

October 2011 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

Eric's Metamorphosis by Margaret Pascoe

Our parents held him in such high esteem. Our fathers would nod appreciatively as he shook their hands firmly on break-up night, while at the same time gently putting his other hand on the head of the nearest child. He even bowed slightly to our mothers. Our parents used to tell us how lucky we were to have such a fine man for our teacher.

But we hated him. We hated the way he whispered harshly to us when he stressed some point of behaviour. We hated the way he ridiculed any pupil who had the misfortune to smudge the previous night's homework. We hated the way he stood in front of the little cast iron heater on a frosty morning, tipping backwards and forwards on the heels and toes of his shiny black shoes, while we rubbed the chilblains on our hands, and longed for recess so that we could run about and get warm.

But most of all, we hated him for the way he treated Eric.

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Eric and his mother had been living in our little country town for only three months. When they first arrived there was a delicious flutter of interest because they had no man in tow. Was his mother a Divorced Woman? Or, almost unimaginable, was she a Single Mother? Fortunately, the gossip stopped before it really began, when it was

discovered that Eric's father had died before he was even born. Eric's mother was more or less accepted into the community and Eric became one of us.

However, at our tiny one-teacher school, Eric's knowledge was found to be well below our teacher's expectations so, even though he was ten years old, Eric was put into the third grade with me. I was quite pleased. The population of my grade had doubled and the focus upon me would be diminished, but I did not expect that the bulk of Mr Brackler's attention would rest on Eric's bony shoulders – or rather, his legs.

Eric was a puny child. He had such thin little legs that it was impossible for his socks to stay up; they would just collapse in a wrinkled heap around his ankles. He had a fine dusting of freckles all over his face as though he had been sprinkled with cocoa. His dark brown hair, growing to a deep V at the back of his white neck, was my usual view of him, as I sat directly behind him. But the most telling thing about Eric was the way he constantly looked around as though he expected something dreadful to happen at any second.

He was terrified of Mr Brackler. Whenever he was asked a question in class he simply could not speak even if he knew the answer. Mr Brackler thought he was just lazy. Mr Brackler said that he knew how to make Eric learn things properly so, whenever the appropriate moment came, he would grab Eric's arm and haul him off his chair so rapidly that there would be an audible gasp around the room.

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Outside, just a short distance from the schoolroom, stood a covered shelter where we would have our lunch on a rainy day. It was here that Mr Brackler would take Eric to teach him how to learn. Whenever this happened, the rest of us would silently count their steps. Well, we really couldn't count Eric's because his feet would be off the ground for most of the way, but we knew that Mr Brackler took exactly six steps to reach the shelter.

There would be a brief silence. We knew that Mr Brackler was then reaching to a wooden beam above, for a thick piece of leather. It was about eighteen inches long and a half an inch thick, double layered and stitched together with dirty cotton thread.

Unbelievably, it had once gone around the huge chest of Blossom, Old Joe Smith's Clydesdale.

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My Dad used to say that Blossom and Old Joe were of national importance. Grizzled Old Joe, with unkempt hair and unshaven face, somehow managed to wave to any passersby even while he hung grimly on to the handles of the plough jerking behind the huge rump of Blossom. She was the light of his life. My Dad used to say that Old Joe would plough up a paddock whether it was necessary or not, just so he and Blossom could be together.

I am sure that, at one time or another, while a father walked on the uneven clods of dirt beside Old Joe and chatted about the weather, every child in the town had lain at full stretch on Blossom's broad back and looked at the clouds drifting along the sky, while that great horse plodded along, pulling the plough. The thick, strong harness would

creak with the strain, while her mighty hooves, covered with long white hair, stamped the ground heavily.

When Blossom died of old age, no-one was surprised that Old Joe followed her only a fortnight later. On the day of his funeral, we children visited the big mound that was Blossom's grave and decorated it with a row of stones in memory of her and Old Joe. When we had finished, I looked at the big mound and realised that her body was still there.

'I thought she would be in heaven with Old Joe,' I said, disappointed.

'Don't be silly,' said Jane Parker, who went to Sunday School and liked to tell the rest of us about the Bible and things like that. 'Only people go to heaven, not animals. Don't you know anything?'

