

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Over the Back Fence

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by Peter McAra

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EXTRACT

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## **Casting Notes**

**Ray Sergeant, 44:** A self-made man; poorly educated, has worked his way up through the fast food industry, starting as a teenage burger flipper in McDonalds. Thinks he's another Colonel Sanders because of his plan to cover the world with his innovative truck-stop restaurants – The Truck Stops Here. He lets nothing stand in his way, least of all business ethics. He's opened six truck stop restaurants to date, and is consumed by his plan to acquire and set up more sites. He's more than a bit of a pain to his elegant, aspirational wife. He tends to wear baseball cap and logo-covered windcheater. May be a bit short and chunky, in contrast to his tall slender wife.

**Felicity Sergeant, 37:** A languid beauty (thin, blonde,) who caught the eye of the young goer-on-the-way-up. Was a self-employed IT contractor he retained, then fancied, then married. She sensed advantage in Ray's drive/money making potential, and saw theirs as an alliance offering the good things of life (travel, nice home, leisure). Now sees him as crass/no class/not very bright. Tends to wear silk blouses and skirts to show off her great legs. Involved with her house, but needs some intellectual spice to make her life complete. Dismissive of her husband. Treats him mean to keep him keen.

**Sean Ferguson, 38:** A textbook left-leaning greenie, Sean rebelled against his suburban upbringing – did arts, gravitated into librarianship, then took the only job he could get – assistant librarian in a country shire. Long hair, glasses, wispy beard, jeans, an armchair intellectual. Seeking escape from suburbia, he moved in with local woman Anne, who'd inherited a substantial house in the locality.

**Anne Marcheson, 36:** Met Sean through their jobs at the local council. She's a country girl – a bit chunky, no makeup, shortish hair, wears jeans and joggers a lot. Likes to cook, works in childcare, loves children. House (always untidy) belonged to a maiden aunt. Anne acquired it via a family asset reshuffle when the aunt died. (Was it seen as bait to help a plain girl to get a man)?

**Graham Butt, 63:** A builder all his life. Born and raised in the area. Retired to Sea Eagle Place after making a bit of money on land speculation. Has a boat moored at the nearby marina. Conservative blue collar/redneck. Not sympathetic to green values.

**Dolly Butt, 60:** Graham's wife of 40+ years. Born and raised in the area. Lives for bowls, bingo, and the CWA. Secretly wants to acquire a bit of class, but doesn't quite know how to do it. Her dress sense just misses the mark, though she tries hard. Often seen in her bowls outfit.

**Janice Matchett, 40:** (small part – could be changed to a male) Council employee, (Manager, Environmental Restoration) - an earnest local government official, trying to do her job well, but inclined to lapse into public service-speak.

## **Act 1**

Scene 1: Saturday morning, the swamp over the back fence

Scene 2: Saturday night, Ray and Felicity's bedroom

Scene 3: Saturday night, Graham and Dolly's bedroom

Scene 4: Saturday night, Sean and Anne's bedroom

## **Act 2**

Scene 1: Sunday night, Graham and Dolly's back yard barbecue

Scene 2: The same

Scene 3: Dolly's kitchen

Scene 4: The backyard barbecue

Scene 5: The same

Scene 6: The same

Scene 7: The same

Scene 8: Later that night - the swamp

Scene 9: The same

Scene 10: The same

Scene 11: The backyard barbecue, next morning

## OVER THE BACK FENCE

### ACT 1

#### Scene 1

RAY SERGEANT, FELICITY SERGEANT, GRAHAM BUTT, DOLLY BUTT  
SEAN FERGUSON, ANNE MARCHESON, *stand in a group on a cleared area amid trees. The back fences of three suburban blocks can be seen to one side.*

DOLLY: Bloody Council! Dragging us out at ten o'clock of a Saturday morning. As if they didn't have the rest of the bloody week to come and bother the poor bloody ratepayers.

ANNE: Well, it's nice to see we've all turned up. The flyer said 10 a.m. (*Looks at watch*) And here we all are, five minutes early.

RAY: It'll be something fishy, this business.

GRAHAM: What makes you say that?

RAY: Since when did the Council give a stuff about the residents? What they think and all that? Now all of a sudden it's a little green flyer in your letterbox. 'Residents' Consul-bloody-tation.' Environment Restor-bloody-ration.

SEAN: That has to be Council-speak for some dirty play

RAY: Yeah. Probably gonna tell us they're putting in a tip just over the back fence.

DOLLY: God, I hope the Environment Destruction Manager comes soon – or whatever his bloody title is.

