

SAMPLE STORY FROM WANDERING AT LARGE

Brunswick Budgie

The blustery late-November wind had completely rustled my brain that day as I returned home to the Great Northern Hotel and dropped into the Public Bar for lunch. The daily special was Chicken Schnitzel, mashed spuds, peas and a free pot for four bucks, but Marie's spelling - already immortalised on the main menu offering Hawaiian Steaks and the beer list proposing Guinness - had struck again and she had rendered it 'Schitzel'. It could not be passed up by anyone.

"Two specials," a couple of the boys from the building site ordered.

"Right, two shit-zels," Spunky Sarah grinned wickedly.

"Well how am I supposed to know," Marie groaned, "Didn't have all them foreign words when I was at school."

"I'll have one too," I sighed, "Except the pot better be tomato juice."

"Driving again tonight, huh?" Sarah smiled, altering the kitchen order to three.

"Me too," said Barney, the country lad.

"You wouldn't like tomato juice," Sarah said. No one could do a young innocent look as convincingly as she.

"Orr, I meant the..."

"Four shit-zels," Sarah cheered jubilantly, "Any more takers?"

"Hookin' a few on them schnitzels," Gordon laughed, "Heard about how they were tryin' to unload 'em at the Railway yesterday."

"Don't get to be special for nothing," Marie said. No one knew whether that made sense or was funny or what, not even Marie. But it sounded right.

"I can hear a sparrow," Old Charlie said.

"Bloody noisy, them sparrows," Barney from the Bush muttered.

"Not like them close-mouthed Galahs and Kookas," Gordon sneered.

It was all fun and laughter in the Public Bar but I wasn't in the mood. I hadn't even noticed the misspelling until Sarah played on it, and although I too thought I heard a sparrow, I didn't see any reason to remark upon it.

"Up the bush," Barney defended, "The bird calls fit in with the environment."

"That's why the city birds gotta be noisier, so they can be heard over the traffic," Gordon teased.

"It's comin' from in the Bottle Shop," Old Charlie reckoned, and adjusted his hearing aid.

"I had a cocky once..." Sarah said seriously, and let it hang for a moment, snaring the lot of them in astonished silence, "But it didn't talk," she added, and breezed to get Old Charlie's next pot.

"Yeah. It's in the Bottle Shop, awright."

"What's in the Bottle Shop, Charlie?" Sarah asked.

"The sparrow..."

Sarah paused to listen. When she listened, everyone listened. There was a sparrow cheeping in the bottle shop.

Marie went in first.

"Yes, there is. It's coming from down there somewhere."

"Told yer," Charlie said.

"Just a bloody sparrow," Barney from the Bush muttered.

Sarah went in and came back. "Give us a hand, boys. It's stuck behind the fridge."
"Wind musta blown it in the door," Gordon knew.
"Then let it blow out again," Barney proposed.
Marie came back around the bar and picked up a pool cue as if she intended to impale the poor creature. Barney went around the other way.
"Good at catchin' critters," he told them all.
"Don't hurt it Barney," Marie cried, "It might be a budgie."
"It's a bloody sparrow," Charlie knew.
"If it's a budgie, I want it," Marie fretted.
"It's a bloody sparrow, I tell yer," Charlie persisted.
"Brunswick Budgie," I remembered from somewhere - probably a Frank Hardy story. But I had to go through the bar to watch the show, despite myself.
Marie poked the cue in one end and Barney was able to snare the bird from the other.
"Just a fledgling," he announced, "Too young to fly."
"Don't kill it," Sarah gasped. She, too, was from the bush and knew that the right thing to do was to wring its neck.
Barney came up with the bird hidden in cupped hands.
"Won't be no good," he assured them.
"Take it outside and give it a chance to fly," Marie insisted, and levelled the cue like a sword. Barney offered an enormous sigh. Sarah, knowing she didn't want to see what had to happen next, headed back into the bar.
"He's right, you know," she remarked to me as she went by, "Usually, once you handle the young ones, they can never fly. They just die."
Barney from the Bush did not want to let this one *just die*. "Better if I just flush it down the dunny. Hardly got no tail feathers. Can't fly."
"Take it out, Barney, and give it a try," Marie insisted.
Defeated, Barney went reluctantly out the door and with total disdain flipped his captive into the wind. It flopped helplessly to the asphalt again.
"Can't leave it there," he muttered, "Cats'll get it."
"Try again," Marie insisted.
Barney went after the bird on the pavement but it jumped up and hopped away from him. The wind was strong and seemed to whip it away.
"Can't fly, just like I told yer," Barney said, "Can't last. It's bugged."
"Get it..."
But it was hopping away and too far out of reach.,
"Poor little thing," Marie finally sighed in defeat.
Barney from the Bush came back into the bar, shaking his head. "Bloody city slickers. Can't save 'em when they're that young."
I kept watching the fledgling as it hopped out across the intersection.
"Cats'll get it, sure," Barney was saying, an executioner with a demarcation problem.
Right then the Rathdowne Street bus came thundering down, flat out trying to make the amber light, and the bird had hopped directly into its path. In my mind, I perceived the bus as an enormous diesel-driven cat.
"Oh no!" Marie shrieked.
The bus went straight over it, but it was between the wheels - the very fact that it could not fly seemed to keep it where it was and saved its life. Out from under back of the flying bus, it hopped and hopped again, and now a Silver Top was making a right turn toward it.
And then there was a stronger gust of wind that seemed to pluck the bird up and whisk it away, and suddenly it found its wings flew off down Pigdon Street, away from three deaths by cats and buses and Barney.
"Bloody tough, them Brunswick Budgies," Old Charlie said with a wink at me.

And Sarah came through from the kitchen with plates piled on her arms.
“Four shit-zels,” she called.