

## October 2009 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

### **The Adventure Club** by Jessie Scott

“Cup of tea, Luvvie?”

The voice woke Charlie with a start from his doze.

“I am not your ‘luvvie’ I am Mr Garland or Charlie, and no, I don’t want yet another cup of tea. I am quite capable of making my own when I want it.”

“My, aren’t we grumpy today, Luvvie?”

Charlie heaved himself out of his chair, tucked his newspaper under his arm and hobbled out of the communal TV room. He wished he could have marched or stamped out. Damn his arthritis.

“No dignity, there’s just no dignity any more. Aged Care Facility they call this. Nice euphemism for dumping ground for unwanted rellies. I’m fed up with being treated like a two year old. I might be eighty-two, but there’s nothing wrong my brain although if something doesn’t change around here, there soon will be.”

“What are you muttering about, Charlie?” Harry called out from the room next door.

Charlie went in and sat on Harry’s bed.

“I’m going round the bend in here. Just look around you, Harry, everyone is either away in la-la land or soon will be with the boredom of it all.”

“It’s not so bad, Charlie. There’s another sing-along tomorrow morning and the bus is taking us on Thursday to the shopping centre with fish and chips to follow.” Harry knew how much Charlie hated both sing-alongs and mooching around the shopping centre.

“Yeah, thanks for cheering me up, Harry. You know, I reckon we can do something about it.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you’re still pretty well with it. You’re like me, only slowed down by Old Arthur and there’s a few more blokes in the same boat.”

“Some of the gals too, Charlie.”

“Yeah, well I guess so. I was thinkin’, maybe we could form an adventure club.”

“What? You’re kidding! Climbing the rock wall in the water feature, bungee jumping off the roof or scuba diving in the fish pond?”

“No, more fun than that. Let’s make a list of all those who might be in for a bit of a laugh. First consideration, everyone has to have a gopher or be able to double-dink with someone else.”

An hour later, the men had drawn up a list of likely club members.

“So how are we going to approach everybody?”

“I’ll type up an invitation on my laptop for them to meet in my room, say the day after tomorrow and we’ll discuss what I’ve planned.” Charlie was beginning to feel better; his blue eyes had regained some of their sparkle. He had always been a good organiser and missed the challenge since he retired.

“The staff will wonder what we are up to.”

“We’ll get everyone to bring a book and say we are starting a book club and don’t want to disturb the others in the common room.”

\* \* \*

Two days later, a stream of residents, all carrying books, found their way to Charlie's room. Some of the staff exchanged smiles. Wasn't it nice some of the old people were doing something to entertain themselves?

It was a tight squeeze for the ten who had answered Charlie's invitation. Once they shut the door, a window had to be opened. Bert looked like he was going to have a heart attack from the lack of air.

"Right," Charlie brought the meeting to order, "I 'spect you're all wondering what I have in mind." He gave a brief outline of his idea for an adventure club. Raised eyebrows and snorts of derision greeted this.

"Okay, okay. Here's what I planned, anybody who doesn't want to be in it, better leave now, but button your lips.

"Life is pretty boring in here, and I figured those of us with a gopher and a bit of gumption could break out one night and have a bit of fun. Given the pap they feed us in here, I reckon our first stop could be the hamburger and pizza place down the road. Anybody game?"

"Yeah," Andy said, "but how are we gonna get out of here without getting caught?"

There were mutters of agreement from the others.

"Well maybe someone could be deputed to cause a distraction. If Mike is on duty that night, you know how he would rather sit in his office watching the football than do his rounds. I figured someone could watch him and if he looked like investigating any noises, waylay him with some longwinded tale or even sabotage the telly in the common room."

“Well, I’d be happy to cause the distraction,” Bert said. “I don’t think my heart could take the excitement of breaking out.”

“Good man! Okay, who’s in?”

“I’ve got a vacant seat on my gopher since Flora passed on,” Sam said, wiping a tear from his eye.

