

She has a red rose

By Mark R. Dean

Agnes liked red, not as much as she liked blue, Carlton blue, but that wasn't an option in the catalogue. Ernie made the decision quickly, his eldest, Marie asked him to wait, take some time dad, she told him with her hand on his shoulder.

People need get on with their life, he had snapped back. He was just as terse with her the afternoon of the cremation, '*What these bloody people want?*' he complained as they drove off in the car. A month later he hammered his fist on the kitchen table when she told him to get help. It scared her and a week after that he told her what he thought about her bludger of a husband. She left in tears, she didn't understand his pain.

When Agnes fell ill, Ernie dreamt of a grand funeral, where his casket was laid next to hers. When she died he found that there were few plots available, and he could not afford what they cost. He cremated Agnes. It is what you did. Marie protested, Lynne, his youngest, tried to mediate with them. Her effort, rewarded as she realised he would not wait for her to fly in from London.

'*We need to get on with life,*' he scolded a neighbour, outside the crematorium, when she enquired where Lynne was.

That was nearly ten years ago. Except for the first Sunday in every month, when he will ride the city train to Flinders Street and another out again towards Camberwell, for lunch with his sister Edith and her husband Geoff, who insists on being called '*Goff*'. Ernie Kovacs has made a solitary life. Once a year Edith will force herself to make the trip to Brunswick. She has long since given up telling her brother to clean up, but will occasionally berate him about the things he still has around the place, '*You need to throw her stuff away, it is not good for you,*' she has told him more than once. The house is the same as the day Agnes was hospitalised, but now the carpet on Ernie's side of the bed is decidedly threadbare and the curtains and linen are yellow with age and dust. Ernie likes it this way.

Edith has a nice house. Goff sold his tyre shop and now manages his own super, they have an alfresco area - '*Alli-fresssco*' - as Ernie has always insisted on pronouncing it. Before Ernie arrives, Goff will always give his wife a small glass of wine and tell her lovingly, '*I know he is a pain, but he is your brother.*' They both know that Ernie can be a

grump when he first arrives, mostly he will cheer up after a wine or two. On Easter Sunday he didn't.

'I don't need your charity!' he bellowed out over the lamb shanks. Edith told him to leave that time, he wasn't the only person she had invited over on that occasion. They didn't talk for a couple of months, he left messages, pretended nothing had happened. It was then that Ernie bought a budgie. It lived in a rusty blue frilled cage by the back door. It doesn't have a name, but answers to 'Ooow you pweety boy'. He is a clever bird, will even talk down the phone. Lynne doesn't call her dad as often as she would like - *Has he put that bloody bird on again*, her husband yelled from the kitchen the last time she felt guilty enough to call him. Cheap as an international calls are these days, Lynne has more important things to do than spend an hour listening to a bird, she told her aunt in an email soon after.

Ernie's favourite place was his garden, vegetables and vines grown in the old way. During the summer he was out there most of the day. But not Tuesday, that is Agnes's day. Sometimes Sunday too. Thursday occasionally. On these days he is dressed up with his hair combed. Taking the blue shopping bag from behind the front door, so he can stop off at the IGA on the way home, as he leaves the house. Ernie will wander over to Sydney Road and wait for the number 19 tram heading downwards to Elizabeth Street.

On what would have been her mother's 60th birthday, Marie drove across from Moonee Ponds and sat in the car waiting for her father to arrive. When he appeared, slowly plodding along against the railings, she couldn't get out of the car. He passed by, oblivious to the parked cars, so she followed him into the cemetery and watched from a distance. He stood awkwardly in a sea of rosebushes – a man drowning in petals, holding on to thorns she told herself – as she stood under a tree and cried for him.

Ernie could talk to Agnes for hours. He has less to say to her now and none of it is new news. Just as well, he told himself, it hurts to stand for too long and the bench faces the wrong way to see her. He has always left by the West gate, so he can walk up and around the Carlton ground, visiting old memories – Saturday afternoons shouting at the pitch in a sea of blue. Recently there had been a gang of school kids hanging around under the East stand shouting and laughing loudly. They never gave him a second look as he shuffled past, but are always aware that he was there. He would continue around, past the rear entrance to the ground, across the park where the purple shirts sometimes train, to the parade and the tram stop. 'Mum's tram stop!' the kids would shout whenever they

passed it in the car. Ernie once offered to move out further, somewhere quieter, Agnes refused. Blues or nothing she told him in all seriousness. They stared each other out for a few seconds before she cracked and they laughed. He never asked again. Blues they were. If something big happened at the club, she would be the first one down there at the ground. He had to follow, if he was working, he'd come down later to find her. Once she was the only person left outside, still jumping about covered in scarves, after God knows how many hours. Marie and Lynne were in their pyjamas and shouted from the car as Ernie persuaded her to come home. Agnes didn't live to see the blues move from the ground, Ernie told her though, she would have been unhappy with that.

