty of blag and not a word of truth he sells it to Joe Gracklin and his lovely, longhaired missus - locals who earn their living mending and altering clothes. Joe loves a yarn, anything different.

The police give Ted a right gobfull but basically it's only fair do's, and they couldn't use it, could they? Who'd wear the togs off a dead man? Nobody. The coat never was.

Jones had no other possessions. His passport – did he ever have one? – gets lost in the investigation, which is fast and futile but sets the record straight: another drifter down on his luck. He's cremated. The empty cardboard suitcase and the clothes he was hung up in aren't worth keeping. They're incinerated, too, in the hotel oven.

Shawn slams an inside glove hard against Brad's ear, deafening him. Brad rips the lacing of his glove down Shawn's face and makes a long deep scratch.

You have to be this close.

Except Trish isn't watching.

She's having the cup of tea Mr Clutch has made for her. He's leaning over, putting the milk in, and closely examining her outfit.

"Mind if I ask you a technical question, Trish?"

"Only a touch, Mr Clutch. I'm slimming."

"Are they padded?"

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Joe is into the outback now, still striding, striding through the random spinifex, purposefully. Though he doesn't have any purpose, as such. Or any destination.

With his soft leather helmet strapped down snug and tight, he can be aware of nothing but the echo of his own spinning thoughts -

"G'luck, Joe... G'luck, sir..."

- as he spins down, then hits the water too hard, then bobs and drifts alone in the Timor Sea. As close to death as ever he'd been. And as alive.

But now, above him a small biplane he can't hear drones across the blue afternoon sky, her propeller flickering now and then against the lowering sun, as she carefully descends.

Joe strides on.

that jacket she thought all along her mum was making for *her*... as a surprise.

So anyway, I've got three lucky teeth now, she realizes. What a fantastic afternoon I'm having...

Shawn's kneeling on the ground – a kidney punch – heaving and spitting.

- And I could have four lucky teeth in a minute, couldn't I...

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The shed doors are wide open.

Joe turns round and walks away towards the outskirts of Woop Woop where the town peters out and nowhere really begins.

He's not on the bike, wearing a new helmet. Not at all. Not really. He's wearing the helmet, though. And something has happened. That's what's happened, something... He feels it.

In fact he's tingling. His head's tingling.

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Brad and Shawn are one fighting unit – one bloody mess.

Their chests and bellies are stained and raw... throats and necks sweaty and inflamed... their lips are split open... cheeks swollen... noses flat and oozing... eyes bruised, shutting...

Trish watching... Best time they've ever had. Wouldn't be the same if they weren't brothers.

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After a few weeks of rumination, Joe Gracklin decides he'll never sell this coat on, not as it is. Not to customers in Woop Woop, nor further out probably. Not even in Windy Hole, the next town four hundred miles away - five hours on the bike - where everybody's barmy... No, even there nobody wears an overcoat to a barbie, do they? Or down the beach, on top of their cozzies.

No. this coat's a bonzer garment right enough but it's not Oz - not somehow... Is it a Pommie garb...? The label's been snipped out. Could be a Pom, trying to hide the fact.

End of March he splits the coat fifty-fifty with his wife Irene. And while he's snipping it through, Joe gets a notion out of nowhere that he'll make something totally different out of his half, which is the bottom part - the skirts. A square yard of good leather. *Make something special out of it, Joe* – something tells him. *Be a bit different.*

Good idea... But what's *special*? What's *different*?

Into his head – straight off – comes his new bike. He stares down at his hands. They could be gripping the handlebars - one over the brake, one twisting the throttle... *gloved* hands ... That's an idea... Mitts.

Or something sportsy? After all, sport's a religion here in Western Australia. Specially the hard sports, one-on-one.

Last year a boxing show came to town in bush week, challenging any ocker who fancied his chances. And there wasn't a bloke worth his beer money wasn't up there on his feet, bunching his fists and roaring his guts out, with the biggest noise coming from the half a dozen blokes who got their noses broke.

OK! Ripper! He'll make some boxing gloves. Now there's a challenge. And he'll do it in a week, less. Holidays coming up.

