

**PENSIONER'S CONCESSION**

by Mark Brandi

1.

Five days ago.

We stand there, looking at the blue waterproof mattress cover, not knowing what to say. The bed is empty, a thin blanket crumpled on the floor. Soiled, white sheets.

A nurse enters, hesitates. Looks at you. She must notice the resemblance. The crooked Roman nose.

‘Are you alright?’ she says.

You choke out some words, your voice suddenly strange to my ears. ‘We were visiting my dad, he ...’

Her eyes go wide. First at you, then at me. She chews her lip like a teenager. ‘Is that ... Tom?’

I see your cheeks flare brightly, but you try to hide it.

The nurse fidgets, scratches at her sleeve. ‘We’re um ... he’s ah ... kind of gone missing.’

*Kind of gone missing.*

That’s exactly what she said.

You act as though everything is under control. You walk in careful, measured steps.

You tell me not to panic.

You tell me not to run.

But every room and corridor looks exactly the same – the beige carpet, cream walls and lurid eighties artwork.

*Down the lift?*

*Outside?*

*Do you really think he—?*

‘Found him!’ A bony nurse announces her prize from down the corridor. She has the brittle eyes of a first-year, gripping the back of his starched white gown firmly in her fist.

You whisper to me, out the side of your mouth – *she mustn’t like the look of his arse*. You can joke now, as though everything will be okay.

He’s smiling, of course. Not a worry in the whole-wide-world. And his hair stands up like the sulphured crest of a startled cockatoo.

You said once that it’s just as well he’s like that – happy, I mean. The doctor told me that too – some of them get really depressed. That’s what they say on the Internet as well. You showed me what it said on your computer, remember? That if they realise what’s happening, it’s so much worse.

So we both agree, don't we? He's better off this way.

The nurse releases him into our custody.

'He was in one of the other rooms,' she says, lip twitching. 'Annoying all the patients.'

You force a smile, but it doesn't reach your eyes. 'Dad,' you say, taking his arm, 'where were you going?'

He looks at you like you are from outer space, but you pretend not to notice.

'I don't know,' he says. 'Do you?'

*You once called him the cliché of a migrant success story. You always had the right words. You said his self-belief was forged in those places where good intentions meet hard reality.*

*You said it at your wedding, remember? He really loved that day. He always loved the things you said.*

*But now you say he's different. A shadow of who he was. But I know that isn't true.*

*We all can see what's happening – it's impossible to miss. He pours wine on his breakfast cereal. Answers the phone with the remote control. Forgets which house is ours.*

*And I dress him in the morning, hold his hand as we cross the street, and wipe his backside in the toilets.*

*A lot to ask for \$121.70 a fortnight, you say.*

*And you're probably right about that.*

*But you're wrong to say he's different. He's not a shadow of who he was. He's someone else entirely.*

You lead him back to bed, his skin so thin you say it feels like tissue paper.

There are deep, heaving sobs from the cubicle opposite. We watch the sudden movement behind the curtain, like a shadow puppets on meth. That's how you describe it, but I don't know what you mean.

The bony nurse rushes in.

'What's the matter, Kristy?'

'The voices,' Kristy says. 'They won't stop.'

'What are the voices saying?'

'They keep telling me to cut.'

Your dad sits up in bed, narrow eyes ablaze. 'What's wrong with her?'

You place a hand gently on his chest, not knowing how to answer. 'Just keep quiet, right?'

'She should bloody keep quiet!' He glares at us like strangers. 'Where the Hell's your mother?'

'She'll be back soon,' you say. 'She's busy.'

*We've always been busy.*

*We landed first in Freo, then took the train to Melbourne. Carlton to be exact. We taught ourselves some English on the way.*

*A train driver, that's what he was at first. Then a publican. Then a farmer.*

*For a while, he was all three at once.*

*Did I tell you how jobs landed in your mailbox back then? You could take your pick. The whole world was yours, they said, if you worked hard enough.*

*The future? It would look after itself.*

*I started at a fruit can factory, Hawthorn I think it was. A winter walk and a train ride, all before the sun.*

*One day a milkman with sparkling eyes offered me a lift to the station.*

*Your dad was very interested when I told him.*

*He drove me to the factory every day after that.*

*Picked me up as well.*

2.

Four days ago.

You try to convince the nurse to let me stay the night.

'It's against policy,' she says. 'We only let family stay when ...'

You cross your arms. 'When what?'

'When they're ...' she whispers, like it's a secret I shouldn't be hearing. 'When they're *dying*.'

You smile. 'A bit late then isn't it?'

She says they have far worse than him.

You tell her if I can't stay, we'll have to take him home.

You look at me. I can see your thoughts. *How did it come to this?*

When she leaves, I say it. 'Do you think it's my fault?'

You look at the telly when you answer. 'I dunno, Mum. But you should try to keep the heaters on. Maybe it was the cold ...'

*I dunno, Mum.*

That's exactly what you said.

