



Guns and Grandmas

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Guns and Grandmas

The road flowed under the car as fences and fields hurried by. Kim had been silent for a while and Yvonne looked at him over her sunglasses. Kim's jaw was clenched, and his eyes were flicking angrily. Yvonne knew this look. She remembered her sons sulking like this.

'It's good to get away from the office.'

Kim smiled and rubbed his chin with his forefinger, 'The further away from Gavin the better.'

Yvonne lifted one hand from the steering wheel, 'You know what he's like. Don't take him personally.'

'He attacks everything I say.'

'He doesn't just pick on you.'

'I'm not saying that. He's horrible to everyone. He's turned the office into a war zone.'

Yvonne looked at him over her sunglasses, 'Hardly a war zone.'

Kim screwed up his face like Gavin did, 'I've worked in mining. That's why I'm the smartest man in the room!'

Yvonne laughed at Kim's bad impersonation.

Kim sighed, 'So, what's your secret? How do you stomach him?'

'No secret.'

'What then?'

Yvonne's hands twitched nervously. 'I don't know,'

'Yes you do, what is it?'

'It's just other things seem a lot worse.'

'Like what?'

'You don't want to know.'

Her ardent tone made him curious. Then he remembered her granddaughter. Yvonne's children lived in Africa. Her granddaughter came to Perth because she needed treatment here.

‘Is your granddaughter coming over soon?’

‘Yeah my daughter’s bringing her next month. She’s having another operation.’

‘You must be looking forward to seeing them.’

‘Yes, but I’d rather have a nicer occasion.’ She looked at the cassette machine, which had just finished playing a tape. ‘Are you enjoying the tape?’

Kim turned the cassette over in the machine, ‘Yeah, he’s nice to listen to.’ He didn’t think her granddaughter’s problems seemed bad enough to make Gavin’s seem harmless. He tried asking about her current boyfriend and the other people they worked with, but nothing loomed as a shadow that could make Gavin tolerable.

They travelled all day without running out of things to say. At their destination they booked into their hotel then set off on foot to a pub that Yvonne had heard about. The setting sun was turning the big, blue sky red and the flat, red ground black. They crossed a railway line that stretched out like silver ribbons to the horizon. The air was cooling but heat still radiated from the ground.

They didn’t see anyone else as they strolled down the wide streets between tall red gums and old dust smudged buildings. These buildings wouldn’t have changed much since horses, camels, and gold-diggers strolled down the street.

Stepping into the hotel changed this perspective. Orange vinyl tabletops and chrome chairs furnished the inside, which had a familiar chemical smell that Kim tried to place as he walked up to the bar.

A small eager looking man came to serve them.

Kim nodded. ‘We’re after a meal.’

‘It’s the rifle club’s prize night. The kitchen’s open but it’ll get real noisy.’

Yvonne stepped back. ‘Oh God no!’

The short man turned to her. ‘I don’t have anywhere quiet for you.’

Yvonne raised her eyes to the ceiling. ‘What about the balcony upstairs?’

‘Don’t know what’s up there – haven’t been up there since New Year’s Eve.’

Yvonne came forward. ‘Can you look for us?’

‘Sure, can I get you a drink?’

They sat at the bar sipping their beers. Yvonne put her hand on the wet wooden bar, looked at her hand and smelt it. ‘Furniture polish.’

Kim breathed in. ‘Of course, that’s what I’ve been smelling.’

‘They haven’t wiped it off.’

Kim rubbed the surface with a coaster and examining the red stain. ‘You’re right.’

They took their beers to an orange vinyl table and sat down.

Kim started on one of his kid’s stories. ‘Adam’s worked out how to start videos. He can’t always do it, but he knows if he pushes his finger at the machine it eventually starts.’

Yvonne sat down. ‘Has he put anything in it?’

Kim wanted to finish his story. ‘Only books and they’re easy to get out. Anyway, when we were driving somewhere the other day and Adam said “Ouch”. I looked in the backseat and he had his finger up his nose. That’d be right, I thought. Adam knows where to put his finger on a VCR but not how far he can shove it up his nose.’