At Mum's tram stop Ernie liked to stand little further down the platform, *Too many people wants to speak*, he told Edith, the only time she travelled this way with him. He had waved his hand in front of his face – pretending to swat away a fly, as he walked off. She stayed under the tram cover, it was raining, she could see he was crying.

The three sets of doors of the number 19 tram flopped open and with one hand on the door rail, Ernie pulled himself up on to the first step as discretely as he could, lest someone saw his effort. The second and third followed as did the nearest seat, where he sat, legs splayed, newly shined plastic black shoes meeting tan slacks frayed a little in the hem. At the foot of his tired Burgundy jumper he rested his hands, clenched tight with his scrunched blue material shopping bag in one fist. On bright days if the blinds haven't been drawn he would often catch himself staring at his reflection, ignoring the hotels, shops and houses flying past. His hair was still thick but now white and his skin leather with years of sun and no cream, or what he is able to see of it through glasses so old that the gold rims had been rubbed white and the once clear lenses now oyster.

The movement of the tram clapped out a discordant rhythm from the blinds as they tapped on and off the window frames. The noise was just loud enough to distract Ernie from two teenagers at the end of the carriage—*Like I don't know, what do you think, should I?— It's up to you, well I dunno, you know—* carried on the conversation. Agnes said yes immediately when he asked her to marry him. Ernie remembered that there was no indecision.

The upward 19 stopped at the end of Victoria Parade and Ernie, as always, glanced over to the pub on the corner. It is an Irish pub now but for Ernie it was always the Sarah Sands. He first met Agnes in the Sarah Sands, after the 1968 grand final. It had been a slog back from the cricket ground, he'd walked from town, a few beers here and there to

celebrate. The first of, on Sydney Road, was the Sarah Sands. He hadn't intended to stay, agreeing to meet some work colleagues at the Brunswick hotel. He didn't make it. In the middle of the bar, there was a spirited, *so his mother called her*, young girl dancing a Scottish jig on a table. The bar clapped the beat and she continued to dance, blue scarves streaming off of her body and they twirled around and around. He hung around until she finally stopped cavorting, until there was also a break in the crowd and asked her if she would like a drink. She eyed him up and down and told him 'Aww yeas,' before punching him in the arm. Later in the evening she admitted that she had a thing for Brent Crosswell, but Ernie was just as sweet.

Three stops up, passed the Town Hall was the church where they were married. Mid September 1970, two weeks before the Blues won the five flags. They were given tickets as a wedding present. It was the only honeymoon they had. In a cupboard, in a box somewhere there are their wedding photographs. Outside the church, Agnes smiling serenely for once and not clowning around, Ernie uncomfortable in his suit, her mother and father and his mother putting on a brave face trying to avert their eyes from the large frilly dress, itself trying to distract attention from Agnes's obvious bump. Marie was born in January 1971, Lynne followed in April 1974. Ernie's best man, his father's brother, said it was an honour. He had driven down from Canberra that morning and stank of beer. Her maid of honour, Janet from the post office, her gap toothed smile just as evident even though they had asked her to smile with her mouth shut. In Ernie's speech, in the back of the Retreat hotel he remembered his father, who had died the year Ernie started working with him at the brickworks. Ernie had taken his fathers name, leaving Sandor, his proper first name for his driving license and bank card.

One stop more and the tram rolled by the old post office were Agnes used to work. After the Grand Final night Ernie pursued Agnes for weeks, leaving work as early as he could and finding any reason to pop in the post office to see her. Agnes liked the days when she could sit behind the counter. She wore a crisp white shirt and greeted everyone with an '*Och halooow*'. The brickworks were due to close at the end of the year and Ernie looked into working as a Postie, just to see Agnes, but she agreed to a date.

Ernie readied his blue bag, the next stop was the IGA, up the hill and by the Turkish shops. A young man in a suit rose and pulled the cord so Ernie only had to move to the door. The doors opened as a big black American car undertook the tram. The young man jumped back up the steps as the car horn blared and the tram rung its bell again. Ernie had always thought that this was a dangerous part of Sydney Road. It was hard to cross

here without waiting for the pedestrian crossing. The lip of the hill made it hard to judge the speed of the cars coming down from Moreland Road and the ones coming up always accelerated away from the lights at Blyth Street. He got off the tram and wandered around to wait for the lights to change at the pedestrian crossing. When the *bedip bip bip bip bip* of the green man sounded he crossed and carried on up though the electric doors of the IGA.

Ernie picked a red a wheelie basket from the stack by the fish counter, they were easier to unstack than the older plastic baskets. With it trailing behind him, he hunted around the vegetable section until he found the rack of full out-of-date produce. He liked the IGA because it always had some food discounted, things that need to be bought before they go off. Sometimes there was meat, which he always hoped for, otherwise he'd have to get frozen sausages from the freezer again. He found a bag of spinach with yellow water at the bottom and three potatoes with mud on them, but no cheap meat. He then meandered up and down the isles collecting his usual four tins of Sole Marie tuna and beans, a litre of milk, Bran Flakes and a packet of Anzac biscuits on special.

