

A Blessing

Jane Downing

May there always be work for your hands to do

It was a dew-dropped morning. Each pine needle on the tree beside the barn had a sphere of water hanging from the lowest point. Each cobweb spun between the bare branches of the apples trees was studded with diamonds. Angie breathed icicles in and steam train gusts out. She tossed the compost of vegetable peelings and leftover porridge into the pen and left the chickens to it, following her own footprints back through the mud. She left her wellies on the sagging verandah and stomped the cold out of her legs and arms down the passage to the kitchen.

‘You haven’t gone out in your pyjamas?’ Her mum didn’t look up from her crouch into the dishwasher and Angie didn’t answer. ‘Your grandfather needs a script filled at the pharmacy. Once you’re dressed madam, you can...’

Angie stuck the bucket under the tap. The water’s honk through the plumbing drowned the rest of the directive. The water thundered into the empty compost bucket, sluicing off the last of the zucchini shavings.

‘Can I get a lift in?’ Angie shouted over the top of it. She knew the answer, that she’d be on her bike down the lane, over the cattlegrid, racing the school bus as it stopped and started at each congregation point, pushing at the pedals with conflict churning in her stomach, unable yet to reconcile the alienation of being an outsider now, and yet, oh! the freedom from classrooms forevermore.

As she drew level with the bus she allowed in a small hope. If school could be put in the past, maybe she could escape from this place altogether.

Faces peered down at her from the bus. Laura waved mentally — not discreetly in her mind, but like a nutter, both hands. Patrick was lost on the line of a 1000m stare, youngest of the brood, the runt. Her other brothers, Mike and Sam, had shot off on their bikes the moment their chores in the pig shed were done, had won the race already.

The bus roared into an unassailable lead at the last turn into town.

May your purse always hold a coin or two

Hector. That's what it said on the pharmacist's badge but Angie knew to call him respectfully by his full name. Mr Stanhouse. The secrets he must know.

'Hope,' he said. A good piece of advice. She wondered whether he offered it because she wasn't smiling. 'Stanhope. Not house.'

There was an awkward pause amongst the pristine, shiny shelves. He put his hand out. 'For your pop?' he asked before taking the slip of paper from her.

Angie only knew the drugs had something to do with his heart. She could never get her tongue around the multisyllabic words. They frightened her. There was a second page under the script which fluttered to the floor in the handover. A shopping list Angie had failed to fully examine, scarred by the top item: incontinence pads. There were some things you didn't ask your mother when she was a mother of five.

'On the account?' Angie whispered. One day Mr Stanhope would say no. But they'd recently sold some baconers to the abattoir and there were a few litters of porkers ready to go, so not today.

'Fifteen minutes,' the pharmacist prescribed. 'Make it twenty to be on the safe side,' he cautioned.

For twenty minutes Angie was free. She fell out of the sliding doors of the Chemist's into the short shopping strip — a bank, a pub, an IGA over the way — with money burning a hole in the pocket of her overalls, her pocket money, an allowance, allowing for little and yet, the beckoning illusion of choices.

The fly screen did its best to keep her out of the bakery. She pushed hard. Then pulled. The place steamed, the morning's rain drying off the coats of the townsfolk and tourists as they lined up waiting their turn for coffees and sausage rolls and vanilla slices the height of a fist.

She walked through the small crowd to the back wall. Once she had the clear glass door of the fridge open, she leaned right in as if pondering which flavour of beverage was best. Really, to cool her blush. Because her crush was there in the queue.

When it came her turn, she placed her carton of choc milk on the counter and ordered a Melting Moment.

'I'll have the same,' said a voice right beside her. And then beautiful Rosa spoke only to Angie. 'Do you want a lift home?'

Their arms brushed as they reached for the little white bags housing their separate biscuits. Through layers of clothes, Angie felt electricity.

Fresh-minted P-plates were magnetised to the front and back of Rosa's ute. She'd been a year ahead of Angie at school. One of the children of the 'mail order brides' of the district. She'd gone off to university taking Angie's heart with her.

'I'm just back for a bit to help out.' That's what she told Angie without being asked as they ate the crumbling Melting Moments and waited out Hector Stanhope's prescription schedule.

May the sun always shine on your windowpane

They took off with Angie's bike on the flatbed of the ute, secured with a dog chain through the spokes of the back wheel. In the cab, Angie was too aware she hadn't had a shower and wouldn't till she'd mucked out the stalls, and that the brown of Rosa's eyes had nothing to do with mud and pig shit. Flecked with gold, her eyes glinted, a small nod to the origins of the town behind them. There'd have been no other reason beyond a gold rush to bring settlers this far. Or to push out the original people, a matter no-one commemorated on the tourist signboards they passed on the main road.

