

## **2004 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner**

### **George's Masterpiece by Harold Mally**

About a hundred miles out from the back of nowhere, along an unsealed dirt road, you might come across a place called Nan's Hole, a little oasis in the Australian desert. None of the residents remembered anymore who Nan might have been, or what the particular excavation that the town was named after signified. All the local historians knew was that it was first named a hundred and twenty five years ago. This was a milestone that Mayor Big Kenny Blair wanted the town to commemorate. Mayor Blair remembered the town's centenary. But it seems that he was the only one who did, because nothing had happened on that momentous occasion.

Twenty five years ago, Big Kenny was not involved in local politics, so now that he had something to do with it, he was determined that there would be no repeat of past mistakes. This year, the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the town's formation would be celebrated in a big way. He was not exactly sure how he would do it, but he was determined to put Nan's Hole on the map.

Old George Newman lived on the outskirts of town. Out the back of his rambling old house was an accumulation of odds and ends that had built up over many years. Some of the items were things that had stopped working, others were things that he had picked up, because, as George always said 'you never know when it might come in handy.' George's back yard was like a machine graveyard; there was the body of an old FJ, there were TV sets, washing machines, an old fridge, chairs, pipes, fencing material, fishing gear, bicycles, an assortment of tools, a collection of children's toys, various household items and other things, too numerous and obscure to mention. Even George didn't know exactly what was out there.

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After receiving a phone call one day, George's wife, Irene excitedly told him that their two grandchildren would be coming to stay for two weeks in the forthcoming school holidays. George said nothing at this news.

'What's wrong? You don't seem very happy about it.'

'It's not that. The only thing is they get bored here. They miss their friends and their computers and their movies. They get excited about the countryside for two or three days, but after that, they just get bored.'

'Well why don't you do something about it?' He looked at her quizzically. 'You've got that whole pile of things that you've been collecting for forty years. Why don't you do something with it that the kids would find interesting?'

George was silent for a while as he contemplated this. He took a sip of his tea and put down his mug. Then he nodded five times.

'I think you're right,' he said. 'I'm sure I could make something interesting out there.'

The following morning George was up at 6am, out in the back yard, pulling out different pieces of equipment, sawing wood, welding metal and bending plastic. When Irene asked him what he was making, his cryptic reply was 'a masterpiece.' From then on, that was what Irene called it: 'George's masterpiece.'

Big Kenny was worried. He had been involved in local politics for twelve years and, even though he had served his constituents well, he still had not left a lasting legacy. He wanted Nan's Hole's one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary to be the crowning glory of his reign. He wanted something big, so that in years to come people would look back and say; 'I remember that. It was when Big Kenny Blair put Nan's Hole on the map.' But he was running out of time. The anniversary was less

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than two months away. He needed something quick. He decided to visit a few of the locals, to see if he could get some ideas of what people wanted. He had not had any luck. It was just the same old stuff. We want better services, more kids' playgrounds, fix up the sewerage system, better street lighting. Boring, small town stuff. Nobody in this place had any vision.

He pulled up outside George's house. Irene heard his car and came out to meet him. After exchanging small talk, the mayor asked where George was. Irene answered that he was 'out the back, working on his masterpiece.'

Masterpiece? Kenny walked around to the back of the house and stopped. He stood there open mouthed. He stared at George's masterpiece. It must have been about nine feet tall and was a confused mass of metal, plastic and appliance parts. He could make out a TV screen in there as well as some old car parts, a bucket seat, a front loading washing machine and various other bits and pieces, with some kind of plastic tube meandering through the middle. Suddenly, George's head appeared out of an empty TV casing.

'G'day,' said George. Kenny looked at George. He was speechless, which is really an achievement, considering that he was a politician. 'You like it?'

'Like it? It's magnificent.' Big Kenny walked around George's creation studying its components. 'Junk sculpture. I know about this stuff, George. I've lived in Sydney you know. I've been to the Museum of Contemporary Art. I've seen this kind of thing before. George, this really is a masterpiece.' George climbed out of the masterpiece. He rubbed the stubble on his chin and nodded his head. 'All these everyday objects fused together. It's post-modern, isn't it? See? I told you I know about this stuff. Post-modern.'