My eyes started to sting. I went off quickly to find some more rocks.

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No-one ever thought, though, that Mr Brackler would get hold of some of Blossom's harness and use it for such a devilish purpose at our little school.

We never dared take it down. Mr Brackler's reactions were frighteningly predictable and, in any case, we all accepted that such punishment was part of school life.

Eric, however, was a different case altogether.

Whenever Mr Brackler had dragged him out of the room we would wait in breathless expectation, then, even though we knew what was about to happen, we would jump every time we heard the first *thwack!* When they returned to the classroom, Eric's

freckles would stand out on his even paler face. Mr Brackler would be flushed and slightly breathless. He would not look at us for several minutes, which was probably just as well, as he surely would have shrivelled up when faced with the seething hate in our eyes.

Eric never cried, but after a beating he seemed to be incapable of doing any work at all. I used to look at the deep V of hair growing down the back of his neck and wonder why Mr Brackler did not realise that his cure never worked.

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It was useless to complain to our parents. They expected the teacher to discipline us and, as I have said, they thought he was wonderful. We were powerless. And Eric was like a lamb to the slaughter.

At recess and lunch times we would all huddle together and discuss how we could exact our revenge on Mr Brackler. It somehow helped ease our feelings of impotence.

'I'm going to get my Dad's razor and cut him up into little bits,' Tom Jenkins said one day, demonstrating by slicing his hand through the air.

'I'm going to set our dog on to him,' said Bernie Hart, but he changed his mind when Marcie Manning said that Mr Brackler would probably poison the dog.

Jane Parker shook her golden ringlets, which always annoyed me beyond belief, and said that hate never achieved anything and that we should all pray for our teacher. No-one took any notice of her. My brother, Ben, said that we should write to the

Education Department and lodge a formal complaint, but he didn't know who to write to or where to send the letter.

Eventually, it was decided that we would put ourselves at risk to protect Eric. Consequently, every time Mr Brackler asked him a question, the rest of us would wave our arms around and wriggle in our seats as though we each knew the answer and would he *please* ask us? Sometimes it worked and then we would be punished for being so stupid but, too often, Eric would be dragged out to the shelter. It was as though he was going to his execution day after day.

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One morning, in early spring, Mr Brackler took up his chalk and, with an arthritic forefinger poking straight out, so that it invisibly foretold each letter before the chalk had a chance to make a mark, wrote, 'MR McMAHON.'

We were mystified.

Mr Brackler put down his piece of chalk and turned to face us. He put his hands behind his back and rocked back and forth impressively.

'Mr McMahan, the school inspector..,' he paused, looked around at each child, and then, 'will be visiting us *next Friday!*'

He waited for this news to sink in.

'He is coming to look at your work and to test your knowledge of the world and its mul-ti-ply-ca-tion tables.' He emphasised the syllables precisely.

He looked down at Eric, who was sitting as usual at the front desk where the teacher could keep an eye on the unfortunate boy. 'And you, my young friend,' he said, 'will know your tables by next Thursday or I'll want the reason why not.'

Eric glanced up at him for just an instant then looked down, his head so low that only his thin, white neck showed above his collar.

Mr Brackler turned his attention to the rest of us. 'You will all practise being on your best behaviour during the remainder of the week,' he said. 'If you forget, just once, you will get a taste of that which will make you remember.' He smiled as if his exaggerated way of talking was amusing. We did not smile. We knew that Blossom's harness was always ready, especially for Eric.

We were a close-knit group. Even though there was often a fight or two in the yard or an argument between us girls, we knew each other very well and were usually good friends. Now, after Mr Brackler's announcement, we all went to the far end of the school yard at recess to discuss just how we could help Eric. At first, there were more violent threats directed towards Mr Brackler but we finally agreed that, during the following recess and lunch times, the older ones would coach Eric in the multiplication tables so that he would know them backwards by the following Thursday.

From then on, at every break, Eric sat obediently on the log under the big pepper tree and endlessly intoned the times tables, but by Thursday he still did not know his nines. He looked defeated. Ben gave his arm a gentle punch, 'Don't worry, Eric,' he said, 'We still have our contingency plan.'

