



The Short Story Writer Competition

SECOND PRIZE

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Be Nice To The Dogs

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When that sound would drift mournfully across the full moon sky, girls would huddle closer together. If they were with their boyfriends, they'd clutch hands. The guys' heads would kick up; they'd wince and their eyes were white. Then they'd laugh and maybe bay at the moon themselves. OwwhooOOoo! But they'd be looking around, staring hard and fierce into dark barred shadows that leapt at them.

I'd been like that too. That sound took us back into caves and childhood dreams where we imagined red eyes and fangs that dripped. We knew that death was waiting out there. Not any more. Now the moon is a friend. I lick my lips. And I smile.

If you want to understand this you need to know about three things.

The first is Kingston. He was old as time and he'd come when we were little and bought the Compton place up on Swaggart's Hill. A big house that never looked kept, iron fences and room for all the ghost stories and horror tales you wanted to weave. A big house with a history, so they said. Kingston himself seemed to breed the fear; the house loomed at you from the hill. No one entered, no one was seen to leave. Kingston sat up there by himself. Strange cries from perpetually dark rooms came ringing down in our gossip. We spun stories round campfires.

Kingston's only company was three dogs; German Shepherds my Dad said they were, but they looked more like wolves. They prowled the corridors of the gardens and looked at passers-by with hungry eyes. They didn't bark, they never growled, they just looked; and in that look was something that stopped us throwing stones or shiacking them or even, after a time, from passing by.

The second of these things was Brendan Heite. You said his surname like you said height but I pronounced it hate. He was big and he was cruel and he'd singled me out from when I was little. My mum used to show people the little cicatrice of a scar I have on my left cheek and tell the story of how Brendan Heite had sunk his teeth into my flesh when we

were barely two. My mum would put on a kind of bewildered smile and say how she could never understand what made certain children so mean from a certain age. She knew about Brendan and how he'd rubbed sand in the healing cheek wound a week or two later; and how he'd tripped me down the stairs when we were in year one; and how he'd filled my new Billabong cap with glue and squashed it down on my head; and how he'd flushed my head in year six...

What she didn't know was that she knew only about 1/100th of the crud I'd had from Brendan Heite.

And that brings me to the third thing.

On this day he'd come hunting for my blood 'cause I punched him, full in the face. I surprised myself and I surprised him and sat him down with shock and that sudden whack on the nose. And then I ran. I ran out of the schoolyard and down Cardigan Street and I heard him and his mates baying behind me. So I went up Bradman Street and across Halpert's Park and then there was only one way to go, so it was up Pulley's Road towards Swaggart's Hill. I could run faster than them but I knew they'd follow like wolves, Brendan and his mates, fanning out, cutting me off from the way home, so I planned it. I had nothing to lose.

And there I was. Beneath a dense bush in Kingston's yard, huddled, making it sway with my fear and my panting and not knowing now whether I was more afraid of the smashing I'd get from Heite or the fact that I didn't know where Kingston's dogs were. I'd gone over the fence like a hurdler because Heite mustn't see where I'd gone to ground. My breath kicked up dirt. I smelt it, wet and dank, or maybe that was what fear smelled like.

Heite prowled into view. He was looking, peering into possible hiding places. His fists were clenched. I figured this time maybe he'd actually kill me. Beat me to a pulp. I saw my parents looking down at my mangled body – then they pointed a finger at Heite and said he did it. But he just laughed.

Heite came over by the fence. He looked in, his eyes swept over my bush. Then he shook his head. He didn't believe I could be in there. He turned his back to me and raised his hands to his mouth.

‘Ya lilly livered bastard,’ he called. ‘I know you’re hiding. You’re gonna get it, Gallagher.’ He stopped. ‘Come out and take it now, ya little creep and I’ll be gentle....’ He laughed at that idea.

The dogs were there, at the fence. They drifted in as quiet as smoke but something made Heite suddenly aware. He leapt back. The dogs did nothing. They were just looking at him.

Heite swore at them. He laughed and picked up a large stone from the gutter. ‘Go’on’ he called and made to throw it at the largest dog. None of them moved.

Heite hated that his threat had been so completely overlooked. ‘Ya dum buggers,’ he called and this time hurled the rock at the top of the fence. It hit and ricocheted off. The dogs didn’t flinch, they fanned out and kept their eyes on Heite but the rock obviously hadn’t worried them.

Heite lost it. He swore and gathered up rocks and threw them in a flurry of hurt pride. The dogs swayed and drifted and none of the stones hit. I wondered if it was my imagination because sometimes it looked as if the rocks were passing right through them. Heite got madder and came in closer to the fence, hurling abuse and stones. The dogs kept evading them but they didn’t retreat.

‘Leave those dogs alone!’

It was Kingston. He was on the stairs. Like the dogs he’d appeared from out of nowhere.

Heite retreated, just a little. He crossed the gutter. He crossed the street.

From the other side he called out, raising his finger, ‘Your dogs are crazy you old bastard, and so are you.’ Then he turned on his heels and walked away. I’ll say that for him. He didn’t run.

I put my head down beneath the bush and wondered if the wind was carrying my scent to the dogs. The earth smelled sweet. I wondered if I could burrow beneath it.

It was old man Kingston who found me, not the dogs.

‘You can come out now,’ he said.

My head shot up. I wondered if I'd fallen asleep for the light seemed softer and old man Kingston's voice sounded kind. I came out.

The dogs were with him but they didn't look vicious. Their tongues lolled and I could have sworn that they were smiling. Dogs can't smile, can they?

He had a drink in his hand, I noticed. I was thirsty. I took it from him without a word. It tasted strange, sweet.

'Thanks. That's good.' They were the first words I spoke to him. Everything felt a little weird. I noticed Kingston's eyes. They were black, maybe flecked with gold but I couldn't be sure. They were like looking into a well. Up close I couldn't tell how old he was; maybe sixty, maybe six hundred.

'I'm sorry' I began to stutter. 'I know I shouldn't have come in...'

'That's okay boy,' he said. 'I know.' He nodded down the road that Heite had taken. 'He's a mean one, that. I can't abide someone that's cruel to animals.'

'I hate him. I'd like him dead' I said, surprising myself.

Old man Kingston smiled and I saw Brendan Heite: dead, bleeding, entrails drawn out, something gnawing at him. I saw it – not a fantasy, it was real - and then it went away.

'You'd better be going home. Your parents may be worried.'

He said, 'My boys'll see you home. He won't mess with them.'

He'd read my mind. I figured Brendan Heite would be watching. He'd be waiting to get me as I came down. I felt better knowing that the dogs would be with me.

Then he spoke to them, not as you and I do, but in a way that had them cock their heads and smile their understanding and we went. And I felt that I was at last walking with friends.

I saw Heite skulk off when he saw the dogs as we crossed Halpert's Park.

I never saw him again.

That night the first of the dreams came. Flowing over the ground like water and smelling the fear. Grass whipping by and the sight of the quarry. Fear smelling like blood, sharp and strong. Faster than running, bodies grey, long and low-slung in the full moonlight. The leap, the flesh, friends, teeth flashing, a growl.

They didn't publish the photos they must have taken of his mangled body on the next day because they were too grim. I knew where the body had lain, close by the creek. I gawked with all the other boys past crime scene tapes and wondered at the stains strewn on reed stems. I could still smell the blood and that other warm smell.

Fear. It was a heady odour.

END