George continued to silently rub his chin and nod his head. Kenny had an idea.

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'How much you want for it?' George looked at him for a few moments. After a prolonged silence, George slowly shook his head.

Kenny was not just a politician; he was also an astute businessman. He knew that he shouldn't appear too keen to purchase the artwork. If George wanted to play hard to get, that was okay, he could play it cool as well.

'Okay then George, have it your way. Let me know if you change your mind, though. You never know, I might be interested.'

Kenny left. George stood silently watching the mayor's car disappear in a cloud of red dust. Irene came out.

'Kenny gone?' George nodded. 'What'd he want?'

'Dunno really. Something about a post mortem.'

Mayor Blair was inspired at the next council meeting.

'In this, the hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary year of Nan's Hole, I have pledged to the citizens that we will make this a celebration to remember.'

'Get on with it, Kenny. What do you want to do?' Eddie Lorne knew when the mayor was in an oratorical mood. He didn't have time for a long speech tonight. One of his cows was about to give birth and he wanted to get the meeting over with so he could return to her.

'Did you know that we have an artist in our midst?' There were blank stares from all of the councillors. 'That's right,' he continued. 'I was over at George Newman's the other day and I was stunned at the work of art that he's producing in his back yard.'

'What? In the junk yard?'

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'I now know why he's been accumulating all that so-called junk for all these years. He's producing a post-modernist sculpture.'

The other councillors looked at each other. None of them was sure what a post-modernist sculpture was.

'That's all very interesting, Kenny, but what's this got to do with us? Get to the point. I've got a cow I have to get back to.'

'The point is Councillor Lorne that I want to purchase that sculpture and put it on display outside the Town Hall.'

Councillor Coles looked up from her knitting.

'I always thought a fountain would be nice in front of the Hall.'

'Yeah, a fountain's always nice,' Councillor Lowe agreed.

'You don't understand.' Mayor Blair was frustrated by the way the small town thinking of the other councillors always hampered his big picture vision. 'This is a local artist. He's producing a work of art.'

'Maybe we could ask George to make us fountain,' Councillor Lowe suggested.

'Let me explain this to you. What George is making out the back of his place is a sculpture. I'd go so far as to say it's a masterpiece. We have someone who is producing important art right here in our midst and we want to ask him to make a fountain? We'd look like a bunch of small town hicks.'

'But we are a bunch of small town hicks, Ken.'

'But that's where we can set ourselves apart. By having a cutting edge sculpture as the focal point of our town, a work of art produced by a local artist, we are sending a message to the rest of the world. We're saying that we are not just an

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ordinary town. We're cosmopolitan; we're sophisticated.' He paused momentarily while Councillor Lorne burped loudly.

'I'd rather get the sewerage fixed, Kenny.'

'Or a playground. Kids are roaming the streets with nothing to do.'

'Wait a minute. I'm not getting through to you.' Kenny looked at the other councillors as if they were children who were playing up in class. 'Once we have the work of art on display, we'll attract tourism.'

There was impatience in Eddie Lorne's voice. 'What tourists would want to come to Nan's Hole?'

'What tourists would have wanted to go to Tamworth until they built that big bloody guitar?'

'That's right,' said Councillor Coles, putting down her knitting. 'That big guitar's a real attraction. I've been to see it.'

'Thousands of tourists every year. It gets the country music crowd. So, we go for the sophisticated urban arty crowd. It'll work I tell you.'

'I believe we should give it a go,' said councillor Coles, picking up her knitting once again. 'I'd like us to attract a good class of tourist.'

The mayor was hopeful. He now had one supporter. It was time to play his trump card.

'Besides,' he said, lowering his voice marginally 'I'd hate to see the artwork go to Bird Flat.' He knew he'd struck a nerve. After a dubious refereeing decision, Bird Flat had beaten Nan's Hole in last season's footy Grand Final. Mention of Bird Flat still brought back the pain of the loss.

'They wouldn't try and steal that too, would they?'

'I wouldn't put anything past them.'