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Meantime, his wife Irene in the back of the shop with her top half of the coat – all manly buttons and epaulets, decides she'll re-model it for a young lady with a nice figure - herself, for instance. Well, why not ? Holidays coming up. And she's got some pants tucked away. Plus... a Big Idea. A Whopper.

But re-styling this item – well, it's not going to be an easy job, so come today, Friday already, she's got her daughter Trish in to help her with the final stitch-up.

Trish is nineteen now and a regular beaut in her bathers. But it's four hundred miles to the sea and donkey's years to the next B&S ball over there. And as for the local boys here - a bunch of roos, all alike. Look at Woop (and Woop). And it's only the holiday weekend tomorrow, isn't it !

So Trish just stands there, her arms stretched wide, more fed up than usual, stuck inside this big tightly double-breasted leather thingy with the hem all raggedy and yukky. While her mum, who reckons that she and her daughter have the same desirable double-breasted measurements, picks and pins it up into a nice snug fit. For herself.

"Nearly done, Trish," Irene sings out. "Just needs personalizing."

Trish gives a sigh.

"Don't deflate yourself, sweetheart. It's looking good on you." Irene sees herself when it's finished, tying up her hair, looking... every bit as good.

But Trish knows she could make herself look even better. And how...

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Irene throttles through the trees in Woop Woop's woodland glade, shouting "*Woweee !*" till she sounds as hoarse as Ariel.

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Brad locks his brother in a clinch, trapping his arms. Shawn nuts him sharp and hard but Brad bites down on Shawn's shoulder and tastes the sweat - and different blood from his own. He slams his right fist into Shawn's rib cage, feels the bones give, hears his brother grunt in pain.

"Care-be-ful !" Trish laughs.

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Joe notices the tyre tracks first.

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"G'Day, Ted !"

Ted's up a ladder screwing a huge new sign high up on his front wall: *TEDS BED'S*. He leans back. He's happy with it. Looks the business – *"Streuth, Irene !"*

But she's already gone, hair streaming behind her. She doesn't see him fall.

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Trish has found Brad's tooth and wiped it. Into her tiny leather purse it goes, with her own kiddie peg which she's taken back out of her mum's Forever Box, plus the lucky tooth she found in that jacket –

She does.

She sits up high in the saddle.

“Come on, Ariel... sweetheart.”

And gives her another good kick.

“Do it for me, love.”

And Ariel does... she clatters... coughs... growls...

And rearing up, she's away, taking Irene away with her, bursting the shed doors open... flying across the yard in no time at all...

Irene honks her Klaxon a third time.

Lots of noise... lots of fun... lots of love, Joe...

They're on the road. On their way.

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Brad spits out a tooth.

“Oh, can I keep it ?” Trish bends down, carefully holding onto her kuni, dibbling her other hand in a clump of scrubby grass.

Shawn reckons he could be losing a whole shitload more than a bloody tooth, so when his brother looks away and opens his gob to say *“Be my guest, darling...”* he punches him on the jaw, full strength, maybe even cracking it...

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Joe strides home, fastening the straps on his helmet.

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...*“How's about some nice boxing gloves ?”* Joe's been saying to all his Friday customers. He likes to surprise them once in a while. Like today, most of them are senior blokes who are thinner and shorter now and they come along to have their strides taken in or their turn-ups taken off. Still, fair do's, they still like a fight. So they pull their bony shoulders back and throw a few old-style, old-age punches.

“You know, once...” they say and tell tales of pre-war. Going you won't believe how many rounds with a pro up in Darwin - or with a fighting kangaroo. But... *“Ta all the same, mate.”*

Joe's disappointed only because he could listen to these old timers yackering till sundown. That's what he really likes. Those days on Darwin Base. Tales the boys told.

Up there shaking in that Wirraway A20-5, with PO Smalls.

“Going for the old glide turn, Gracks... You don't reckon she's past it... ?”

Bailing out. With a kind push from PO Smalls.

In mid-air.

Where are you now, sir ?