"Spring looks like it is coming dear" the spiky haired checkout women told him without being asked "oh I have had enough of this cold eh!" she continued but Ernie could only think of the time he caught sight of her with a black eye hidden under more makeup than usual.

The blue shopping bag packed, Ernie slowly started up to the traffic lights, along by the police station, the little shops and the girlie bar with the poster of the woman in leopard skin on the outside, to the junction. If the lights turned when he got there, Ernie would always cross and walk down Albert Street, beside the Edinburgh Castle - *not that they would ever let him back in*. The lights didn't and the broken clacking of the pedestrian crossing shepherded him over Albert Street on the wrong side of the road and on along the hoarding of the building site and passed the red post box that he would always stand next to when he waited for the tram down to see Agnes. When he was opposite the Don Bosco Hostel Ernie stepped out from the curb and peered up and down the road over the side of a green Mitsubishi. He saw the 19 tram coming down, far enough away for him to cross and the other side of the road was clear, but for the glint of metal in the sunlight just level with the IGA. Ernie thought it was a building in the city.

Ernie pushed out into the road. He moved as quickly as he could, though he would not admit it, it was difficult to walk and he was not quite as quick as he used to be, even last year. Out at the centre line he looked upwards again, the tram was approaching, he

could hear its bell, so he hurried more. There were cars in front of the tram that he hadn't seen. He scuttled across the other lane as horns blared. The first from the small black Honda that bared down on the old man from the opposite direction. The car was nowhere near the pedestrian - as much as the driver was nowhere near mature enough to be driving - but he wailed his horn anyway and jabbed the accelerator again, pitching the nose of the car higher adding more speed to that which had already propelled him up Sydney Road, over the incline and under the lights just after they changed to red. It was a clear road ahead to Coburg but for this old man. The little black bee box was the predator here, the driver its brain and Ernie likely pray. The horn let out a hunting cry and was matched by a passing van, then another from behind the following taxi. The three cars that had sneaked in front of the tram, its bell clanging furiously at the driver of the oncoming Honda. They hollered their horns and small pistons beat metallic chests as Ernie shuffled furiously to safety between the bonnet of a parked Landcruiser and the boot of a commodore.

The black Honda buzzed by '*Ouse the fukin lights mate*' the passenger shouted leant full out of the window. His abuse audible above the car's burping exhaust. It was followed with an obscene gesture as he was carried off towards Coburg like prey in the vehicular predator's mouth.

Ernie thought about shouting back, but was breathing too hard to talk. That had scared him, he had not seen the car. He rested a hand on the Landcruiser bonnet and looked up the street in case they came back.

'Are you OK?' a sweet voice asked as a hand gently clasped his arm.

His heart continued to pump adrenaline around his body and the light touch unbalanced him pivoting him around until his back faced the road. With his focus away from the incident Ernie gathered back his thoughts. He realised his hands had started to shake. The young middle-eastern woman asked him again if he was all right.

Ernie touched his head lightly to indicate that what had happened could have been a moment of insanity and spoke to reassure himself more than her 'Yes I, fine - boys they have no—'

'I know,' she curtailed his reply, 'my brother, was the same, he died, like they will if they carry on.'

'I am sorry...' Ernie tried to respond. The adrenaline had started to subside, he felt light headed.

Her grip on his arm steadied him, they both knew it. Her other hand rested on the handle of a stroller. She shifted the stroller deftly with one hand and led him with the other, moving away from the curb to under the shade afforded by the tall face of the Don Bosco.

'It is in the past,' she said dryly, understanding that this was not a conversation to have in the circumstances, 'I have Ava to think about.' She motioned down at the stroller. The child, about two years old, dressed in pink shorts and t-shirt, felt the attention draw to her and ignored the book she held in her lap. It had been stuck on the same page all morning, '*Monkay, Monkay!*' she had been calling out as her mother watched Ernie reach the refuge of the parked cars. Ava grinned at Ernie and her round brown eyes stared straight into him. Maybe he was more shaken up than he thought, her look reminded him of many happier things.

'My youngest she pregnant,' he ventured 'but we don't talk.'

'That is a shame,' the woman replied, 'I wish my father was alive still, I would love her to know her grandfather.' She lightly rocked the stroller from side-to-side. Ava looked up and laughed, 'you'll be no good if you get run over.' She added in the hope that the seriousness of the comment would be taken as a joke.

'Yes maybe you right,' acknowledged Ernie. She made sure he was OK and he reassured her that he did not have far to go. They walked to the corner of Tinning Street and as Ernie Kovacs continued up to the old concrete silos, by the railway line, he tried to remember what Edith had told him about the time difference, the thing that you need to remember, when you make a telephone call to London.

3,320 words.