Dora, who was sitting next to him, laid a manicured hand on his arm, fluttered her eyelashes and said softly, “Why Sam, since I don’t have a gopher, I’d be happy to share with you.”

Sam didn’t look quite so happy, but was too polite to say otherwise.

When the details had been worked out, Harry asked, “Any questions?”

“What are we going to call ourselves? And do we get to wear a tee-shirt? Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“Any ideas for a name? Coffin Cheaters would have been good, but it’s been taken I believe.”

A few suggestions were tossed about, but were rejected as too tame, already taken or not appropriate.

“How about ‘Coughin’ Angels’ spelt with a ‘g-h’,” Harry suggested.

“Okay. Now as for the tee-shirts, it’s too late to order any and too expensive. Does everyone have, or can borrow, a plain one? Great, get busy with the marker pens we use to label our things for the laundry. Bert, you have a nice hand of writing. Maybe you could do the graphics, as they say. Excellent. Now remember this is hush-hush. Loose lips sink ships! Everyone meet in uniform, at nineteen hundred hours at the rear exit, mounted and ready to roll.”

There was a knock at the door and a nurse peeped in.

Charlie said, “So Esmé, you think Mr Darcy would prove to be a terrible husband and Miss Bennett would have been better off without him. Why would that be so?”

The nurse smiled and quietly shut the door.

\* \* \*

On the night of the great adventure, Bert hid in the linen cupboard opposite the office where Mike sat, true to form, watching football. A loud noise and a stifled giggle came from the far end of the corridor. Mike stirred and looked like getting out of his chair to investigate. Bert’s heart beat faster, then slowed when Mike shook his head and sat down again. The Eagles put another one through the posts. There was a commercial break and replay. Mike stood up again, headed to the door and eased his back. Bert got ready to move. No, Mike went back towards the coffee machine. Much more of this and I won’t need to create a diversion, Bert thought as his heart banged loudly in his ears. Relax Buddy.

Charlie waved the last gopher through the exit gate and right into Sycamore Street. They were out, so far so good.

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At the top of the street, Constables Lacey and Smart sat drinking coffee in a police car. Hamburger wrappers littered the floor and the cabin smelled of onions. Lacey, in the driver’s seat waved, cup in hand, at the cavalcade of gophers emerging from ‘Honeysuckle Haven’ and said, “Oi, what’s goin’ on there, then?”

Smart stretched, yawned and said, “Having a bit of a night out I expect, poor

sods. Hey look at them go down the hill. Speeding a bit, aren't they? Shouldn't we get after them?"

"What, put on the siren and flashing light? Just let's make sure they make it to the bottom alright then we'd better do our rounds."

\* \* \*

Charlie had brought up the rear to keep an eye on things. Everything was going like clockwork and the group gathered at *Pinocchio's*. Dora was clutching Sam's arm and squealing with delight, "Wasn't that thrilling?" Even Esmé had a little colour in her cheeks and Horrie's comb-over was standing to attention above his cherubic grin.

"Okay, let's park. There's a side entrance."

Tumbling through the door like a bunch of kids on their first picnic, they made their way to the counter to order. Sam and Harry slapped their hands on their ample stomachs in anticipation and Dora and Esmé gushed over the aromas emanating from the kitchen.

"Bit different to Stalag 17, eh girls?" Sam winked.

They sat at a table for eight, laughing and chatting and sharing each other's food. Some found things and acquaintances in common.

Halfway through the meal, they heard the deep-throated roar of motorcycles arriving. The staff looked apprehensively at each other and removed glass bottles from the counter.

Minutes later, the doors swung open and a group of black clad, bearded and tattooed bikies entered. The lights glinted on stainless steel studs, earrings and chains. The leader, standing six foot five, built like a silo and with arms akimbo, said, "Whose

are those gophers out there in the car park? We're the Hell's Cheaters and those are our parking spots."

