

Fikret Pajalic

Complication

SHORT STORIES

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BOONIE

A couple of weeks after I started my new job, a woman from the office took a shine to me. Her name was Wanda and she was the payroll lady. She had some Polish blood in her somewhere along the line and she understood a few words of my language. She had a nice, round, pleasant Slavic face. I liked faces like that.

This happened right after I went to live with my mate in his old weatherboard house in Tottenham, close to the train station. Train wheels screeched in my ears during the night, keeping me from sleep.

I got the warehouse job where Wanda worked because my mate quit. He was a truckie and he wanted to go and work up north, try mining, so I ended up minding his house. I didn't have to pay rent, just utilities, and I had to take care of his dog Max.

'When I settle in, I'll come and get Max,' my mate said.

Max chewed on an old cricket bat and glared at me.

I wasn't keen on being a dog sitter. I could keep an eye on the house, all right. The house didn't move.

'Max is old,' my mate said, 'he doesn't need much these days.'

We shook hands. Before he left, he said he'd dropped my name with his ex-boss. So I went to this place on Sunshine Road where they used to make work pants and shirts, but now it was just a warehouse where all sorts of stuff from China arrived. Everything from picture frames to garden furniture.

I got a job as a forklift driver. It was a small operation. There were a dozen or so of us in the warehouse, our boss and two ladies up in the office.

I filled out the paperwork, and Wanda took me to the warehouse. When the boss introduced me to the blokes, he struggled to say my name properly.

He said, 'Sorry mate, I can't bloody say it.'

I was going to say my name slowly and loudly to the group, I'm used to this shit, when some fatso with a face that looked like a bag of walnuts said, 'We'll call you Frank.'

The boss looked at me and said, 'Is that all right, mate? It's kind of similar sounding.'

I needed the job, so I nodded. Wanda's lips formed into a line that stretched her round cheeks. After the introduction, she asked me to follow her, saying my name as my mother would. She issued me with steel-capped boots, a uniform and a forklift key.

After I gave her my signature, she put her hand on my shoulder and with a smile said, 'Good luck.'

I smiled back.

By the end of the day, I was Frank. One old codger called me Franklin. No one knew my real name.

As I was leaving work that day, Walnut Face stopped his green Falcon near me, wound down the window and said, 'Mate, you can't expect us to remember that mouthful every time we call you.' He spat at my feet and drove off.

I sat in my car and looked at the warehouse. Wanda was in the window looking at me. She waved before I drove off, and I did the same.

Wanda was forty plus, blonde hair in a bun, great figure, big matronly boobs halfway down her waist. She'd come down to the warehouse and offer guys overtime or weekend shifts. She'd always come to me first. When I had my lunch on the benches outside, she'd come down with some sandwiches or something she cooked the night before. Soon I didn't bother bringing food.

One day she said, 'I've got these varicose veins and they're hurting a lot.' She put on that damsel in distress voice and it got me going.

She pulled her skirt above her knees and I saw little purple rivers running from her feet all the way up to her thighs. I offered to massage her feet. I said some bullshit story about how a few years back I completed half a course in physiotherapy at St Albans TAFE. I also said I had strong hands. I pumped up my biceps and she giggled as she touched them. She said she might take me up on the massage.

'You could walk to my place. I'm only two streets away,' she said.

I said I might do that.

Then she launched into her life problems. She told me she was married to a chap who liked to stick his nose into everything. His name was Brad. The first time we did it in her car, I had to listen to her talk about Brad for half an hour. Then we did it. She had a Camry station wagon and when we dropped the seats there was heaps of room for a romp. We fucked in the parking lot after everyone had gone home. For a lady her age she could go the distance and was a great root, but as soon as we stopped fucking, she talked about her husband. She said the last time her mother visited, while they were eating Sunday roast, her husband asked her mum at what age she started her period.

'This was right in front of my son, Richie. Richie's twelve, for fuck's sake!' Wanda said.

I saw Richie once when I gave Wanda a ride home. He worked on his bike in the front yard. He was blonde and blue eyed, just like his mother, and there were dark blue marks on his neck and scabs on his forearms.

I kept seeing Wanda even after her husband started coming to work and threatening every bloke that if he found out who was fucking his wife, he'd kill him. Wanda would come down to calm him and he'd cry and beg her to stop whoring herself.

Wanda didn't listen. She left him and went back to her mother's house in Deer Park, taking her boy with her. We didn't see each other for a couple of weeks and when we met again, she said her weakling husband had lost the plot.

'Couldn't give me some space, wouldn't take his meds.'

