

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



A View of Concrete

by Gareth Ellis

EXTRACT

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ACT ONE

JACQUIE and BILLY at a table, coffee.

BILLY: ...And just the other day I remembered the jacaranda that stood in my yard when I was a kid. Enormous it was. With a maze of branches, and purple... When I was young, my mum'd tell me about the fairies that lived in our tree. In all jacaranda trees. Inside the tree, a whole city. I used to climb the tree for hours, looking for the doors. But they were too small, or I was too large. She told me about how when the tree shed its flowers and left its purple carpet on the grass below, the fairies would come out and collect the purple flowers, replacing each fresh one with an old one from the year before, and slowly the purple carpet would turn brown. For us, a disappointment. But inside, in their city, the fresh flowers stayed bright. Like a purple fairy Chinese New Year. God I wanted to see it. To live there, to be part of that tiny world. So, one day I started to shrink. My meals gradually got smaller and smaller. And so did I. I wasn't hungry. Not at all. I was just ... getting smaller. Becoming a fairy.

I was told I was sick. Still, I got smaller. I got lighter. They kept me in my room. So I watched the tree out my window. Still got smaller. Smaller. And one day, I thought, I'd open my window and float on the breeze to the tree. Tiny now, I'd alight on a branch. And in front of me would be a door. Hidden from me once, but now, so small, I'd turn the handle and step into my new home.

Then there was a point where it stopped, I stopped. I wasn't getting smaller anymore. Or at least I couldn't see a change. I was half the girl I was before, much thinner, but not shorter.

Then I heard my mum on the phone one day. She's going, 'A psychiatrist? She's eight years old. My daughter does not need a fucking shrink.' I think, what? What? Shrink? They can help me? So I say, 'Mum, I want a shrink.' But then he just asked questions, no help. Just questions. So, on my own I got lighter.

One day mum comes home in a fury. Fuckin' crazy. I hear a vase smash in the hall. I couldn't leave my room now. Too small, way too fragile. My muscles were getting small enough, almost non-existent, but bones take longer to shrink, right? And the discrepancy between muscle and bone now made it hard for me to move. But in time I thought they'd meet.

So mum races into the backyard with this massive bag of tools, then suddenly, axe in hand, she starts swinging at the tree. My eyes filled with tears but I couldn't turn away. Just watch. For hours she went – Whack. Whack. Whack. Into the night.

The next day I woke to the same sound. On and on she went. Tiny woman with this bloody heavy axe. And then, somewhere in the middle of that day, the tree just keeled over and I fainted. Still, for days she worked – saws, planes, nails, sandpaper. Until one day all that was left, lying flat on the stump of my tree, fashioned from my destination, was a tiny coffin. Just big enough for an almost fairy.

And I got bigger.

You know. Sometimes, I think a recollection is not your own. You know? You think it is. But really it's just someone else's words filtered through your fading memory to create a picture that you take for reality. So I wound up saying, 'I suffered from anorexia.' Speaking other people's words. And then something quite extraordinary happened, and...

You know I hadn't truly remembered until recently. I was looking for a new house. And as I walked up the hall of my potential new home, the back windows filled and expanded, glowed purple. And at the end of the hall, there it was. Beautiful.

JACQUIE: What?

BILLY: A jacaranda.

JACQUIE: You have a tree at your new place?

BILLY: A jacaranda.

JACQUIE: Oh, that's fuckin' great. There's not a thing at my place.

BILLY: You live in an apartment.

JACQUIE: I had a... What are they? A spider plant. Some guy bought it for me. Fuckin' idiot. But it didn't get any light. And it just died.

There's not even anything in the courtyard. They've paved it.

BILLY: It was paved when you got there, wasn't it?

JACQUIE: Old Snady Olsen reckons there were some ferns in it a few years back, but there was some kind of sewage problem. She said they found a whole web of tampons and condoms that people had been flushing. They'd matted up a section of the pipe. So they had to dig it all up. Never planted it again. They just paved it.

BILLY: Shit.

So what do you think?

JACQUIE: About what?

BILLY: What I told you.

JACQUIE: Yeah, you could lose some weight. I'll take you shopping. We'll get all size eights so you have to lose it.

BILLY: I want to be a fairy.

JACQUIE: The fairy shop. Get one of those cotton skirts that sit on your hips. Show heaps of new skinny waist. You know that crumply cotton? And wings if you want.

Have you seen the feather ones? They're too big though, I still like the stocking ones. They're just smaller, sexier. We'll go to a doof as fairies. Bush doof.

BILLY: Do you want to come back to mine? See the jacaranda? We can be fairies.

JACQUIE: I'd love to see your new place.

NEIL's house. NEIL is reading, JAMES enters.