Angie stared out the window. A foot taller, heaps lighter, Rosa was beyond anything except fantasy. It was painful to look at her full in the face. Her perfection was glimpsed from snatched glances out of the corner of her eye.

'A lot on today?' asked the goddess.

'No,' Angie lied.

'You had to leave school early didn't you?'

'Yes. To help out.'

'And not just for a bit?'

Their exchange was only punctuated by changing gears. They reached fourth and the engine settled.

'My pop's heart is fucked,' Angie explained. She nudged the green bag with the medications and the unmentionables, wedged at her feet. Dried mud from her boots peppered the mat. The work was hard, with her father gone, her grandfather weak, but she hated pity. It was what it was. 'But today'll be good,' she said. 'No piglets need to be taken off the sows.'

'It's the same with the calves,' Rosa agreed. Her family ran cattle. Made more money.

'These types of pigs Pop invested in would be extinct if we didn't eat them,' Angie mused. 'No-one was breeding them anymore, but if there's money in selling them to butchers, the line will survive. That's irony.'

She'd never said so many words to Rosa before. The sun had an edge to it now. The rays magnified by the glass. Angie unzipped her jacket.

'You've got the hot flushes all the time like my mum,' Rosa joked.

Angie felt the truth of it burning in her cheeks again. She deflected, speaking over the top of *Boy & Bear* on the local AM station. 'So what are you studying?'

'Politics.'

'You're kidding me?'

The hills rolled away out the window. The road was strung out like a ribbon in the wing mirror. She was looking anywhere except at the dazzling light that was Rosa. Two years admiring her from afar, and Angie hadn't realised how confronting it'd feel to actually be *seen* by the woman she loved. How it would make her see herself. The song's lyric was stuck in her head, something about a *feeding line*, which Mondegreened in her brain as *feeding time*, and the chores of her day ahead rushed back into her line of sight, this brief respite almost over and her future set, a rerun of her mother's past and Rosa's mother's past, laid out in steps as plodding as those of a dry sow. Be tough. She needed to be tough.

Rosa talked about politics in the cab beside her. Rosa obviously thought she'd escaped this place.

Angie squinted at the sun coming through the windscreen. 'You can drop me at the letterbox.'

'Like a piece of mail,' Rosa said.

'Something from Amazon,' Angie countered.

May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain

The old telephone side table and attached vinyl-upholstered chair had been relegated to the back verandah when the landline was moved onto the kitchen wall. The table was piled with things that needed to be taken in later. Angie added the green bag from the Pharmacy to the pile and briefly sat to change her boots back to her knee-high wellies.

Behind her, the house hummed. All the appliances had been left alone to get on busily with their chores. They were almost in song. Almost a siren song to beckon her into the warmth. Luckily she was on her feet and looked like she was off to the sheds when her mother slammed through the backdoor. Surprisingly — because her mother was usually hard at work already by this time.

The shock that her mother was there beside her was eclipsed by the shock of the .22 rifle held with both arms like a shield across her chest. She barrelled past without a greeting. Angie followed, leaping down the three low steps.

‘Fuck Mum... what the...?’

The weight of the gun wasn’t slowing her mother; Angie had picked it up once, had been surprised by the heft, before getting a bollocking for even touching it. Where was grandpop, she wondered as she chased after her mum’s stride. His truck was gone from its spot in front of the garage. A rainbow of purples and blues and greens swirled in the oil slick left by his cranky 4x4.

‘Don’t follow me,’ her mother called over her shoulder. ‘Go and muck out Prince’s stall. Keep away from the farrowing shed.’

Of course she disobeyed. ‘Mum,’ Angie wailed in her wake.

Words muttered back across the yard. ‘I never wanted this. If your dad hadn’t...’

Angie caught up. ‘Wait. Wait until he’s back. Pop’ll be here soon. Whatever this is, wait.’

She was one step behind when entering the warmth of the farrowing shed, the nicest place on the farm. This was where the sows were brought to give birth, where they stayed with the soft piglets until they were weaned, safe in the low light and the sweet and sour smell of straw.

Nine sows were lying in the spots they’d scratched into nests to their own satisfaction. The black pigs melted into the shadows, their pale udders alone discernable, bloated, topped with tiny hillocks in two lines across their warm bellies.

‘It’s his fault,’ her mother snarled. ‘I told him Beatrice wasn’t ready to be serviced again. The scoring conditions for breeding are there in black and white. It was too soon.’ She hefted the rifle. ‘It was his incompetence that let Prince loose on her. Now your pop is off collecting juniper slop from that gin distillery. Feed, he says, so the pork’ll be tastier. As if.’

Angie followed a line of sight from the tip of the rifle as if it was a teacher’s pointer. Pointing to the tenth sow. And saw the Shakespearean tragedy in its final act. What was left of the joy of her morning, evaporated.