She said he found her in the shopping centre and gave her two days to come to her senses. When Wanda didn't, he came with a couple of his mates to her mother's house and they went berserk. They smashed her place up, wrote off all the walls. Her husband cut the furniture with a knife and then tried to kill himself in the lounge room. After that, the cops came.

'Now he's locked up and on watch,' Wanda said.

I felt there was more to the whole thing, but didn't ask her any questions. I just sat on the sofa next to her and gently touched her hand or knee. I'd make her coffee and something to eat. Every now and then I'd say something like 'I understand' or 'that's not on'.

She'd say things like 'you're so good to me' and 'I can't believe you don't have a girlfriend'. I told her my wife left me and she gasped. After she'd had a good rant about her husband, we'd root. She'd always get horny after trash-mouthing him.

We kept up with seeing each other. I started working like crazy. My bones hurt. I wanted to save for a house deposit. I worked hard all week and at night I'd have a few drinks to relax. On telly, the new crop of Aussie batsmen was putting a high price on their wickets just like David Boon once did. Then sometimes I'd have a few cones just to wind down and go to sleep so I could get up the next day and put in a twelve or fourteen hour shift.

After I forgot to feed Max a few times, I bought a second-hand dog self-feeder off the internet. It cost me thirty bucks.



I was driving back from work when I saw Max running on the paddock next to the train station. Some boys on their bikes were riding in a circle and Max was running with them. I parked the car and whistled. Max stopped running and looked my way. I whistled again, and the boys stopped riding. Max turned his head toward them. One of the boys on a blue mountain bike dismounted and went to his knees. He patted Max on his neck and head and then pointed toward me. He waved at me. I squinted to see better. It was Richie.

I called, 'Over here, Max,' and Max licked Richie's face before trotting my way. I couldn't figure out how he'd jumped the fence. When I got home, I looked to see if he'd dug a hole under it.

The next morning at work, I told Wanda about it. 'The last thing I need is to lose my mate's dog.'

She asked what type of dog Max was, and I said I wasn't sure.

'He looks like that dog from the first Mad Max movie. He's got a patch on his right eye and a thick grey-blue coat.'

Wanda laughed. 'You're having me on, aren't you?' she asked.

'I'm not. He looks like a pirate, I'm telling you.' I crossed my heart.

'I can't believe you don't know that's a heeler. He's a cattle dog. They jump on cows' backs to round them up. That's your answer.'

'But he's old. A grandfather, really.'

'Doesn't matter. He must be bored.'

That day, I came back home from work and I found Max tied to one of the porch railings. The rope was short, and it was tied tight around his neck so he couldn't sit. His tail was tucked between his legs. When he saw me, he barked in relief. His bark was weak and coarse. He shivered when I untied him and leaped into my embrace. As I stroked his back, I felt a cold, oily dampness between my fingers and the smell of petrol hit my nostrils.

I found a piece of paper stapled to the front door. There was no message on it. A single matchstick was taped to the paper.

I looked up and down the empty street. Nothing moved. Even the tree branches were still. I couldn't hear any birds. Rain started to spit.

I took Max inside and washed him in the bathtub. He didn't protest. He stayed still, happy to be clean again. I dried him and placed a bowl of food and bowl of water in the hallway. Max dug into his biscuits.

In the kitchen, I turned on the stovetop and filled a small pot with water and put it to boil. I was going to make macaroni cheese for myself. I was serious about saving money. As the water slowly came to the boil, my anger rose with it.

Max stopped eating and ran to the front door. He made a low growl. I heard people talking outside. I peered through the curtains and saw four men on the footpath. The afternoon was growing dark from the rain.

One of the men grabbed his own forearm, opened his mouth wide and started biting the air, making a crazy face. His eyes rolled up until there were only whites visible. The fat one joined this performance and checked the hand of the crazy man, who now pretended to squirm in pain. Bastards knew they were being watched. I had a better look at the fat one. It was Walnut Face from work. Further down the street, I could see his green Falcon, a bike sticking out of the boot. A blonde head poked out of the backseat window. Max jumped on the windowsill and when he saw Richie's head in the car, he barked and wagged his tail. He turned to me with his pleading eyes and whined.

The men talked some more and then one of them walked to my front door. The bell rang. I went to the kitchen and turned off the hotplate before I opened the front door.

The man said, 'I'm Brad from down the street. Can I talk to you for a moment, mate?'

Wanda's ex had bulging eyes and flaky skin. He rubbed his right palm with the thumb of his left hand like he was hurt.

I said, 'What's this about?'

'You're Frank, right?' His eyes darted back to the street where the other three men stood watching.

'I'm not,' I said.

'You're not?'

'No.'

'You're not what?' Brad asked, confused.

'I'm not Frank.'

'I was told that was your name.'

'Who told you that?' I peered over his shoulder.

