

## Griefbox and other plays

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*to Matthias*



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## Acknowledgements

I once read in the acknowledgements to one of the first feminist histories of Australia a backhanded thanks from the author to her colleagues for their insistent scepticism that such a history existed let alone was worth writing. In that spirit I would like to thank Sydney's National Institute of Dramatic Arts and their Playwright's Studio for all their criticism, tuition, fights and friendships, and of course the opportunity to have your plays performed, but especially my tutor Nicolas Parsons and my fellow student playwrights. Without that journey I would be a poorer writer than I am today. Waitressing has never been good for my writing, so I sincerely thank those people and institutions that made it possible for me to continue to write whilst pursuing other professional endeavours, including the Department of English at the University of New England (Julian Croft, for saying that I was a better playwright than scholar), the School of Writing at Southern Cross University, and the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, King's College London, (where I've had to opportunity to meet and be moved by the work of more Australian writers than I deserve). Most of all I would like to thank those people close to me in my life who always inspire: my brother Graeme Smith (also for the cover photo that somehow perfectly matched a story he had never read); my former husband Matthias (not the least for having to suffer audiences believing he is the real-life villain of every play); Charlie Le Duff and Amy Kuzniar for the love and the lake; Julie Hancock for her unceasing, theatrical friendship; John Kinsella for his faith and conversation; and finally James Bradley, who knows it best.



## Worry: a foreword

I hope this is the shortest foreword in history because to explain your writing seems like an unwelcome conceit, on all sides. But someone unexpected came into my life recently and at the witching hour I was asked where it came from, the writing. Because in answering I found out something I hadn't known I'll take that encounter as sign that an honest explanation is better than the more flattering concealments I had planned. In saying that I write from a place of pain, I write more because it takes me away from that place. Despite the grievous outcomes of many of my plays, it is the exploration of hope contained in the action that I want to have the most resonance. The promise of damage being repaired at personal and political levels is the seductive force that makes me bother. It seems that I bother most about the failure of love, the failure of communication, but it is also the world we try to love and communicate in that occupies me. The world I once knew best is Australia, so the emotional, psychological, physical and linguistic landscapes of my plays are more often than not Australian. And I write plays more than anything else for the perverse reason that they are the hardest thing for me to write, and because the struggle somehow corresponds to my subject matter, which emerges better from the fight. That, and watching an audience watch your play, which is a terrifying delight. Theatre frightens me, the collaboration, the actors, the audience, the so very public nature of the confessional, the way that it can sometimes effect real change. But it's one of the best things I know.



# Griefbox

*(seven locked monologues of grief, with witnesses)*

## Characters

These monologues could be performed by one actor, but they are designed for seven different actors with one griever and six witnesses (guardian angels) to each episode of grief.

WITNESSES / GUARDIAN ANGELS

PRINCESS, *a working mother*

THE BUS CONDUCTOR

ROBERT, *a smart young businessman*

THE BOSS

DENISE, *a recently widowed mother*

THE DAUGHTER

ELOISE, *a university student*

THE UNIVERSITY LECTURER

CAMERON, *a lonely man at a high school reunion*

THE FRIEND AT THE URINAL

MIRANDA, *an adulterer*

THE BARMAN

ROBERT, *an octogenarian*

THE BIRTHDAY GUESTS

## Prologue

*Dressed for a funeral, the actors enter one by one and join the original monologue, until it builds to choral proportions.*

ALL

'In all truth I tell you, whoever listens to my words, and believes in the one sent me, has eternal life; without being brought to judgement such a person has passed from death to life. In all truth I tell you, the hour is coming – indeed it is already here – when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so has he granted the Son also to have life in himself; and, because he is the Son of a man, has granted him power to give judgement. Do not be surprised at this, for the hour is coming when the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice: those who did good will come forth to life; and those who did evil will come forth to judgement'.

*They all shake hands then exit.*

## Scene 1

*The PRINCESS hails and then sits on a bus. Enter WITNESS.*

WITNESS

Episode one: The Princess Who Lies.