Crumping in. Then the month on AHS Mununda.

But not everybody's past it. Handsome, happy-go-lucky Arthur Clutch has twin sons, eighteen years old now. *“Both of 'em,”* Arthur always jokes. Shawn and Brad are a couple of handsome, happy-go-lucky ockers. Best smilers in town - chips off the block and true bonzer brothers.

"Too bloody bonzer !" Their dad would appreciate a mite more itch and aggro between them. They've got zilch right now.

Sometimes Shawn doesn't know if he's Shawn or Brad. Same goes for Brad. Same goes for everybody in Woop Woop. In fact everybody calls them Woop (and Woop) – just for fun. Except their old man.

"Remember them shearing finals ?" says Arthur, as he stands in the shop having a button sewn back on his pants for the weekend. (Mrs Clutch has left home.)

"Too right. Your boys should have won there... one of them should." Joe pushes it along. *"Your face, mate."*

" - Bloody sheep couldn't believe it neither. It was like a no bloody contest ! There's my Shawn, he's clipping a length off of his animal. Then he waits up till my Brad clips a length off of his animal... Then he waits up for the other one... Or maybe the other way around... It's got like I can't even tell 'em apart myself, mate..."

Arthur's not so happy-go-lucky at the moment.

"Anyway, same result - some other bastard gets first prize !"

He's still shocked, and worse -

Was it the missus ? Did she breed me a coupla drongos ?

Joe's at work mending his fly, so Arthur scratches his head instead. *"I dunno, Joe... I bloody bated my bro's guts when I was their age... That's the Ozzie way."*

Joe's finished. He bites off the cotton, fastens Arthur up, and they both look down at the new button.

Hot.

But Irene feels -

Great ! she shouts - and honks the Klaxon horn. *Great !* She will go. She honks the horn again.

After all *...this is the time when every healthy young Australian's fancy turns to thoughts of going places on a 500cc OHV Ariel Deluxe.* Joe read it out to her like poetry before he went up to Darwin and bought one.

"You've got to dream, Irene," shutting his eyes.

"Don't I know," she'd said, looking at the bike.

Now.

"We're going places..." Another kick.

The garage man had brought them back – man and bike - in his pick-up, both in the back. Since when *Ariel Deluxe* has sat all bright and beautiful but neglected in her shed, waiting to be straddled, waiting to go places...

"...You and me..." Another kick.

Left alone, except in the evenings sometimes, when Joe visits her, sits himself down on her saddle carefully, as if he's back on his hospital bed, strokes her slightly, gingerly revs her up a little, and dreams - and comes out ten minutes later shiny-eyed, coughing.

This is the time... Irene knows. *"My little beauty beaut !"*

Her horoscope's been shouting at her from *Women's Weekly.* *'Go for it, Irene ! Right now !'*

“No, you’re looking gorgeous, Trish.” Art’s the spokesman. “Don’t we agree, boys.” He gives them a juicy smile and a sly wink.

The boys say nothing – which they never say, not normally.

“How’s Irene ?” Art asks Trish awkwardly.

Trish is looking at Brad and Shawn, who are looking at her.

“...Your mum...” Art reminds her.

Joe’s heard nothing. He has to peel off his cap to look at his watch again.

“She’s on her way.” Trish giggles.

“Me too.” Joe puts his cap on again so he can take it off again, politely. Raising it in the air to one and all, he replaces it on his head, with dignity. The flaps slip over his ears and again he can’t hear anybody. But, no matter, because nobody says anything to him, as he goes, shiny-eyed and looking straight ahead, as if beckoned towards a different life...

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...Irene can’t get any spark of life at all. When she kicks – down hard on the pedal – just a rattling clattering... no comeback.

But she will go. Right now.

But right now is a hot afternoon. Very hot inside this shed.

Hot inside her new biker jacket, too, and even hotter in this pair of Joe’s dungarees - narrow round the waist and tight on the hips now, re-styled over nice chatty evenings with little Trish, while Joe was in uniform.

