

October 2008 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

Bang to Rights by Maris Morton

By the time I found my way to the last place on the agent's list I was getting desperate. There'd been nothing so far that I could afford or, if I could afford it, that we could possibly live in.

The idea of moving to a country town that I'd never even driven through was alarming enough without the accommodation problem. Small towns were supposed to be friendly places, I told myself, and the kids would probably like it. But it wasn't going to be easy.

There was only a week till school started, so I had to be fixed by then. If I hadn't needed to start earning I'd have hung on and waited for a vacancy nearer the city, but the sooner I started work, the better. Simon had said he'd be sending money for the kids, but I wasn't holding my breath. I knew about Simon's promises.

The houses in this part of town were all old fibro ones, probably a job lot built for returned servicemen after WW2, but at least they were on full quarter-acre blocks. The best of them had vegie gardens, chooks and a few fruit trees at the back. The worst ones had yards full of dry grass and weeds, not quite hiding the rusting carcasses of cars.

The house I was looking at was on a corner with a lane running along behind it, which was a plus because the country friendliness that had been such an attractive prospect when I lived in the city had become a bit daunting. In this house there'd be only one lot of neighbours to worry about. So, brushing aside the litter of dead leaves and spider webs cluttering the front porch, I twisted the key in the front door and pushed it open, half-expecting to be greeted by some foul odour.

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Inside, the house wasn't as squalid as I'd feared. Just very shabby. When I looked more closely I realised that the worn look was because everything had been scrubbed to within an inch of its life, the paintwork around the door handles and light switches rubbed back to bare wood.

I made another circuit, visualising our furniture in the rooms: yes, it could work. Anna and Sam were young enough to share the second bedroom, leaving the louvred sleepout as a playroom. The yard was big enough for them to run about, with a rusty corrugated-iron fence.

It was only after the move was over - and what a drama that was! - that I realised that the water heater was a wood-burning one. I'd seen the wood stove in the kitchen, but there was an electric range next to it so I hadn't taken much notice. After the first dismay wore off my mind slowly filled with childhood memories of granny's house, the scent of woodsmoke, of making toast on a long fork held over the glowing embers. How cosy it would be on winter evenings to light the fire and sit with Sam and Anna in its warmth while they had their meal. Afterwards I'd read to them for a while before tucking them up in their beds.

The teaching came back pretty easily, the kids adjusted happily to daycare, and life started to look more cheerful as the difficult years with Simon began to fade. The only neighbour turned out to be an ancient-looking woman who introduced herself as Sheila. I often saw her out in her garden, raking or hoeing or tying things up. There was no sign of any Mr Sheila so I inferred that Sheila was a widow, living alone in house that looked like the twin of mine. Although Sheila was friendly and kept on offering me vegetables out of her garden, I was nervous about making friends with an old woman who flaunted

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her wrinkled brown legs and arms in skimpy shorts and singlets. The Lord knew what she was using to fertilize the rows of giant cabbages that paraded across her yard! It seemed sensible to keep the woman at arm's length till I was sure she was no threat to the kids.

For the duration of Term One the supply of firewood for the hot water wasn't a problem, which was just as well with all the other adjustments we had to make. The old people who'd lived in the house had left the remnants of their woodheap, and during the warm weather the water heater did its job well enough with only a handful of chips. But by May, when the winter rain started and the temperature dropped, thoughts of those cosy winter evenings around the glowing wood stove became deeply attractive. If this was going to happen I'd be needing more wood.

With both the kids in daycare there wasn't any money to spare and the Easter holidays in the city had eaten up everything I'd saved, so I didn't go straight to the phone and order a couple of tonnes of firewood. Instead, I asked Sheila, busy hoeing carrots.

'You want to get hold of a load of mallee roots,' Sheila said, dropping the hoe. She was a small woman and we had to stand up tall to talk to each other over the fence.

'What are they?' I'd never heard of such things.

Sheila looked surprised at my ignorance. 'The best firewood,' she said. 'They burn hot and clean, and they last. That's what you want to get hold of. Mallee roots. Little fellas, if you can get 'em.'

Still mystified, I asked around at school, too, which only confirmed Sheila's advice.

'What you want is a load of mallee roots,' Marshall, the Year 3 teacher, told me.

'Someone in your class who lives on a farm might bring you a load. Ask the kids.'

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So I did, and the next weekend a ute piled high with gnarled grey lumps was backed through the gate into the yard and a couple of men in scruffy work gear tossed the roots off.