*First, he taught himself to lay bricks. Then he built our home. That's the right order, he said.*

*A two-storey fortress of double clinker and Spanish arches. White concrete balustrades and black ceramic tiles.*

*Remember how it looked, beside all those little weatherboards? How grand and proud it was? How you bashed the kids who teased you for it?*

*We pretended not to know about the fights. But your dad, he fought hard for us, so he didn't mind if you fought too.*

*Then he did his back. He couldn't drive the train after that. Couldn't handle all the shunting.*

*So he bought the pub in Stawell. Got it cheap. And we got to run our own show.*

*We poured money into the place. And you boys spent it on cars and girls. I never blame you though.*

*At night, I would crawl upstairs to bed. I know you saw me once. You saw my legs, all varicose and ulcers, crawling like an animal.*

*You and me were different after that. You think I didn't notice. Something harder in your eyes.*

*But we never ever talk about it.*

3.

Three days ago.

A small Vietnamese man is wheeled into the room. Fashionable jeans. Bright t-shirt. Bare feet with dirty soles.

'He's okay.' The nurses whisper to each other. '*Voluntary.*'

He sits quietly on his bed. Breathing deeply in and out. His thick black hair wild and bold like a proud lion's mane.

After gathering his thoughts, he inches slowly to the edge. Dangles his legs. Then screams it out.

'*Dirty ... Fucking ... Cunts!*'

It is incredibly loud. And I don't like that sort of language. But I think he'd have a really good singing voice, if he put his mind to it.

Your dad stares at the telly like he didn't even hear it. That *QI* show is on, but there's no sound working. I never liked that show. I go to the tearoom and eat cold spaghetti from a plastic container, standing over the kitchen sink.

A nurse seizes the moment. She goes to you and looks right inside your eyes.

'Are you amazed at how strong she is?' she says.

'Who?'

'Your mum.'

'Dunno,' you shrug. 'Never really thought about it.'

I come back. You tell me what she said.

'What choice have I got?' I say, but I can't tell if you're listening. You're watching Stephen Fry on the telly. 'And it's not all bad.'

'Really?' you say.

I try to smile. 'I can call him *cornuto*, *cretino* and *ritardato*. Five minutes later, he's forgotten all about it.'

Later that night, while you're asleep at home, I drag your dad away from Kristy's bed – away from Kristy the cutter.

He yells at her, '*Porco Puttana!*'

The next day I tell you, but I say that it was okay. That she couldn't understand Italian.

4.

Two days ago.

We take him back home.

But first, the social workers come to visit. All lined up. The best help no money can buy.

Community groups. Respite. Counselling.

You try to persuade me too. That it could be helpful. But I think it's all just rubbish.

'No,' I say. 'For now, I can cope.'

You tell them you will come around more often, but you don't look at me when you say it.

We're back at home. You sit at the table. Turn on the telly.

He goes to the toilet out back.

'Eventually,' you say, your eyes on *60 Minutes*, 'we'll have to do something.'

I tell you it will kill him.

'There's nice places. The Italian joint on Rathdowne Street.'

I tell you we can't afford it.

'So what's the plan?' you say. 'For the future?'

The future will look after itself.

'So what happens when ...'

No-one can answer that.

*The local coppers were trying to kill him. At least that's what he thought. They didn't like wogs in town, especially running a pub. They were trying to shut him down. Like they thought he was Robert Trimbole. You don't remember him, but he was in the mafia.*

*But they didn't get him in the end.*

*A burst blood vessel in his brain. I know you remember that. It got him deep down inside his skull.*

*And it got him very bad.*

5.

Yesterday.

He goes missing.

It was while I was doing the shopping. I came back to the door wide open, the house empty. The telly still on.

You tell me to call the police.

They're different now. But just as helpful.

'Yeah?'

'We can't find him. My husband.'

'We'll keep an eye out.'

We search the city. Fitzroy. Collingwood. Carlton. We know he'll ride the trams.  
Still likes the squeal of wheels on rail.

You try to act all calm, but I can tell you are upset. You keep scratching at your  
cheeks. Then your neck.

The skin is red.

And I can feel the edges fraying.

So I try to hold the middle.

6.

Four hours ago.

It's almost dark again.

It rings and we both freeze – the sudden God of the telephone.

That's what you call it later.

You always have the right words.

You answer. You almost smile. And hang up the phone.

You tell me it's your wife.

She's found him.

She's bringing him home.

You warn me not to tell him off. Like that's the important thing right now.

'Why?' I say.

'I read it somewhere.'

I think that's meant for dogs who run away, but I don't say anything.

She brings him down the hallway and sits him in the kitchen. You both talk like he isn't  
there. Like I'm not there as well.

Your wife says he was in Lygon Street.

Standing outside the pasta shop.

Caught in a crowd of tourists.

A smile on his face.

He stared into the window with those cloudy eyes.

Somewhere. Nowhere.

All at once.

She walked up slowly. Watched his face in dim reflection. And touched his hand  
just lightly.



'Tom, it's me. Do you know where you are?'

'No.' He shook his head. 'Do you?'

I look at him. He looks at me. And I think he knows.

Under the table, out of your sight, I squeeze his hand.