'The neighbours,' he said and looked at the street again.

I pulled out my wallet and showed him my driver's licence. Brad leaned in and squinted.

'But how do you say it?'

I stayed quiet and stared into Brad's eyes. They were red, no glint in them. Lack of sleep, maybe.

'I heard that's your name. All right if I call you Frank? I'll call you Frank, all right. In any case, that's not why I'm here.'

Brad turned to his buddies.

I looked up and down the street. It was lined with saplings along the footpaths. There were houses with bright red roofs and inside them were people like Brad and his three mates and their wives. Some had children, some had cats and others had dogs. A train whistled in the distance.

'Get to the point,' I said to Brad.

Brad said Max had chased his son who was riding his bike and that his son had fallen and broken his leg. He said his son smashed into a rock somewhere in the paddock near the station when he fell, and it was Max's fault.

I knew the land around the station well. It was flat, nothing on it. There were no rocks or trees or anything. Just flat, muddy earth.

'Any witnesses to this?' I asked.

'My son doesn't lie.' Brad stiffened. 'Your dog's a heeler. Heelers chase.'

'I've never seen Max run out to the paddock,' I lied.

'You haven't been looking, then,' Brad snorted. He put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

'What do you want, Brett?'

'It's Brad.' He took a deep drag on his cigarette. 'I'll tell you what I came for.'

'Hang on, Brett. I've got something on the stove. Be right back.'

I returned with the note and its matchstick. I shoved it in Brad's chest and told him to read it. Then I reached for the cricket bat behind the door and leaned on it like the once impenetrable David Boon. Max sat next to me and growled. Brad looked at the note, then at Max, and stepped back. I lifted the bat in the air and took a stand as if I was facing a delivery. Then I pretended to play pull shot. I swung the bat above Brad's head, the willow swooshed, and he ducked.

'The Tassie boys,' I said, 'they could play pull shot like no one else.'

'What?' Brad said.

'You know. Ponting and Boon. You follow cricket?'

'Not here to talk sports, mate,' Brad said.

'I reckon it's time for you to take a walk. Think of it as a Yorker right on the shins.' I tapped Brad's shins gently with the bat.

'All right, mate,' Brad stepped back and looked toward the car. I saw Richie slump in the seat under the weight of his father's stare and I started to feel sorry for him.

'Brad, mate,' I said, 'Listen. How about I take Max over to your son. Let them suss each other out. They'll be mates in no time.'

Brad and the rest of the men looked at me like they were staring at an abstract painting. Walnut Face clenched his fists. I still had the bat in my hand and Max by my side.

'That won't be necessary,' Brad said.

'I insist.' I walked out and passed the group of men. They pulled their collars high and their hats low to protect themselves from rain. I headed for the car.

Richie was crying in the back seat. He wiped his eyes with his shirtsleeve.

I looked at Richie's legs and there was nothing wrong with them. I opened the door and Max jumped into the boy's lap. They hugged. I walked to the back of the car and pulled the bike out. Richie followed Max out of the car and I told him to go home to his mother.

Max sat beside me, watching as Richie jumped on the bike and rode off. The dog snarled when Brad flicked his cigarette in my mate's front yard and the men started walking toward me. Night had arrived, and the rain was coming down harder. I couldn't hear the trains coming and going. The streetlights had all come on and the lamp above my head was buzzing. I put the bat between my legs and wiped my wet hands on my thighs. Max barked and barked. I gripped the bat and thought of the stocky batsman with a seriously thick moustache. He could really strike the ball.

About the author

Fikret Pajalic came to Melbourne as a refugee, learnt English in his mid-twenties and started writing years later. He has won and placed in competitions, published in anthologies and literary magazines. His fiction has appeared in *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Westerly*, *Etchings*, *Sleepers*, *Antipodes*, *The Big Issue*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Wisconsin Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Fjords Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Bop Dead City*, *Structo*, *Paper and Ink*, *JAAM* and elsewhere. For a full list of his publication achievements and to read samples of his work view his Literary CV. In 2014 he was awarded a Creative Victoria grant, and in 2015 an Australia Council grant for the development of his literary manuscript '*Wanderings*' and in 2016 from Brimbank City Council for the development of chapbook . He is married to author Amra Pajalic and they live in Melbourne's western suburbs with their daughter.

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'If you struggle to read, then you haven't found the right book format.'



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There is a quote that states 'If you don't like to read, then you haven't found the right book.' I would like to extend that further and state that 'If you struggle to read then you haven't found the right book format.' As a high school teacher I have taught students with various individual needs and recognise the need to make books accessible for all kinds of readers. To this end I am committed to publishing all Pishukin Press titles in as many formats as possible. This includes:

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