Yvonne didn’t laugh.

‘Oh, come on Yvonne – I know that you don’t like kids stories much, but even people without kids see the funny side of that story.’

‘Do they?’

Kim rubbed his chin with his index finger. ‘You don’t get angry and don’t dote on children.’

Yvonne reeled back and stared at him like he’d slapped her. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well if whatever it is stops you getting angry with Gavin, does it stop you doting over children too?’

‘Just because I don’t fall about laughing at stories about your kids doesn’t mean I don’t care.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

She clenched her jaw and looked at the beer glass she was holding in both hands. ‘I should hope not!’

Kim saw her hurt look. He’d managed to hurt her more than Gavin’s best efforts. They sat in silence until the short man returned. ‘I put a table up on the balcony for you. If you order dinner here, I’ll bring it up to you.’

Kim smiled. ‘Great, thanks, what wine do you have?’.

The short man looked at Yvonne, who had hardly looked up from her beer, then said to Kim, ‘Dunno, I’ll show them to you when you’ve ordered.’

After ordering their meal, Kim followed him, glad to get away from Yvonne’s dark mood. He’d thought through what he’d said. He hadn’t been clever but hoped it hadn’t permanently spoilt his friendship with her. He wouldn’t be able to face work if Yvonne was dark with him as well as Gavin.

The short man led him to a small wine rack at the back of an office. Kim chose a red wine as they weren’t chilled. He went upstairs and joined Yvonne at the table.

To Kim’s great relief Yvonne smiled at him. ‘What wine did you get?’

He handed her the bottle that had been opened for him and sat down. There was no breeze and the sounds of the night drifted up to their balcony. It was lit with coloured party lights. They were in a corner of the balcony with a row of neglected pot plants screening off the rest of the balcony.

‘Nice,’ she said and filled their glasses.

They chatted and watched people arrive to join the good-humoured hubbub downstairs. The short man brought up their meals and then left them alone.

‘The whole family went on a boat cruise,’ Yvonne said, about her recent holiday to Zimbabwe.

‘Did you stay on the boat?’

‘Yes, for five days. The country is just beautiful. They’d just got some rain, and everything was in flower.’

‘Did you see the Victoria Falls?’

‘Not this trip, that’s in Zambia. I love Zimbabwe – it’s just all the political turmoil that ruins it.’

‘Any one hostile to you?’

Yvonne waved her fork in the air. ‘Not at all. Everyone we met was really friendly. The people on the boat treated us like royalty. They all hate Mugabe. He’s destroying everybody’s livelihood over there. I just hope the next election is fair, so they can get rid of him.’

Kim didn’t want to risk their conversation becoming too political. ‘How are your grandchildren?’

‘Just great – I see them here fairly often but only when they are getting treated so it was nice to see them relaxed with their families. I got to know them a lot better. All the cousins get on so well. I read to them lots and they told me all about their school.’

‘Children say the most wonderful things.’

‘Yes.’

‘Adam was playing one of his games with a battle cruiser he’d made out of Lego. It had guns everywhere. It could shoot baddies in all directions. He said it would kill all the baddies. There would be none left, just killers.’

Yvonne half smiled then looked down at her meal but didn’t eat any more of it. ‘You know, I don’t remember enjoying my children like you do.’

This frightened Kim. ‘You might just have forgotten.’

Kim saw Yvonne’s determined glint. ‘Maybe, there was a lot happening then. Both my husband and my brother were in the army fighting the resistance. Hardly saw them for seven years.’

‘That would make it hard.’

She flexed her fingers. ‘Yes, keeping the family together was hard. Jack wrote to me many times a week. He poured his heart out about losing mates, killing the enemy. He missed me and the boys and the life we had before. They were very draining times.’

Kim had stopped eating but he picked up his wine tentatively and took a sip. ‘It would have been hard to be separated all that time.’

‘Jack had to have his gun with him all the time – when he slept, when he showered, on the toilet, everywhere. They lost so many men in surprise attacks. I hated the enemy. but he had respect for them, even sympathy. One guy they’d killed had a wife and children like he did. He felt sorry for him, when there was no time for pity. Everyone was suffering, everyone.’ Her voice was hard. unlike her normal tolerant self.