Esmé and Dora clutched each other and the men examined their leftovers as though looking for hidden treasure.

Charlie creaked to his feet, bared his tee-shirted chest with its handwritten logo and said, "And we are the Coughin' Angels so what are you going to do about it?"

The leading bikie roared laughing and slapped Charlie on the back, nearly knocking him over.

"Come on guys, let's order then sit down with our new rivals. I wanna hear all about them. Can we get you summat? Tea, coffee, eh?"

Dora was looking at his broad shoulders and his tight jeans. "I'll have a coffee," she said and as he turned to the counter. "My, look at those thighs!"

After they had ordered, the leader said, "Me name's Hagar, this on me right is Spike, that's Attila, that's Axel, on the other side is Slasher and on the end is Nigel."

"Nigel?" the Coughin' Angels chorused.

Nigel looked shamefaced and said, "Yeah, well, I'm only on probation yet and haven't got me proper name, like."

The bikies moved a couple of tables and some chairs to join the Angels and when their meals were delivered to the table, tucked into their food with enthusiasm.

"So," Hagar waved his knife and fork in the air and asked through a mouthful of steak and gravy, "what's with you guys?"

Charlie told their story. Hagar belched loudly, picked his teeth and said, "Geez mate, no wonder ya broke out. I think maybe we could give you all a little bit of fun."

There were rumbles and belches around the table in agreement.

“Would anybody like a ride on a Harley?”

Dora, her hands pressed together as if in prayer, said, “Oh, could I please?”

“Come on, Babe. Nige, give us your helmet for the lady.”

They all tramped out to see her go astride the monster bike, arms tightly around Hagar’s waist.

“How fast do them gopher things go?” Spike asked. He picked at his teeth thoughtfully.

“Fast enough,” Charlie said, “although not as fast as yours of course,” looking at the gleaming black beasts lined up alongside their modest machines. “Why?”

“Just a thought. Are you gambling folks?”

“Some of us are. Mostly Melbourne Cup tipsters though. You’re not going to race against us are you? That wouldn’t be fair, would it?”

A thunderous rumble resonated off the walls of the surrounding buildings. Hagar was back with Dora. He parked his bike, unfastened Dora’s clutching arms and called Spike over to help her dismount. Her legs were fixed in a crouching position and she was squealing.

Esmé rushed to her side. “What’s wrong, Dora? What has he done to you? Has he had his evil way?”

“Oh, don’t be so silly, Esmé. I’ve got cramp and can’t straighten my legs and what’s more, I have just had the greatest experience. You should try it. It was woo-oo-eee,” she squealed again.

Hagar said, “Spike here’s got an idea and since us guys are wondering how fast

these toy machines of yours can go, we're wonderin' if youse'd be interested in havin' a race. No, not against our machines, fair go Harry, but between yourselves. I bet you've no idea how fast they *can* go. And speakin' of bets, let's have a little bit on the side. The car park is empty besides us. Who's up for it?"

Andy put his hand up. He'd always been a petrol-head and missed the racing. Horrie followed and after a bit of persuasion, Charlie and Harry did likewise. Sam shook his head. His double seater would be off balance and he was not prepared to take Dora despite her pleadings.

Since she wasn't allowed to take part, Dora nudged Esmé. "Go on, Es, live a little. Let your coiffure down and give it a go. Don't let the boys have it their own way."

"There was a time when I...well, no matter. Perhaps...yes, okay."

"Onya Es," the bikers chorused.

"I'll have a tenner on 'er," Nigel slapped a note into Spike's hand.

"Okay, line up here and it's straight to the end, around the bollards and back here twice. You'd better wear our helmets. We don't want no nasty accidents. Just one thing we need numbers. Attila, you still got that luminous spray paint? Good, line 'em up and spray numbers on their backs. Right, somebody got a flag?"

Dora handed him her blue silk scarf.