After they'd driven away I surveyed the little mountain with the pride of a successful negotiator. The wood was a weathered silvery grey, each piece covered with lumps and spikes like some kind of mediaeval weapon, crusted with clay and gravel. When I had time, I'd move the heap up closer to the house so it wouldn't be so far to fetch them on a wet night. I hoped there'd be enough small ones to get us through the winter, because I didn't own an axe, and didn't have the faintest idea how to use one. Most of the men in my grandpa's generation had a finger or three missing, and I imagined terrifying scenes of severed feet and spurting blood...

With the shorter autumn days there was less time after school for jobs like moving the mallee roots, but I did make a start on it, and sometimes Sam and Anna helped. I worried about snakes, though: someone told me they liked to hide in woodheaps. If Anna saw one she'd probably want to bring it inside to sleep in her bed.

By the time the winter set in properly the heap was looking distinctly smaller, and it was easier to notice the big roots, the ones I'd put aside because they'd never go into the water heater or stove without the vigorous application of the axe I didn't own. There was one monster in particular that reminded me of the picture of a stegosaurus in Sam's dinosaur book, and every time Sam went near the heap he said it growled at him. I wondered what to do. Where did you buy axes? Could you slaughter a stegosaurus with an axe?

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I was picking cautiously through the heap looking for small roots when I heard Sheila's voice over the fence.

'Going down pretty quick, eh? Those kids of yours must be swimming in hot water.' She cackled at her joke.

I stood back and surveyed the heap. It was certainly getting smaller, and at this rate it didn't look like lasting till the warm weather came again. I'd be embarrassed to have to ask the kids at school for another load so soon and money was still too tight to carelessly phone a wood merchant, assuming there was such a thing in the town. But what could I do? I managed a smile for Sheila: she meant well. 'No, I don't understand it,' I said.

Sheila nodded, her lined face serious. 'You reckon some bugger's nickin' 'em?'

'What? You mean ...?'

'As in stealing. Has been known.' Sheila jerked her head to indicate the houses on the other side of hers. 'We useter lose ours alla time, till my Arthur got jack of it and we went electric. That fixed it.' She stared across my yard at the open gate. 'Making it easy for the buggers, aren't you.'

I looked over at the wire gate. One of the hinges had something wrong with it and I could barely move it, and anyway, with it open I could drive the car in and out without the bother of stopping. It hadn't occurred to me that anyone passing could just walk in ... 'Maybe I ought to get it fixed ... ?'

But somehow the gate stayed open.

Then one day the stegosaurus root had gone. I was so amazed, and so full of righteous indignation, that I called Sheila over right away.

'Hey, you were right, Sheila. Someone's pinched the stegosaurus!'

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Sheila looked up and shook her ragged head, parked her fork and clumped in her wellies over to the fence to peer into my yard. ‘The what?’ So I explained about the big mallee root that reminded Sam of a stegosaurus. ‘Told you. It’ll be them buggers along the lane.’ She jerked her head in that direction and frowned. ‘Always were useless bludgers. You seen their yard? Nothing but car wrecks. Boys work out of town and come back to mum to get their washing done. Always pissed on a weekend. Wonder you don’t hear ’em. Shocking language.’ She nodded piously.

‘Should I go to the police?’

Sheila wrinkled her eyes and stared at me. ‘Could, if you like,’ she said slowly; then after due consideration, added: ‘Wouldn’t bother, meself.’

But I went, anyway, calling in at the little police station in the main street on the way home after school. A tired-looking sergeant came to see what I wanted, and after I’d explained the problem he gave a slow, sad smile and said: ‘At it again, are they? Have to catch them in the act, you know, and we haven’t got the manpower to stake out your place. Not on a weekend.’ He paused to take a wheezy breath. ‘Not for a few mallee roots.’ He gave a look that implied he might be interested if I’d been raped or murdered.

‘Thanks a lot.’

As I drove home my anger mounted. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt such rage. When you have kids you have to keep things under control. But now, with these ... these *fucking* wood thieves ... I said the word again, savouring the incorrectness of it.

By the time I’d collected Sam and Anna and put all the shopping away the rage was still simmering, and I nursed it, carefully hiding it from Sam and Anna, but nurturing it just the same. Being so angry was curiously energising. When I went to bed that night I

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lay awake for ages rehearsing all the hideous tortures I'd inflict on the *fucking* thieves, visualising them as ape-like creatures who'd be helpless in the face of my fury.