JAMES: Hey, what the fuck is that cat doing out there?

NEIL: What cat?

JAMES: There's a fucking dead cat attached to your letterbox. All tied up around the neck and strangled. Did you bloody put it there?

NEIL: Now why do you think I'd strangle a cat and tie it to my letterbox?

JAMES: I don't know. But someone put it there. There's a piece of, like, thin twine wrapped around its neck about three times. All twisted up with rope and mange, it's fucking sick. Front legs off the ground, neck to the side, strangled and tongue out. Back legs buckled and dragging on the concrete.

NEIL: You know, cats are smart creatures. Very smart. They don't just get caught up in string and strangle themselves to death.

JAMES: Unless someone tied it there.

NEIL: Someone could have done. Wait. What colour's the string?

JAMES: Green twine.

NEIL: I put it there.

JAMES: Why?

NEIL: For a bit of flair.

JAMES: A fucking dead cat is flair?

NEIL: Not the fucking cat. The twine. So either someone tied the cat to the twine. Or the cat got tired and ended it. Put its head through a loop in the twine, tired of scrounging through rubbish bins for cartoon fish bones, and spun, wild, paws off the ground, like a one-cat fight, twisting up the twine for its own death.

JAMES: Take it down.

NEIL: No.

JAMES: Fucking take it down. Why wouldn't you?

NEIL: I think it's a sign. All the animals are killing themselves. Why are you here?

JAMES: To buy Louie.

BILLY's house. They are under a huge jacaranda.

JACQUIE: Why are we here?

BILLY: To find fairies.

JACQUIE: It is a beautiful tree. But I came to see your house, babe.

BILLY: And this is it. I sleep up here whenever I can.

JACQUIE: No.

BILLY: And look for doors. I'm shrinking.

JACQUIE: You're serious.

BILLY: And one day I'll live inside the tree.

JACQUIE: You have to eat, Billy.

BILLY: I know. Always have. I did last time. Small meals.

JACQUIE: How big?

BILLY: Fairy size.

JACQUIE: Oh, darling. Shit. No, you have to eat.

BILLY: I do. Enough. No more talking, talk about something else.

JACQUIE: You know how crippling that is?

BILLY: What?

JACQUIE: Talk about something else. It locks in the thought. Creates a fascination.

BILLY: With what?

JACQUIE: We've already had this conversation.

Anyway, I like your tree.

BILLY: Yeah.

I wish there were some stars here.

JACQUIE: There are. Look. That's the evening star. It's Jupiter, or Saturn.

BILLY: So it's not a star.

JACQUIE: No, it's not a star.

NEIL's house.

JAMES: What's that?

NEIL: What?

JAMES: What you're reading.

NEIL: Book.

JAMES: What's it called?

NEIL: Don't know.

JAMES: What do you mean you don't know?

NEIL: Don't know, didn't look at the cover.

JAMES: Why wouldn't you look at the cover?

NEIL: Didn't have one. Besides, I never look at the cover. It's what's inside that counts. Covers can be deceiving.

JAMES: You never look at the cover?

NEIL: Never.

JAMES: What if you can't help it.

NEIL: Oh, I can help it. If I see the cover I don't buy it. I buy old books, no covers, falling apart. If I want a new book, go to a store. Close my eyes, reach for a book and rip the cover off. Sales assistant runs over, says, 'What the hell are you doing?' and I say, 'I'll take it'. They reach for the cover on the ground, and I say, 'There's no need for that'. Then I get a saw, and cut the top off the book. If I see the name, I throw it out.

JAMES: You serious?

NEIL: At the moment, yeah.

NEIL's phone rings. He answers.

NEIL: Go.

Done.

He hangs up.

NEIL: Old books are better, falling apart. So you never know how much story you get.

JAMES: Bullshit.

NEIL: I have a commitment. It's a philosophy. Creates strength. See, we never get the whole story. Why should we? That's how we live. Never read the last few pages either. If you get an ending, you get used to things resolving. They don't. Rarely do.

JAMES: They do for me.

NEIL: Not for me they don't.

JAMES: Because you never read the end.

NEIL: Be it as it may. It's about life. Not death. If I read the last page, it's over. This way, it goes on.

JAMES: Doesn't it drive you crazy?

NEIL: It doesn't drive me crazy when I walk past someone in the street. I see them, they're alive, we walk past each other, they're gone. But they're still alive. I don't want to see them die. People die all the time, and I don't need to be part of another death.

JAMES: Another death? What do you mean?

NEIL: I see enough people die.

JAMES: When?

NEIL: All the time. If I can help it, I'd rather not. Close to death is fine, there's still hope. But not death.

JAMES: When did you last see someone die?

NEIL: A while back.

JAMES: When?

NEIL: Can't exactly remember.