"You keep it, love. Since you can't be in it you can flag the start."

\* \* \*

It was a quiet night elsewhere in the town and Lacey and Smart were having trouble staying awake. The disembodied voice booming out of the radio made them

both jump.

“Base to Car 2, there has been a report of seven missing residents from Stalag...er...Honeysuckle Haven. They may be riding gophers. Keep an eye out for them. There’s also a report of a disturbance at *Pinocchio’s* car park. Look’s like Hell’s Cheaters are at it again.”

“Message received. Now’s your chance to put on the flashing light and siren. We’ll attend to the bikies first and let the oldies have a bit more freedom.”

Smart set off the siren. Lacey, secretly enjoyed putting his foot down, and pushed the accelerator hard. It wasn’t often he got the chance.

Screeching to a halt outside *Pinocchio’s*, they tumbled out of the car, batons at the ready. As they reached the car park, they both stopped open mouthed. Five gophers were burning rubber around some bollards at the end of the park. The bikies and a couple of old folks were screaming their heads off and jumping up and down. Blue smoke filled the air and one of the bollards went flying as a gopher, steered by a slight figure, took the corner too tightly, teetered dangerously on one side, righted itself and flew down the straight to the finishing line.

The others reached the line and all crowded around the winner who appeared to be unable to stand. Two bikies picked her up and carried her shoulder high, while money was changing hands.

“Looks like we’ve solved both problems at once.”

“Righto, lads,” Lacey addressed Hagar, “what’s going on? What are you doing to these nice old people?”

“Oh please, Officer, these nice young men have been giving us such a lovely

time tonight. It has been such fun.”

“Well apart from complaints from the neighbours about a disturbance of the peace, i.e., hooning in the car park, we have reason to believe, having witnessed the money changing hands, that illegal gambling has taken place and you, Madam and your friends have been reported missing from your care facility.”

“Hagar and his friends have had nothing to do with our breakout tonight,” Charlie intervened. “It was my idea to have a bit of fun before we all died of boredom. As for the money changing hands, we were only paying them back for our meal.”

Lacey raised an eyebrow in Hagar’s direction.

“You heard the man, officer.”

“Okay, now you escapees, some of your gophers don’t have lights. I could charge you with being out after dark without them, but let’s see if we can’t do it another way. Hagar, would you and your men help us to escort these ladies and gentlemen back to Honeysuckle Haven? We’ll drive ahead and if you would line up in the rear, I think we can get them home in style with nothing further said about any little misdemeanours.”

The bikies all growled their agreement and mounted their motor cycles ready to fall in behind the procession. Traffic halted, as first the police car with flashing lights crawled up the incline of Sycamore Street followed by a line of six gophers, then six monstrous motor bikes burping and booming brought up the rear.

The entire cavalcade entered the circular driveway of Honeysuckle Haven arriving at the front door with a flourish.

The front doors flew open and a formidable figure marched down the steps.

Constable Smart was about to introduce himself to her, but she brushed past him and addressed the runaways.

“You will each be in my office tomorrow morning at ten. Now inside, all of you.”

Smart elbowed Lacey and muttered, “What do you reckon, a hundred lines each or a flogging on the triangle?”

“Thankyou Officers,” the woman said then turned and looked the bikies over. “I won’t even ask about you. Goodnight.”

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Several mornings later, while the staff served breakfast, one said to the other, “Shirl, have you noticed how that group that broke out the other night are sitting together at the table.”

“Yeah, I did notice and what’s more, don’t they look cheerful crunching on their cornflakes. Even Sam has a sparkle in his eyes again as he looks at Dora. And what about Esmé? Now there’s a turn up for the books. She and Horrie are holding hands under the table.”

Charlie looked at his new friends and smiled to himself. He was looking forward to the game of pool tonight with Andy and Harry. He hoped they’d be a match for Hagar and his mates. They had to defend the name of Honeysuckle Haven.

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