And so we did. Bernie talked throughout the day. Tom dropped his book and then stepped on it, tearing the page when he got up to retrieve it. Ben asked endless

questions about William the Conqueror during the poetry lesson. One boy after the other was hauled out to the shelter shed, each returning as though he were wearing a medal of honour instead of the angry red weals on the back of his legs.

We girls helped, too. Marcie, the best reader in the school, seemed to find great difficulty with quite simple words and so read them in a halted and stumbling manner. Rosie complained of a head-ache so that she had to go outside three times to get a drink of water. Jane fell off her chair. Even I developed a persistent cough.

By the end of the day Mr Brackler was furious. 'You do not seem to realise,' he shouted, 'that the *school inspector* is coming tomorrow! Your behaviour today has been *a-b-s-o-l-u-t-e-l-y* disgraceful. As a result, you will all have to stay in for an extra half hour while I test your tables.'

Our plan had failed. We answered his questions in flat, monotonic voices. When he got to the nines we knew that poor Eric was doomed. He could not say them. All our hard work had been in vain. We waited for the inevitable, and, of course, it came. Eric was dragged off to the shelter shed.

Marcie started to cry.

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At nine o'clock the next morning the air was crisp and clear. A flock of galahs flew into the branches of a tall eucalyptus tree so that it suddenly blossomed with pink and grey, while high in the blue sky a black cloud of starlings swirled and curled its flight with intoxicating freedom. A slight breeze teasingly chased a few fluffy clouds towards

the school and played with the leaves of the trees. It gently whispered through the Australian flag Bernie had raised, fanning out its colours with a subtle gesture of patriotism as if reminding us of the importance of the day.

But at ground level, where we were, there was an almost tangible air of anxiety.

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The schoolroom was meticulously tidy. Mr Brackler, who so far had hardly said a word, had replaced all his broken bits of chalk with smooth, white tapers. His bin had been emptied. His table was clear except for some papers neatly stacked in the centre. He had wiped over the blackboard with a damp cloth and made sure that the cupboard door was properly closed.

We were also meticulously tidy. We sat with ramrod-straight backs, our books opened at their best pages, our finger nails clean, our hair neatly combed and parted.

I looked at that deep, dark V of brown hair in front of me and simultaneously felt sorry about the thrashing Eric was bound to get and guiltily glad that I, being a girl, would not get one, even though I did not know the nine times tables either.

Mr Brackler walked up and down each aisle, checking that our pencils were sharpened and in even rows on the desks. He looked hard at Eric and shook his head ominously.

At exactly half past nine there was a knock at the door. Mr Brackler took a deep breath. He swept a warning glance over the room, put on the jolly face we remembered from break-up nights, and opened the door.

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We looked at the newcomer with extreme interest. We had very few visitors at the school and, despite the fact that this one would no doubt expose our ignorance after his very first question, we welcomed this opportunity to break the day.

He was tall and thin, with a shiny, bald head criss-crossed with a few long strands of hair. He wore a grey suit with thin white stripes, quite unlike the suits our fathers wore to funerals, and his white shirt looked freshly ironed. Jane Parker said afterwards that he looked just like a film star, as if *she* would know.

Mr McMahon shook hands with Mr Brackler. They smiled at each other. My heart sank. If they liked each other there was not much hope for us.

Mr Brackler gestured towards his desk. 'Would you like to check the attendance book first, Mr McMahon, and then, perhaps, the children's books?'

His eyes rested briefly upon Eric. Suddenly, the room darkened but, only a second or two later, the sun shone through the windows as brightly as before.

Mr McMahon bent over the teacher's table. He ran his finger down the line of names in the attendance book. The finger stopped at the bottom of the page and stayed there.

'Well..., I can't believe it!' he exclaimed. He looked up, his eyes briefly resting on each of the boys. 'Which one of you is Eric William Thompson?' he asked.

The air was suddenly electrified.

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Mr Brackler pointed warily at Eric, who looked as though he were about to be shot. Mr McMahon regarded him keenly.

‘Was your father’s name Bill?’ he said. ‘And did you come from Mount Gambier?’

‘Yes, sir,’ whispered Eric.

‘Well,’ Mr McMahon was actually smiling at him. ‘I am very pleased to meet you. Stand up and let’s have a look at you.’