Next morning I made a point of going out early to be sure of catching Sheila before I headed to work. Since winter had arrived Sheila had taken to wearing a crocheted beanie, striped in orange and red, and a felted wool sweater. 'Sheila!' I called. Sheila brushed the dirt from her bare knees and limped over to the fence.

'Any more nicked?' she asked, hopefully. I hadn't even looked this morning. It didn't matter. I knew without the shadow of doubt that the stegosaurus had been stolen, and that was enough.

'I went and saw the police. You were quite right. They didn't want to know.'

'Told you.'

'So what happens now?' I was confident that Sheila would know a way to solve the problem.

Sheila stood back from the fence and looked around, slowly, as if she was making up her mind about something. 'There's one thing you can try,' she said, her tone suddenly serious. 'My Arthur told me about it once and I've always wanted to give it a go. He reckoned it was sure-fire.' I waited eagerly, but Sheila shook her head. 'Better you don't know,' she said, mysteriously, 'It might not be ... quite legal.' Then, after a few more seconds of deep thought, she added: 'I've still got all Arthur's tools and stuff so I could prob'ly manage it. What I need is for you to sort out a few of the big roots and toss 'em over here to me. Can you do that?'

'What, now?'

'Now would be good.'

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So I went over to the sadly-depleted woodheap and pulled out the big gnarled roots that I'd been hoping would by some miracle divide themselves into manageable pieces, humped them one by one over to the fence, hoisted them up and dropped them on Sheila's side. A couple of them bounced, and bits broke off with the impact. When there were six of them lying there Sheila nodded. 'Should do. I'll drop 'em back over when I've done and you tuck 'em in among the others, okay? On the side nearest the gate, mind.'

I stared at her, but her weathered face wasn't giving anything away. I remembered the anger: whatever Sheila was planning mightn't be legal, but neither was nicking my firewood. 'Okay, Sheila. I'll do that. Thanks.' I wasn't sure what I was thanking her for but it seemed like the right thing.

It wasn't until I went to collect wood for the evening's fire that I remembered. The six big roots were lying over near the fence where Sheila had dropped them, and I sighed as I lugged them back to what was left of the heap. They were heavy, with a lot of mud dried on them, and when I'd finished my hands were filthy. I remembered Sheila had said to put them on the side nearest the gate and did as I'd been told, tucking them artistically in among their fellows so that you'd hardly know there'd been any disturbance. Then I went inside and got on with the evening's chores and thought no more about it.

During the rest of the week nothing interesting happened. Anna developed a chesty cold and my hands were full coping with that on top of everything else. I didn't think to check the woodheap; while there were still enough small roots for our immediate needs the wood situation had low priority.

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Anna's cold hung on and by the weekend she was still in bed, flushed and miserable. I made soothing lemon drinks for her and a big pot of pumpkin soup laced with plenty of garlic and ginger, and before I tucked her up for the night rubbed the little girl's chest with plenty of Vicks, hoping both of us would get a good night's sleep.

In the middle of the night all hell broke loose! Screams echoed through the freezing night. There was horrendous banging and shouting, then slammed doors and cars revving and squealing tyres, and I thought to myself that Sheila had been quite right about the feral neighbours: this uproar was outrageous. When at last the noise subsided I pulled the covers up around my ears and went back to sleep. Anna had slept through it all, and so, thankfully, had Sam.

On Sunday morning Anna's cold was better and Sam showed no signs of having caught it, which was a blessing because he's a terrible whinger when he's sick, and once breakfast was done with and the washing machine at its dutiful churning, I went out into the yard. It was a sunny morning, a touch of frost still on the ground, and I thought to myself that if it was still fine this afternoon I might wash the car.

Sheila called out over the fence. 'You hear that gerfuffle last night?'

I went over to her. 'Yes, it woke me up. What was that all about?' Sheila was grinning all over her weathered old face, which surprised me because I'd expected her to be furious.

'Can't say too much,' she chuckled, tapping the side of her nose with a grimy finger. 'Wouldn't do to incriminate meself.'

I had no idea what she was on about. 'Incriminate?'

'Had a look at your woodheap lately?' Sheila asked, with seeming irrelevance.

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I shook my head. I hate it when people play at being mysterious. ‘No. Why?’

‘Go and have a gander,’ Sheila urged.