RAY: Yeah, typical. Keep us waiting.

DOLLY: It's not exactly my idea of a nice Saturday morning - standing round looking at this stinking bloody swamp. God, it's an eyesore – and a nosesome too, if you ask me.

SEAN: Nosesome? I don't think you can say that.

DOLLY: Well I did, and it is.

SEAN: I meant there's no such word.

DOLLY: Well there ought to be. The swamp stinks.

ANNE: Well, at least it's a nice day. And it's not often I get to climb over the back fence. Come face to face with the wilderness and everything. It's quite exciting.

GRAHAM: A tip. That'll be it. Make the swamp into a tip. For years they been wringing their bloody hands about the car bodies in the swamp. Every bloody weekend there's another one lands there.

DOLLY: Oh-oh. Here he goes again.

GRAHAM: No, come on. It's got out of hand these last few years. Half the cars stolen, too. The young louts from out The Settlement. Steal a car to go down to McDonalds, then set fire to it. Dump it in the swamp. If the council made the swamp into a tip it'd save a lot of work.

DOLLY: You sound like a stuck record, Graham.

GRAHAM: In my young days, if you touched someone's car it was a year or two in the slammer. Today, they stroke 'em on the wrist with a galah feather and send 'em off to some bloody shrink. Who's no better than they are. Let me at 'em with a horsewhip. A horsewhip and a cattle prod – high voltage one. Give 'em a bit of a tickle in the right places. I'd sort the buggers out quicker than you could blink. What do you reckon, Sean?

SEAN: Well, I went to a meeting of Greening Shorehaven a year ago, and they said the swamp might be recoverable. Bit of a diversion of Eucalyptus Creek, bit of revegetation-

GRAHAM: No, mate. I meant about the shrinks. You must know a bit about that sort of stuff. Working in the library and all that. Bachelor of - what is it?

SEAN: Arts.

GRAHAM: Arts, was it? When were you at the university? I had this nephew-

SEAN: I graduated the year Wollongong won the Grand Final.

GRAHAM: Oh. My bloke was a bit after that. Anyway, what about this psychology stuff? Did you do anything like that?

SEAN: Actually I did do a bit of psych in my degree. Then I spent a couple of weeks' work experience in a clinic for chronic alcoholics. That finished me. I switched to library studies. A pity. I got fantastic grades in psychology. They wanted me to do honours. But I-

FELICITY: (*Said without malice*) Don't take too much notice of Graham, Sean. He's just setting you up. We know you're an old redneck, Graham, but we love you anyway.

GRAHAM: OK, mate. Later. Felicity likes to get her two cents worth in. Have to make allowances. Good looking sheila like her.

FELICITY: *(to Sean)*. Graham likes to have people on a bit. What's been happening on the local green scene, anyway?

SEAN: Actually, heaps. This swamp. Did you know it's home to the lesser golden reed frog? *Trichomanoidus auricus*. Very fussy about its habitat. Estuarine reeds – that's it. Doesn't want to live anywhere else, apparently. And all the estuarine environments are going – coastal development. Everybody wants a bit of the coast. You know – marinas, canal developments, boat ramps, parking for boat trailers – all that stuff. So poor old *auricus* is getting squeezed out. Squeezed to extinction, I'd have to say. It's-

*(sound of car arriving)*.

GRAHAM: Hey! Here's the man/woman himself/herself. *(The group turns to watch as JANICE/JIM MATCHETT enters from the left, dressed smart casual, carrying a briefcase)*. Oh my God. It's Matchett the hatchet!

JANICE: Good morning folks. I'm Janice Matchett, Council's Environmental Restoration Manager. Sorry I'm late. Had to take my son to soccer. Couldn't get him out of bed. Anyway, nice day for it. *(Notices Graham)*. Oh, it's Graham Butt. G'day, Graham. It's been a while.

GRAHAM: Yeah, I gave the building game away a few years back, Janice.

JANICE: Oh, yes. You put together a subdivision. Paradise Beach Estate.

GRAHAM: Yeah. You're standing in it. The one the council went and froze. Thirty blocks of it. Nearly put me in the bankruptcy court. Three blocks out of thirty sold. Only just got my money back.

JANICE: Well, at least you're not on my back any more. Building inspections and all that.

GRAHAM: No, I used to enjoy giving you a hard time, mate. Probably why I had to wait so long for those council inspections.

RAY: And why they froze your subdivision.

GRAHAM: I might get to sell it one of these days. When we get a council that's got a bit more nouse than the present mob. A squashed echidna'd have more brains than the lot of 'em put together.

