

IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?

Julienne van Loon

1. Maryanne

The name of our town is Dubbo. It's blackfella for red dirt. It's Pommie slang for toilet. I don't know why all the rels and that always come to our place for Christmas night. Patto and me can't afford air-conditioning. Christmas at our place is hot. I guess it's the space we've got for parking all the cars. And the fact that Patto won't budge.

"What am I going to do? Drive somewhere? At Christmas? Worst day to be on the road."

I suppose the rest of the family feels sorry for me and so they come. Even that arsehole Graham will put on a collared shirt and get into the car with Tracey and the kids to do the rounds at Christmas. Anyway our place is good for the kids. We back on to the river, so they spend all afternoon down at the railway bridge, swinging off the pepper trees, lying on their stomachs on the stubby bit of bank amongst the sheep shit. They come back burnt and grumpy towards dusk when Smiley's got the barbie hot and the smell of sausages and burnt onions calls them home.

Patto's right about one thing. Christmas is the worst day. No matter how many times I warn the kids about Santa this or Santa that, they're up at the crack of, hoeing into the three stockings full of shit lollies and broken chocolates hours before they manage to haul Patto and me out of bed and even then it's lucky to be seven a.m. The kids are already on a sugar high by the time we lay our sorry Christmas-morning arses on the lounge. Tom's neck is in a red rash from the food coloring and will stay like that till tomorrow. Bridie's somersaulting across the lounge room floor so fast she's minutes away from bouncing her head off a chair leg. The eldest, Grace, already tired of bossing the others around is reverting to early childhood herself, repeating "Moron, M. O. R. O. N., moron, M.O.R.O.N.," into Tom's face.

If the day would just finish soon after one of us has put the red cap on and handed out the presents, just after we've unwrapped all the plastic toys and socks and underpants and useless new inventions for the kitchen and said thank you, if the day was just over then, and you didn't even have to go round picking the wrapping paper up, maybe I wouldn't hate it so much. We could all go back to bed and get up the next day and that would be that. But it drags, the whole day drags. I've got some stupid tradition in me passed down from my mother and her mother saying I have to have roast for lunch with old fashioned Christmas pudding and it's thirty eight degrees by midday and after that the visitors start arriving and they stay all afternoon, all night. By then there's bound to be some kind of awful family bullshit going down. Right when you're past the point of exhaustion. Bullshit, absolutely guaranteed.

2. Patto

"Oh, come on Maryanne, this is bullshit."

The outfit is familiar enough. It's the same sawn-off shotgun I point at the neighbor's blue cattle dog every Wednesday night when the bitch comes over to pilfer scraps out of our garbage bins. It's out of the padlocked cupboard too high for the kids to reach. Maryanne has a key, of course she does. It's the Adults Only cupboard. But the gun? Jesus! It's Christmas, for Christ's sake.

The thing about living with Maryanne - knowing that craning of the neck she does when she presents to herself to the mirror, knowing the way she picks the dirty dishes up from the table, balancing them on her forearm as if this house of ours were a fancy restaurant, as if she were some kind of professional, knowing the width of her ass, the feel of her poky tiny tits against my own back night after night, year after year - the thing about living with Maryanne is she can be as unpredictable as a roo caught in your headlights along the Old Dubbo Road at night. You never know which way she's going to jump.

But fancy pulling out the old shotgun. She doesn't even know how to use it. It'll give her a big kick back if she pulls the trigger. She'll fall right on her ass. Whatever she thinks she's aiming at, don't worry, she'll miss.

"Maryanne, it's Christmas for fuck's sake!"

I try laughing at her a little, a low rumble and shake until I'm tilting my head, just to stop her spinning. There's the taste of bile at the back of my throat and then a retch or two, low and automatic. Now I'm starting to wonder if Maryanne's even there at all because she hasn't budged an inch. She's a cardboard cut-out, I'm thinking, and I'm looking around on the verandah and over toward the last orange coals of the barbecue to see if there's any more of them, these cut-outs.

"Where is everyone?"

3. Maryanne

Smiley's first to roll up, as usual. Carton of Toohey's balancing on one shoulder and a bag full of soft drinks and chips for the kids dangling off his wrist. He clips his heavy bundle of keys on to the belt loop of his jeans, which makes the denim arse sag low enough to show the rim of his undies as he walks down the hall. I'm still elbow deep in the lunch dishes.

"Aye, Smiley. Patto's out on the verandah."

A few minutes behind Smiley, Tracey and Graham arrive with Mum and the kids. Bullet's already screaming, having shut his thumb in the door to the ute and Em's trailing behind, dragging her blanket. Fruit salad. Beer nuts. A carton of Resch's. More soft drink for the kids. And then their Christmas present, a stick of hydro.

"What'd Santa bring you Bullet?"

"A Pee Wee Fifty!"

"Yeah? D'you bring it with you?"

"Yeah."

The top of little Em's head only just reaches the kitchen counter. Tracey touches her little one on the crown lightly as she dumps the box of groceries onto the bench and Graham brushes past her, pushing his mother-in-law out onto the back verandah. Mum, released from Lourde's House for the day, is content enough out there with her luke-warm tea in a Tomme Tippee training flask that prevents her from spilling it on herself.

"Kids, Gran's here."

They file up, one, two three, pecking their grandmother on her papery cheek and saying "Merry Christmas Gran!" before they take off like over-wound toys with their cousins in the direction of the river.

Which leaves Tracey and me in the kitchen.

"Hot, aye?"

"Yeah."

Tracey and me were born too close together. Mum came home with me in July and with Tracey in November the following year. Seventeen months never seemed like a big enough

distance. Still doesn't. For years I managed to convince myself we were completely unrelated.

"Mum, I really don't look like anyone else in the family, do I?"

"Yes you do. You've got Uncle John's nose."

"Is Tracey adopted?"

I was supposed to look after my little sister. I wasn't supposed to kidnap her stuffed-toy Snoopy by stealth and dump it in the garbage bin outside Coles in Macquarie Street. I wasn't supposed sit on her chest until she went red in the face. But Tracey was the worst. She was the baby one. She borrowed things.

4. Patto

The sun falls low and the barbie gets lit, mozzie coils threading their thick smoke in amongst the Winfield Extra Mild and the Stuyvesant and the Holiday Lights. My little brother, Kev, brings his new Falcon over to show us, carving a hollow in that white gravel I paid an arm and a leg for all those years ago but what the hell, the gravel looks like shit these days and anyway it's Christmas and it's a fucking nice set of wheels he's got himself. We all know Smiley's been holding himself back from the stereo for too long already and so we're suffering Pink Floyd, which isn't to say I don't go in for Pink Floyd anymore, just that it's predictable.

It's when I'm walking back round the side of the house after seeing Kev's new car, I've just taken a piss, and before I can step into the sharp line of light coming off the back porch, I'm right up against a nice soft wall of woman and it's all Tracey Miller nee West, I know it, even in the dark.

5. Maryanne

I'm still standing here with this thing pointed right at him, the handle all warm from my hold. I don't even know if it's loaded. It doesn't matter. The point is Patto's raised his ugly head at me, strings of Christmas vomit swinging down off the end of his chin, his head bobbing about like one of those toy dogs with a spring for a neck. He's trying to make sense of it all. He's pretending to laugh, but it's not convincing.

"Where is everyone?" he says.

When he shuts his eyes again, I'm going to walk away, put this heavy bit of wake-up call back in the dirty videos cupboard, pick up the two youngest from where they lay sprawled on an old doona on the verandah floor beside their Gran and maybe even grab a plastic bag, start to gather up all the stray wrapping paper floating down the hall.