I decided I might as well humour her and wandered over to the heap. It looked just as usual. I circled around to the far side. Was it ... ? I bent down for a closer look. It was! The big roots that had travelled over the fence to Sheila’s place and back were missing. I looked more carefully: four of them were missing, two still where I’d tucked them back into the heap. I looked over to where I could see the top of Sheila’s striped beanie over the fence. ‘Four more have gone!’ I shouted.

Sheila was grinning so widely that her eyes had all but disappeared in their nest of wrinkles. ‘Thought so.’ She went into a gale of wheezy laughter.

I was getting impatient. ‘Tell me, Sheila. What’s going on?’

‘Well, you won’t be losing any more of y’r mallee roots,’ Sheila gasped. ‘Arthur was right. It never fails.’

‘What never fails?’ I demanded.

Sheila sighed and used her sleeve to wipe the tears of laughter from her cheeks. ‘I better tell you,’ she said, serious now. ‘Two of them are still here, you say? You don’t want to go putting them on the fire, my girl.’

I resisted the urge to stamp my foot. ‘Why not?’

‘Well, you heard what happened last night, didn’t you. All that banging ... ?’

‘And shouting. Yes, I heard ... But what ... ?’

‘That was yer mallee roots going off,’ Sheila said, breaking once more into chuckles of delight.

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‘Going off?’ I imagined fireworks, explosions ... come to think of it, that banging *had* sounded a bit like explosions.

Sheila was nodding. ‘Going off. As in 12-gauge. Not as in being nicked, for a change.’

I was no wiser. ‘What are you talking about, Sheila?’

At last Sheila took pity on me. ‘Look,’ she said, taking a step back from the fence. ‘Best I come over, then I can show yer.’

I wasn’t sure I wanted Sheila in my yard, but curiosity got the better of me. ‘Okay.’ While I waited for Sheila to come around by the street I inspected the woodheap. Apart from the four missing mallee roots everything seemed the same as usual. The fresh green winter grass was growing up between the roots and I saw a little lizard dash into a crevice.

Next thing Sheila’s squatting down beside me, reaching in and dragging one of the big roots out of the heap, rotating it about on the ground with a grimy hand. In a minute she found what she’d been looking for and picked up a twig to scratch at one of the clods of mud plastering the wood. Something glinted in the sunlight.

‘There y’are ... See?’

I could see but was a long way from understanding. Sheila flicked the shiny thing with a muddy thumbnail. ‘See? Twelve-gauge cartridge. Made a hole with Arthur’s old brace and bit, just the right size. Bit of mud over and no-one’d be any the wiser.’

Now I could see more of the muddy reddish cylinder with its brass end. I’d never seen a cartridge before except in the laser printer and photocopier at work and had no

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idea what this other sort did, except for being vaguely connected with firearms. ‘What ...?’

Sheila gave me a look, and began to explain. ‘Bung a coupla these in y’r mallee root and throw it on the fire and wait till it’s well alight and *BOOM!*’ She threw her arms out wide to give me the idea. ‘Has to be an open fire for best results, and I know those bloody ferals’ve got one in their place. Only light it cold nights, come and get a bit of wood wherever they can find it.’

I was beginning to understand. ‘So it *was* explosions I heard ...’

Sheila cackled. ‘Too bloody right it was. There were three cartridges in that big one. Bet it made them buggers jump!’

‘But mightn’t someone have been hurt?’

Sheila was unsympathetic. ‘Serves them bloody right. Only bird shot anyway.’ She grinned. ‘Wouldn’t kill anyone.’

‘Still,’ I wasn’t convinced.

‘Still you won’t be losing any more of them mallee roots, will you,’ Sheila said sternly. ‘Think about that.’

I remembered my fantasies of torture and murder. ‘Yes, you’re right. They brought it on themselves, didn’t they. I had no idea ...’

‘City girl,’ Sheila said, not unkindly.

I flashed her a grin. ‘I’m learning.’

Sheila reached across and patted my knee with her grimy paw. ‘Tell you what, I’ll bring the axe over and whack up the rest of those biggies for you, okay?’

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I looked at her, astonished. Though she was small, Sheila looked wiry and since she'd offered, I had to believe she could do it. 'That would be marvellous, Sheila. Thank you so much.'

'And I'll fetch you a cabbage. Just remember not to use those other two biggies, right? Put 'em somewhere you won't get 'em mixed up.' She grinned. 'You never know when you might be needing 'em again.'

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