May the hand of a friend always be near you

The atmosphere in the shed was usually soporific. Now stress buzzed the air.

The black of the pigs’ hides was a shade of dusk, not of midnight. It had no effect on the meat on the table, beyond, if they were fed well, a certain marbling that chefs and high-

diners appreciated. When Angie's eyes had fully adjusted to the light, Beatrice, the problem, was visible near the wall to the right. Her back legs were splayed, her back almost vertical, in the posture of a toddler learning to sit without pillows as a prop. She'd not only fractured the bones in two of her legs as she'd tried to stand, she'd crushed the bulk of her litter in her collapse. She gave no audible cries. The look in her eyes screamed. The muteness of soul-destroying pain. Physical or pure grief — who knew.

'Shouldn't we call the vet?'

'He'll only charge a bob to point out the bleeding obvious and tell us she needs to be put down. We can't fix her and we can't leave her in pain.' That mute, all-encompassing pain. 'I don't need a vet. I can shoot a pig.'

But her mum had lowered the gun. The .22 was now resting against her mother's leg, making it patently obvious she couldn't.

'I'll do it.' Angie sounded braver than she felt. She put her hand over her mother's. Her mother's trembling hand. Angie was in this one moment the grown-up, a friend not a daughter. She started to take the rifle. The wood of the butt was smooth and greasy and collected fingerprints. Angie avoided the largest one, the one she imagined was her father's thumb print. Where he'd placed his hand before he turned the barrel on himself.

But her mother pulled it back. The jostle, the tussle, over the gun galvanising her into action.

Beatrice's large ears flopped like summer parasols over her eyes. Angie closed hers. The shot reverberated on a wave of screams and squeals from all the pigs, quietening to grunts and snuffles. The shed settled though the empty silence was all in Angie's head.

Only two of the litter squirmed under her touch when she crawled forward and pushed past the body — slumped now like a sack of rice — to check. Their long whip tails and long broad snouts balanced the little fat barrels of them.

May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you

'Babies drain the life out of you, suck your bones to the marrow.'

Angie couldn't help but take her mother's ranting personally as one of five siblings, always needing, needing, needing. When she looked over though, at her mum standing straight to her full height, she realised she was talking only to herself.

'The stupid pigs know no better. Their bodies give and give with every new litter, until their very bones are too brittle to hold themselves up let alone walk. How pathetic is that?'

Angie didn't know killing made you drunk. Slurred your voice, disinhibited your mute martyrdom, plunged you from anger to regret to maudlin fatalism.

'This is your future,' she turned to tell her daughter.

Angie already knew she'd never be qualified for any other work than shovelling muck and straw, occasionally slaughtering livestock. She didn't need telling.

'I'll put the... the survivors with Betty,' Angie interrupted because the pair were squirming against her sleeveless padded jacket, the exact same sort of vest her mother was plucking at distractedly. Their uniform on the farm, complete with up-market logo above the heart.

As she was searching out the sow Betty, she realised what her mother had actually been telling her. Not that her life would be like her mother's, or not *only* that, but also that both their lives were the same as Beatrice's. Her whole brain protested.

'Rosa gave me a lift back,' she said quietly. 'She's home for a bit. Rosa Conti from Riverlands.' She'd wanted to tell her mum for so long. Now was the chance. To offer a ray of light, a small blessing, that her fate was not automatically set like that of the sow's. 'I like her.'

'Her mum's not bad either, for a foreigner,' her mum conceded, as if this was a compliment.

'I mean I really like her. I like girls.'

See, her eyes begged. See, nothing is inevitable. Not a man, not a destiny. The chain could be broken. I can choose my fate.

Her mother snapped the rifle like a soldier on parade. Shouldered it. Addressed her daughter coldly. The emotion of the last few minutes wiped away. 'Don't let me ever hear you say that again. What are you thinking?' She delivered her last words on the subject. 'It's not natural.'

The gun had to go back into its locked cupboard. A hole had to be dug in the mud for the dead animal. The list of chores did not end there. Her mother marched away.

Angie was left alone in the shed. I don't have to buy into my mother's brand of resilience she told herself. Doing what needed to be done day in, day out. Getting knocked down, getting up again. Until you were broken and couldn't get up ever again. Being stoic until the moment of collapse was surely not the only way.

She carried the motherless piglets to Betty at the back of the farrowing shed. They each attached themselves to a teat without coaxing. Betty lifted her head. Blinkered. Accepted.

No, I'm not left alone in here, Angie corrected herself, as she stroked the sow's hip bone, squeezing gently, just checking there was enough flesh there. Not marbled flesh, necessary flesh.

Jane Downing's stories have been published around Australia and overseas, including in *Griffith Review*, *Big Issue*, *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Westerly*, *Island*, and *Overland*. Her novel, 'The Sultan's Daughter,' was released by Obiter Publishing in 2020.