JANICE: Council did come down a bit hard on you, Graham. I thought-

GRAHAM: Anyway, Janice. I'm a patient man. Let me do the honours, seeing as how we're old mates. This here's Ray Sergeant. Owns the truck stop place down the highway a bit. You know – The Truck Stops Here, it's called.

JANICE: Yes. Know it well. (*Shakes hands with Ray*). Quite a cute name you've got for it. Sticks in the mind a bit.

RAY: Yeah, the name's turning out to be worth a fortune. I've got a two more sites over on the Hume, and another one in Queensland. Buying up a few other sites too. Actually, I've got to fly to Queensland this afternoon-

GRAHAM: And meet Mrs Sergeant, Janice. Felicity to her very good friends. (*Janice and Felicity shake hands*).

RAY: Yeah. She ran a little IT consultancy. I got her in to set up my system. Thought it'd come a bit cheaper for the next few sites if I married her.

FELICITY: Thank you. And did it?

RAY: Don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out.

FELICITY: (*Aside to RAY*). Come on, Ray. What about the fantastic fringe benefits?

RAY: I was getting them anyway.

FELICITY: Yeah, but times have changed. I wouldn't push my luck, big boy.

GRAHAM: (*Anxious to move on*). Ahem. Meet Sean Ferguson. You might have spotted Sean working in the Council library.

JANICE: (*Shakes hands*). Ah, yes, Sean. Don't get a lot of time to read in my job. But my partner gets me to drop books in now and again. Might have seen you then.

GRAHAM: And here's Sean's better half, Anne. Anne Marcheson. Works in Council's childcare centre.

JANICE: (*Shakes hands*) Very pleased to meet you, Anne. (*Anne steps back, too shy to make small talk*).

GRAHAM: And finally, my little woman, Mrs Dolly Butt.

DOLLY: (*Shakes hands*). Pleased to meet you, Mrs Matchett. (*Looks into her face*).

Hey. You're actually quite a nice sort of person. Not at all like Graham-

GRAHAM: Well, yes. Now where would youse like to conduct the meeting then, Janice? You'll be wanting to get it over with. Get back to your Saturday.

ANNE: Yes. Sorry you had to come out on your day off, Janice. No trouble for us – here we are in our own back yards. But you had to get in your car and-

JANICE: No problem. Goes with the territory. Now would you like to meet here? Or is there somewhere else? Over to you. You're the ratepayers.

(*Mumbles of 'It's fine here.' 'Let's get it over with.'* *The group faces JANICE, falls silent, and waits expectantly*).

JANICE: Well, thanks very much for coming along this morning. I know you all have lots to do. Saturday and all that. So without further ado, I'll just- (*Puts down briefcase, extracts a fat book from it. Opens the book at a place bookmarked with a sheet of paper*) -read you a memorandum sent by the Department of Planning to the mayor.

'I refer to Article 42 of the State Planning Code (Section 12), pursuant to the Riparian Preservation Act, 1912, and amendments, (*gestures with the book*) which states-'

RAY: Jeez, mate. Can't we come to the point? We haven't got all bloody day. I've got to catch a plane to Queensland.

GRAHAM: Yeah, Janice. You can spare us the bullshit. Let's get to the point. Why does Council want to drag us out into the swamp of a Saturday morning?

JANICE: Sorry. I was coming to that. It's just that we have to put things in their proper perspective. Legal stuff. Land titles and such. So I have to-

GRAHAM: Sure, but some of them acts of parliament-. Just tell us why we're here, mate.

JANICE: OK. As I'd begun to say earlier, the Department and Council have been having consultations-

GRAHAM: What's new? They're always having bloody consultations.

JANICE: Consultations about the riparian environment in the neighbourhood of Blackbutt Lagoon.

GRAHAM: You mean the swamp?

JANICE: Er- yes. OK, then.

GRAHAM: Bloody thing's lousy with rusty car bodies. If somebody doesn't do something pretty quick, the swamp'll be chockers with dead cars. Those young louts from The Settlement-

FELICITY: Cool it, Graham. Let the poor woman get on with it.

JANICE: Well, we all know there are big environmental issues about Blackbutt lagoon. Endangered frog species and the like.

RAY: (*Aside*) Oh-oh. Endangered species? Here comes trouble.

JANICE: The fact is, we've come up with what we think could be a pretty acceptable solution to quite a complex problem. The proposal we have on the table at the moment is to raise the water level of the swamp by a metre or so.

RAY: A metre or so? How?