

Silence

By Barry Fitzsimmons

For Samantha

At first Greg thought it must be dead, but no, it only had a broken leg . . . so it was as good as dead. The kangaroo was stunned. The rest of them stood around it while Macca checked his car for damage.

“The fuckin’ thing’s busted one of me parkers,” growled Macca through thin lips and, coming around to the animal lying in the headlights, gave it a vicious kick in the head. The front legs pawed at the air in front of it.

“That woke ya up, didn’t it, ya cunt.” The kangaroo didn’t say anything.

“Waddawegunnado, Macca?” asked Robbo from somewhere that the National Broadband Network would never reach. They all communed with their own thoughts for a few moments.

“We should take it to the vet,” said Greg, surprised at the hollow sound of his own voice, as if spoken down an irrigation pipe and bubbling up into the real world from somewhere else.

“Yeah,” said Macca, pausing. “*We should take it to the vet.*” Just a hint of sing-song derision. Greg felt the poofster’s thorns under his skin flex inward and sting, making him flush. He was usually good at hiding his feelings but sometimes he looked at Macca through doe-eyes, sometimes with meat-eater slinking behind his irises. He had tried to fit in, but Macca could tell. Macca knew



he wasn’t a man.

“Yeah . . . the vet,” said Macca softly as, in one powerful movement, he picked up the doe by the neck and the tail and tossed her into the back of the ute, his eyes never leaving Greg.

They all piled into Macca’s twin-cab which, with a teenager’s lack of imagination, spun its wheels into a cloud of dust and headed back to

town, but not to the vet. Greg sat back to keep an eye on the ute's tray and watched with dismay as the party mood re-asserted itself and the kangaroo was forgotten.

Macca rested one elbow through the open window as they roared around the tight curves of the parking lot, climbing up to the top level. They were thrown left and right, spilling rum, and coke, and 'rum-and-coke' throughout the cab. They all tumbled out on the top floor where the other cars had gathered. An audience.

"Hey, Ball-bag!" Macca hailed a young, bearded guy with greasy dreads. Something about Ball-bag reminded Greg of his father—his turn of phrase, his inflection, his air of disapproval, his years of working with cattle—which made him want to please the younger man. Ball-bag didn't like the way Greg looked at him and would have nothing to do with him.

Greg walked around to the back of the ute. The roo was still alive and looked at him with unreadable eyes. Suddenly, after shouldering him aside, Macca was there, grabbing the roo again in his easy, powerful hands, dragging, swinging it out of the ute before dropping and ramming it into a shopping trolley left by the day shift.

"I don't want it pissin' in me ute," explained Macca to everyone, but looking at Greg. The roo's back was bent up the back of the trolley and its legs, one broken and one vertical, poked up and out at the front. The animal struggled with the uncomfortable position but soon quietened. Macca pushed it into the arena between the cars, then gave it a shove into a railing. The trolley

crashed into the metal fence, pain causing the roo's front legs to again twitch and claw as the broken leg bounced over the heavy, wire rim at the front. A couple of heads looked around at the noise. One of the girls gasped, but said nothing.

"That bitch, Sharon. Who the fuck does she think she is?" Ball-bag hailed Macca as he walked back to his mate. Their conversation trailed off into half-heard expletives and occasional laughter as they settled into a more private intercourse, their arms comfortably around each other's shoulders. Greg couldn't help noticing the way Macca's forearm rested on Ball-bag's naked shoulder, the hand left safely hanging in air. Greg sank down onto a concrete ledge at the limit of the darkness, separate from the rest, and watched as the grog and joints were passed around. The group's mood swung from boozily happy to bored to—

Macca wandered over to the trolley, glanced at Greg and, calling to the group, ran the hapless creature over a speed hump, causing its broken leg to bounce on the wire at the front of the trolley.

"Hey look, it's trying to run away," Macca proclaimed. Ball-bag and Robbo snickered but most ignored him. In a fit of frustrated attention-seeking, he grabbed the kangaroo's good leg and bringing it down with a loud crack on the front of the shopping trolley, broke it as well. The kangaroo's mouth opened and closed, its tongue extending in a silent scream. Everyone turned at the sound this time. Running the trolley repeatedly over the speed hump to show how the

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broken legs bounced, Macca was now eliciting pissy, half-hearted laughs from a few. As Greg watched, time slowed and his vision sharpened, the moths around the headlights of the cars illuminating the watching faces which were alternately disfigured and revealed in flickering shadow.

A new idea lit up Macca's face and he turned and smiled at Greg as he dragged the trolley to the stairwell.

"Hey guys, the kangaroo wants its freedom. Let's see it make a run for it." Most wandered over, revulsion and boredom fighting each other for agency with boredom just winning. With a gentle launch, the trolley bounced over and clattered down the steps, each step causing the broken legs to bounce on the heavy wire rim of the trolley as it lurched its way to the landing halfway down the stairs. More laughter and a few groans. Macca bounded down to the landing and dragged the trolley roughly back to the top.

"Didn't quite make it, did ya?" sneered Macca at the trolley. Momentarily satisfied, he turned away to get a drink, his self-imposed position as entertainment director restored. Greg was amazed at how attention quickly transferred away from the roo and its continuing distress—

how its torment was not as important as the new exhaust pipe on Ball-bag's ute, or the antique shotgun Robbo had just bought.

Greg wandered over to the roo. It struggled as he approached, making its legs move. The mouth worked. The front legs clawed at the air. It gasped for breath in terror. It made no sound. Suddenly he knew what he had to do. He looked into its eyes - its still, unfathomable eyes and tried to explain, tried to tell it that he was going to take it all away, that he couldn't stand it any more either. The cruel taunting had to stop. The animal quieted as he slipped his hands around its neck with all the gentleness he could and squeezed.

Greg's fingers interlocked through the fur on the upper neck of the roo as he gazed into its eyes. He maintained a steely resolve and made no sound. The sudden realisation that he would be the last thing this kangaroo would ever see, that its silent indictment would float out through the universe forevermore made his stomach drop and he struggled to keep down the rising bile. Stupidly, all he could think for the whole time after that was:

'Find a happy place,
'find a happy place,
'find a happy place.'

He was looking into the roo's left eye as eternity rushed out, spearing and slicing him, leaving him exhausted and devastated as it subtly changed from a bottomless, enigmatic pool to a dead, wet thing.

Macca dragged Greg out of the way. After a quick examination of the roo, he was back in Greg's face.

“Wady wanna kill it for?”

“Wady wannit alive for?” Greg mimicked Macca's tone and delivery instinctively for maximum derisive power. A couple of goading “oooOOOooos” from the audience.

Macca's surprise slid downwards through, “What's your fuckin' problem!”

“I don't like the animal thing and I think I'm going home.” Deadpan.

“Oh y'are, are ya?” snarled Macca, giving Greg a double open-hand shove to his chest that drove him backward onto the cement. Getting up, and without saying a word, he walked away into the darkness. As he got to the end of the carpark, “POOF-DAAH” was yelled clearly in his direction. Loud laughter.

That night for the first time in many years, Greg cried like a child. He cried for the kangaroo, he cried for his parents, and he cried for the man he could never be. His tears gradually subsided into stunned exhaustion. He didn't know who he was, but realised that the bits he did know—the bits that ran silent and deep—he liked, and that was a good place to start.

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