Kim had been trying most of the day to discover Yvonne’s shadows, but now they were coming out he thought they’d had good reasons to stay hidden.

A train rattled down the tracks past the pub but didn’t disturb Yvonne’s intensity. ‘I was trained to fight as well. I was good with my Oozie. I trained with the kids. Jack the eldest would carry the ammunition, Richard would find cover and Kate would be on my back. We all had to be ready. Kate didn’t cry when I fired the Oozie.’

‘How old were they?’ Kim asked, thinking of his boys.

She sat up straight like a soldier. ‘We started training when Jack was seven and were still training when his father came home. We were always working with the local militia, finding new workers to replace those the fighting drove away, and begging the banks for more money.’

‘The seven years away must have been very stressful for him.’

Yvonne looked angry. ‘It was stressful for everyone.’

‘Yes, of course.’

Kim hoped it was the end of the story, but Yvonne went on. ‘When Jack came back, he spent a lot of time staring at nothing. He’d talk to the children, but they were brief interludes. Although he sometimes told me something about the farm, he had lost contact with it and he was rarely of any use. Like a few days after he’d got back, he went for a walk about the property. When he came back, he was quite animated. He told me the workers had left, so there must be guerrillas about.’

‘He wanted to load up the car and go to the assembly point, but the main roads were too dangerous. It would soon be dark and it would be safer to go on foot.’

The sound of laughter and applause came up from below.

‘He thought it would be too difficult with Kate. I had to yell at him that we can’t use the roads if there are guerrillas about.’

An hour later we set off. The boys walked in front, Kate on Jack’s back. They kept behind cover when they could but there were large expanses of open ground we had to scurry across. Jack ordered the boys about, but I told him to be quiet. They knew the route so well and where all the ambush points were. At the second place there was open ground, the boys signalled for us to stay low. I saw them now. There was a group of men coming towards us from the road. They weren’t in range.’

Kim saw how she was reliving the events in her eyes.

‘I told them to keep going while I stayed hidden, but Jack prepared his gun and stayed. ‘Go, you have Kate.’ Jack hesitated but moved off with the boys. When I looked back the men had got a lot closer and were beginning to fan out. They had seen Jack and the boys and were trying to cut them off. I kept under cover, until they were within range of my Oozie. I stood up, broadened my stance leaned forward and squeezed off rounds at targets like we’d practiced. I’d hit three of them before they had got to ground. I counted to four before they got up again. I hit two more, then turned to follow my family down the track. I hadn’t got far when I heard my son say, ‘It’s mum.’ My husband was defending a fall-back position.

This annoyed me. He didn’t need to do that. I told them to keep moving.

We still had a long way to go, but we had no further trouble. When we got to the assembly point Jack was even more distant than before.

He told me that I shouldn’t have shot those men.

‘We’re fighting to protect our property and our family.’

He looked at me as if he had no idea who I was. ‘What I was fighting for was to protect you from the war, not immerse you in it.’

Our militia got rid of the rest of the guerrillas and we could return to our farm. We’d been there a week when Jack came into the Kitchen holding a letter in his hand. ‘I’ve been offered a job in the city.’

I was stunned. He’d only just got back. It didn’t occur to me that he wanted me to go with him. When I understood he said, ‘You see, we can leave the farm and let the kids grow up in the city where it’s safe.’

I was not going to give up the farm after all I'd done to protect it.

He thought we'd have to give it up soon anyway. Said that our children would be better off if they got a chance at new lives in the city.

I told him I'm not leaving our home.

The children had come into the kitchen to see what we were yelling about. They all moved to my side and folded their arms.

He said he would go, and we could come when things get bad for us. It was one of the last times he saw his family.'

Yvonne fell silent and looked at Kim, aware of him again. Kim stared back. He didn't need to say that the shadows in Yvonne's life made Gavin seem harmless.

The sound of drunken cheering and laughter from the rifle club came up the stairs. Kim leaned forward and refilled Yvonne's wine glass.