“Well, Joe...” says Art, still not nearly as cheerful as he might be, never mind Easter coming up.

“Well, Art...” Joe says the words. “How’s about... ?”

And he pulls two pairs of boxing gloves from under the counter, like rabbits out of a hat, and lays them down facing one another, gloves v. gloves, shiny black, just touching.

“- Giving your boys a prezziie...”

Arthur stares at them. It takes a minute.

And then ! - And then he gives a great big whoop !

He sees his pair of larrikins knocking three bells out of each other in their back yard.

“...They can try ‘em on for size. No obligation.”

But Arthur can’t hear Joe’s kind offer. He’s listening to the bam bam of punching leather...

He whoops again !

And he scoops up all the gloves and pulls one glove on.

“Joe, ” he pulls another glove on. “You’re a bloody miracle-man.”

But Joe has disappeared.

Still, Arthur can see himself right enough, cracking a couple of stubbies, cheering his lads on.

Ace ! He punches the air and aims a fast one-two at the till.

Then looking round for Joe, to shake his hand or maybe give him a matey right hook, he spots the lovely Irene at the back of the shop and chucks a few friendly uppercuts in her direction instead - plus one of his handsomest smiles.

“And what about these ?” Joe says, from under the counter...

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... *“Ouch, mum !”* At the back of the Gracklins’ shop, Irene is sticking a pointy screwdriver into Trish’s bosom. She’s making holes in the leather for the brass studs.

But for a moment her attention’s been distracted by Arthur – he’s so nice and manly-looking standing there – well, bouncing around there... boxing. Has he knocked Joe out ? Oh well...

Irene waves back at Arthur with her screwdriver and her own favourite smile - a row of studs between her lips.

“Mum ! Hello ! It’s me in here.”

Mum returns to the job in hand. She squeezes her eyes nearly shut with the effort of making the holes and studs spell out *IRENE*. The R is very hard work.

“Watch it, mum !” Someone has to, thinks Trish, fearing for her life, and more important, her bust. She reaches down to guide where the metal point’s going in – and how deep.

“Put your hands away, Trish. If this slips...”

Trish snatches her hands out of the danger area and puts one of them over her eyes.

“Easter, son,” Joe hears himself say and he respectfully removes his helmet. But everybody’s looking Trish’s way.

The sun’s near on blinding, and it strikes Joe hard through his thin hair. He pulls his helmet back on.

“Pretty hot, isn’t it, Mr G...?” the other boy says, winking at Trish. He squeezes his busted nose and wipes the blood and stuff on his dungarees, and grins at his fingers.

Joe feels himself becoming - what ?... distant ?... He can’t even hear himself. He’s thinking about bailing out again.

Down... with the Wirraway.

Where are you, sir ?

Joe’s head’s up in the clouds. Eyes tight shut.

“Hot inside there, Mr Gracklin ?”

But Joe’s dreaming.

“It’s a matching outfit.” Trish waves a tiny purse – just a fold and a stud - also in black leather. *“I made it all myself, yesterday.”*

She’d like to be a dress-designer or a model – and not at the back of a shop and on a stool, but in the real world – the world of high style fashion. She’d like to be up on a catwalk running the entire length of Woop Woop. *Haute couture.* And not just in wool.

“Now I need the right hat.” She smiles at her dad sweetly and takes her hat off, probably to fan herself or let her beautiful hair cascade over her shoulders. Just like her mother’s.

The boys wipe their faces on either end of their towel.

"Totally thanks to you, Mr Gracklin... Nice gloves."

"Nice hat, Mr Gracklin."

"They keep apologizing, Joe."

"Sorry, dad!"

"I'm getting near my tether end..." Mournfully Art looks down at the blood spotting the bleached dead grass. Joe's looking at his watch, trying to. He ought to be off.

"Bloody hell!"

Joe should be surprised to hear one of the boys swear like that. They never swear. But he can't hear much – his cap...

Then -

"Bloody hell!" Again.

Art's glad to hear either of them swear. But *both!* And on their owns !!