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'Alright, I'll go along with it.' Eddie stood up to leave. 'I don't have time to argue. But let me warn you, if this thing turns out to be just a pile of junk, I'll run against you for mayor and I reckon I'll win.' Councillor Lorne put on his jacket and went home to his cow.

Just to prove that he was not wrong about the art, Mayor Blair took Councillor Hattie Coles with him on his next visit to George Newman. As he drove her to George's place, he praised her knowledge of art and told her that he knew that she would be able to see the artistic value in something before others could. He talked about how he wanted to raise the cultural consciousness of the community in general and how her level of knowledge in this area would be a great asset to the community. By the time they arrived at George and Irene's place, Hattie was convinced that she was a major art expert.

Kenny and Hattie walked around to the back of the house. They stopped when they caught sight of the enormous structure. It had grown even bigger than when Kenny had last seen it. A lifetime of junk collecting had been fused into one massive sculpture. Kenny and Hattie stared at it.

'Magnificent, isn't it?'

'Well, it certainly is striking.'

'Can't you just visualise it in front of the Town Hall? It will give it class; it will show that we have culture.'

'Yes, it will.' She was starting to see it, too. 'It has depth. It has depth and...'

Before she could finish the thought, George's head appeared, about a metre from the ground, out of a large yellow plastic tube.

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'G'day,' he said slowly. 'Must be an election coming up. I've never seen you twice in a week before, Kenny.'

'Not an election, George. I was just showing Hattie your creation here.'

'It's magnificent, George. Truly magnificent.' Kenny nudged her. He didn't want to appear too keen; George might jack up the price.

George climbed out of the structure and stood with the other two, contemplating the masterpiece.

'Let me get right down to business, George. I want to purchase this masterpiece of yours. I want our entire community to benefit from it.' George rubbed his chin. 'I'm authorised by Council to offer you ten thousand dollars for it.'

George turned his head slowly. 'Ten thousand?'

Kenny turned to Hattie and whispered to her, 'Do you think I've insulted him?' She nodded.

'Look George, we know it's worth a lot more than that, but I'm appealing to your sense of civic pride. Council's been hard hit by the drought. I tell you what. I'll stretch it to twelve. How's that? Twelve thousand. For the sake of the community, George.'

George said nothing. He continued to stroke his chin with his right hand. Kenny and Hattie looked at each other, trying to discern what was going on in the mind of this artistic genius. Without warning, George put his hand out to Kenny. The mayor took it. They shook. It was a deal. In Nan's Hole a handshake was a legally binding contract.

After George shook hands with Kenny, he shook hands with Hattie and Hattie shook hands excitedly with Kenny. George asked what they intended to do with his structure.

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'We're going to put it on display at the front of the Town Hall.'

George nodded a few times while rubbing his chin.

'You'd better put some sand down underneath it.'

'Sand? Of course, sand. You're a genius, George. Sand'

As they drove back, Hattie and Kenny were both excited by their art purchase.

'Won't it be expensive to dig up all that concrete?' Hattie asked.

'Don't worry about the expense, Hat. Look how cheaply we got the sculpture.

See how I kept the price down?'

'Yes but I don't understand about the sand.'

'You have to think about the context, Hat; the context. Here we are, on the edge of the desert, surrounded by sand, bringing civilization to this country. The sand represents that desert, while all of the items fused together in the sculpture represent the accoutrements of modern society.'

'I see, yes.'

'On a meta-artistic level, it also represents the artist's own struggle to be creative in a hostile environment.'

'I didn't realise you knew so much about art, Kenny.'

'You forget I lived in Sydney for three months, Hat. Did I ever tell you about the Museum of Contemporary Art?'

There was great anticipation in Nan's Hole on the day of the town's one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary. Mayor Blair had managed to keep the entire sculpture project cloaked in secrecy. It was moved into town at night and covered by an enormous canvas until the official unveiling. Kenny had asked the national press, the State Premier, the Minister for Local Government and the Minister for the Arts.

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None of them turned up. If it had been the centenary, they explained, then they would have come, but a hundred and twenty-five years was not a celebration that they had time to recognise, considering their important schedules, the state of the world and so on. Kenny knew that his predecessors had blown it by not doing something like this at the centenary, so he would have to raise the town's profile himself.