Eric stood up shakily.

‘Yes,’ said the inspector, ‘oh, yes, indeed. You have the look of your father about you, my boy, straight and wiry. I bet you could stop a galloping horse in its tracks, couldn’t you?’

Eric appeared about to faint. Mr Brackler looked astounded. I could hardly breathe.

‘You may not know this, young man,’ Mr McMahon went on, ‘but many years ago your father and I travelled right around South Australia on horseback, from Mount Gambier to the Adelaide plains, through the mid-North, up to Maree and across to Ceduna. We had our swags and billies on the backs of our horses and camped out in the bush. It was the best time of my life.’

Mr Brackler cleared his throat. ‘Ahem!’ He appeared to have gathered his wits. ‘Would you like to see their books, Mr McMahon?’ he said. ‘Or perhaps the children can show you how well they know their tables. Bernie, would you start off with the sevens? And then we will have a go at the nines.’ He smiled roguishly at us, as though we were part of a little game we all enjoyed.

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Again, the room suddenly darkened. Eric, still standing, gripped the back of his chair, his knuckles white. Then, just as suddenly, the darkness was replaced by a brilliant shaft of sunlight which seemed to be directed right at Eric. His whole body was illuminated. His hair shone with tiny lights of red and orange; the back of his neck glowed bronze.

The moment passed as quickly as it had come; the room lit up in its ordinary way and everything became normal again. I looked around wonderingly. I became aware that Bernie was talking. 'Well, yes, sir,' he was saying bravely, 'but I'd rather hear Mr McMahan talk about the time he went around the state with Eric's father.'

And that was that. For the next two hours the school inspector told us tales of how Eric's father had captured and subdued an enraged camel, of how snakes came into their swags, and of how Eric's father had squashed a red-backed spider between his bare hands when it had crawled into his tea mug. When it seemed that the stories were about to end, Bernie asked about droughts and frog plagues. That was enough to set the inspector off again. The multiplication tables were forgotten. Eventually, there was time only for a brief inspection of our books and a quick scan of some papers on Mr Brackler's table, and the school inspector was gone.

At recess we burst into the yard as though we were on holiday, laughing and pushing each other as we thought of how at last we had got the better of Mr Brackler. It was then that we discovered that we had a new boy in our midst – Eric. He was a different person. He walked straight and tall. He ran and shouted. He laughed when he fell over trying to tackle one of the bigger boys. He kicked the football clean across the yard. We were astonished.

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At first we did not know quite what to do. We had always looked after Eric and tried to protect him. We had felt responsible for him but, suddenly, it seemed that he did not need us anymore. We followed him aimlessly around the yard and waited for the old Eric to come back. He never did.

We eventually adjusted to this new boy and found a new, elevated position for him in our little hierarchy. Mr Brackler also adjusted to him; after all, a favourite of the school inspector demanded quite a different consideration. Eric was never dragged out to the shelter again and, although Mr Brackler still resorted to his usual sarcasm, it was diffused somewhat throughout the whole school. One day, even that dreaded piece of Blossom's harness disappeared.

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Months later, I wandered out to Blossom's grave, thinking my solitary thoughts as usual. I remembered that miraculous day when the school inspector came to our school, and how the room had suddenly darkened and become bright again, illuminating Eric in a breathtaking instant.

I picked up several stones to add to those we had so carefully arranged when Blossom had died, but just as I was about to put them down, I realised that something was very different. The high mound I had first observed, soon after the big Clydesdale had been buried, was now considerably lower. There was no way that great horse could still be there, I thought – and then I knew. She had gone to Heaven and become a horse angel. It was Blossom who had been flying through the sky on that day, blocking out the

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sun so that our little school room was darkened, but who had touched Eric with her angel wings and turned him to gold.

I skipped all the way home, imagining Jane Peter's face when I told her, but somehow I felt, once shared, my experience of divine revelation would lose some of its wonder. It had to remain my own delicious secret forever.

When we returned to school after the next Christmas break, we were surprised to find Mr Brackler gone and a young Mr Ellington in his place. Even more surprising was that we discovered that learning could actually be enjoyable.

And even Eric learned his nine times tables.

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