"Bloody hell," he says. Then *"Bloody hell, Trish!"*

Trish, suddenly standing there, doesn't seem offended by all this language. Maybe she can't hear it either, because *her* head's covered, too - by a great big straw hat. But down below she's wearing a great little black leather bikini. That's all.

"That's all you're wearing today, Trish?" says Joe mildly.

"Why not, Mr G...?" pipes up one of the boys and spits a gob of blood onto the hard earth between his feet, but still looking at Trish and narrowing his eyes.

She slides her other hand inside the jacket, meaning to place it over the breast at most risk. She might save one...

Instead her hand slips straight into a little pocket in the silk lining.

"Oh."

She touches a small shiny piece of - paper ? card ? a photograph ? – with creases and torn edges. Her nails and finger-ends feel something else, too, something she knows straight off is a tooth. She knows it for sure because mum's been keeping one of her teeth for over ten years now.

She lost it – *"your kiddie peg"* mum called it – when she was eight or nine. Mum took it off her and gave her a kiss and a new silver three-penny bit for it and said she was going to keep it forever and a day. And Trish knows she has, so far.

What happened to that three-penny bit though ? Trish doesn't know that. She forgets she spent it.

But she does know that at this very moment her kiddie peg is in mum's special drawer, in a nice little box. She knows mum doesn't think she knows but she does know.

"There's something in here," she says to her mum...

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... *"Any bright ideas ?"* Joe asks, surfacing.

...He shows Arthur the remains of the leather he'd made the boxing gloves out of. One nice patch left. Only one ? He'd thought there were two.

"Make yourself a nice wallet with that, Joe." Arthur can't wait to get back home but he owes his mate something.

He turns to go. He's fair made up wearing these gloves. Well, he's still in good shape himself. Pretty solid. He looks at Irene from the back. So is she. Specially stretching like that.

"Streuth." He says under his breath.

And with that Arthur Clutch gets off home with the other pair of gloves around his neck. Truth is he'd been hoping for Irene to mend his button. But, well, you can't have it all, can you? Well...

Anyway he's feeling a heap better now, ready for a few beers and, well, maybe a spot of gore.

While Joe gets down to work...

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...*"Aw, mum, It's a little girl,"* Trish says sympathetically, peering at the faded brown photo – what's left of it. *"Or a boy,"* she adds with just a shade of disappointment. She wonders if the tooth is male or female. *"Looking straight at me."*

"So d'you reckon your father'll let me have a go on his bike, Trish?" Irene says - *Snip! Snip!* - making the hem into a fringe with a pair of nail scissors. *Snip! Snip!* And trying - *Snip! Snip!* - to sound casual. *"Turn around, love."*

"Oh, cute... She's definitely a little girl, she's so nice." Trish is still looking at the photograph. *"Where to, mum?..."*

"Oh, dunno, Trish, love." Irene *does* know...

Trish holds the photo in front of her mother's eyes. *"Could be me..."*

"Yeab, could be." Irene takes it and puts it down under her sewing box. *"She's a pretty one. Could have been me."*

"Don't go far, mum."

"Just round Woop maybe..." A little white lie... But everyone's got to live, haven't they? Sometime or other.

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The time now is Sunday, Sunday afternoon – the Easter holiday - and everybody's out.

Bappity Bap... Three, four right jabs to the nose from Brad. (Or Shawn.)

"Sorry, mate," he says, dropping his gloves as his brother's nose spurts blood. *"Hurtcha?"*

"S'OK, mate," says the other, landing *bap bap* two straight lefts and *bap* a right that splits his brother's lip. *"Not so I'd notice."*

"Nice one," his bro says and grins, as best he can.

"Streuth," says their dad, unhappily.

"G'Day, Art." Joe's here. He's wearing a cap – a flying helmet, in point of fact, in black leather finely polished and shining under the fierce afternoon sun. A piece of work any digger would be proud of... chinstrap... strap across the forehead... straps for goggles... strap at the rear... It's a snug fit, as it should be, with flaps (and straps) over his ears and the peak low down, resting on his eyebrows.

"G'Day, boys... Working up an appetite?"