He had t-shirts printed. They featured a picture of George's magnificent sculpture. Above the picture were the words 'Nan's Hole.' Beneath it, 'An Oasis of Culture.'

Of course Kenny gave a speech. Of course it was too long. Of course nobody listened to it. They were all waiting to see what was underneath the canvas. Eventually, Kenny finished his speech and with a great flourish, the canvas was pulled away to reveal George's magnificent fusion of everyday objects. It was huge. The crowd gasped. They didn't know what to make of it. They knew that it was supposed to be a work of art, some kind of sculpture. Most of them didn't understand art, but didn't want to appear to be uncultured, especially after Big Kenny had made such a big speech about what an important piece of work it was.

There was silence for two whole minutes as the populace took in the work of art, trying to understand it. What had Kenny said? It worked on aesthetic, intellectual and emotional levels all at once. Pretty highbrow stuff. They all tried to relate to it on one of those levels. They were having trouble doing so, but nobody wanted to appear to be so unsophisticated as to actually say so. At last a voice from the back of the assembled populace shattered the silence. 'It's just a pile of junk.' At that point, the entire crowd erupted with laughter.

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Kenny Blair was despairing at the lack of culture that his fellow citizens were displaying. Here he was, trying to instil a bit of a civilising influence into their lives and they were laughing. This could ruin his career.

Eddie Lorne rushed up to him, face red, veins visibly protruding from his temples. He held up one of the t-shirts.

'Is this some kind of joke? "An oasis of junk" is what it should say. I warned you, Kenny. You're through as mayor. You've made this town a laughing-stock.'

Just then they heard a young girl's voice saying, 'I'm the king of the castle.' They looked up. The girl was at the top of the structure.

'Be careful,' came a cautionary maternal voice.

Kenny wanted to get the girl down from the sculpture. It was bad enough that people were laughing at it. Children clambering all over it was the last straw.

The girl sat on what was once a bucket seat from an old Datsun 200B. The bucket seat suddenly zoomed ground wards. There was a collective gasp from the crowd, until the seat took off and ended up at the top of the structure at the other side. The girl laughed uproariously. She bounced on the seat and made the journey down and then up to the other side. Looking closely, you could see that the chair was on some kind of rail, with little wheels and pulleys.

Suddenly, there was a scream. Kenny looked up in time to see a pair of legs disappear into the structure. A few moments later, another young girl was propelled out of the large yellow tube near the bottom of the structure, to be caught by a large prawning net. She climbed out of the net, laughing joyously.

Suddenly, the entire structure was alive with the town's children. Cries of 'my turn, my turn, give me a go,' permeated the atmosphere. It seemed that it was easy to climb onto the structure from the back. Almost as if it had been designed for it.

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Children were taking turns sliding through the plastic pipe and riding the bucket seat on rails. A boy found that if he pedalled the bicycle, it made a propeller twirl. Another discovered a rope that you could grab onto at the top of the structure and ride down to the sand. The sound of children laughing dominated everything else.

Big Kenny stood with his mouth wide open. Eddie Lorne grabbed his hand and shook it.

'Who would have thought it? Kenny, it's great. Combining a work of art with an adventure playground for the kids. I still don't understand the art bit, but I've never seen my kids having so much fun. I didn't realise. As far as I'm concerned mate, you've got my support for as long as you want the job.'

The one hundred and twenty fifth anniversary celebration was a resounding success. Every kid in town talked their parents into buying them a t-shirt and every parent thanked Mayor Blair for the new playground. Big Kenny stood there shaking hands with his constituents, staring at the structure with his mouth wide open, unable to say anything. The residents assumed that he was overcome with emotion at seeing how much pleasure he had given to the town's children.

Irene in a new dress and George in a new suit, walked to their car to return home after the big day.

'See Irene, didn't I tell you one day all that stuff would come in handy?'

'You did George. You were right. Can you just explain one thing to me, though?'

'What's that, Irene?'

'What's this post-mortem art that Kenny kept talking about?'

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