*WITNESS joins the passengers.*

PRINCESS

Can you see that man? Down there. On the bicycle. His baby seat is empty. Who'd ride through this bloody traffic with a baby? Bloody idiot. Stupid bloody pom. Anyway. It's empty. The kid is safe somewhere I suppose. Already started its perfect day at its perfect nursery in this perfect city in this perfect country and it's only 8.43 jesus fucking christ why isn't this bloody bus moving? I always sit on the

top deck. People are very uncomposed from this view. Like, every single one of those women standing down there waiting . . .

WITNESS *plays the role of the* BUS CONDUCTOR.

BUS CONDUCTOR

Full up, no more sorry. Full up. There's another one coming right behind.

PRINCESS

Liar! . . . waiting to be allowed on, they, all of them, need to get themselves quick damn smart to the hairdresser and get their roots dyed. And Fred there, he needs to buy himself a decent dandruff shampoo. How people can just let themselves go like that I don't know. Shabby old town. I'm lucky to be here though. In the heart of the old empire and all. Lucky, really. Lucky to be on the bloody bus, let's face it. Some days I just can't stand it. The other day for example . . .

BUS CONDUCTOR

Fares please. Anymore fares please. Fares please.

PRINCESS

I got thrown off the bus. At the Angel.

BUS CONDUCTOR

I don't take no twenty pound notes lady.

PRINCESS

But it's all I have.

BUS CONDUCTOR

I don't have to take it.

PRINCESS

I can't ask the automatic teller for small change!

BUS CONDUCTOR

Get off at the next stop Lady and don't you get on no bus of mine

again without the right money. Now get off or I'll stop the bus.

PRINCESS

Well. At first I refused to move. I ignored him. Was he picking on me because I was white? Then he got mad. Then I got mad. Said it was legal tender, and asked him to point out the signs warning people to have the right money or bloody else there were none of course and by this time he'd stopped the bus and was asking everyone to get off and people were abusing me, and others were offering to pay my fare for me and were criticising the conductor for his rudeness and excessive officiousness. I became hysterical. I became extremely dangerous. I screamed he was going to burn in hell for his cruelty, for my humiliation, his wrong-headedness, his inhumanity. He looked a bit worried. He refused to give me his name or number. I looked at all the other people and saw how frightened they were of my lunacy and how very close so many of them were to falling off my edge that I just turned and fled into the back streets of Islington.

BUS CONDUCTOR

Hold tight.

PRINCESS

I was very late for work.

WITNESS *becomes* PASSENGER.

PRINCESS

My bus. 'RML2460 JJD4CD. RML2460 was delivered to the new London transport area in May 1966. Its first garage was Northfleet. After many years in the NL country area it was, in 1970, transferred to the new London Country Bus services. In 1979 it was withdrawn for scrap but London transport bought it back along with most other country RMLs (although 24 were sold to Wombwell Diesel's in Yorkshire and these were broken up before LT could buy them back. However the rest were bought, sent to Aldenham Works, were made serviceable and painted red and placed in service around London. RML2460 was allocated to Tottenham for use on Route 73. In 1990 its original AEL Engine was refurbished at Tottenham garage (mechani-

cal work) and at Enfield Heavy repair Centre (body work). During the body refurb all the exterior panels were replaced and an inscription was found above the rear entrance saying 'RML2460, the last green one' and was signed by all the staff who built her. (Unfortunately this can not be seen but has been preserved by sealing with varnish.) This practice was a trademark of the Park-Royal Vehicles, that is, the first and last of every body type they built. RML2460 will continue to serve London for many years yet, and passengers on Route 73 daily. When she is finally withdrawn it is hoped that she will pass into preservation. Chassis AEC RRH A & B SUB Frames Engine Cummin's C series 8.2 135 BHP at 1800 RPM Transmission speed electro-pneumatic automatic gear box and Spiral Bevel Differential Body Park-Royal 72 seat doubledecker built in April 1966, Harlesdon, London, NW11.'

*Silence*

I do not have a daughter. Every morning, I do not leave her at this shitty nursery in a filthy north London suburb. Every single morning, she does not cry her heart out at the grubby window, watching me disappear behind piles of spewn rubbish to the bus shelter and I use that word loosely around the corner, where I never ever have to wait for the number 73 bus, and I always get a seat. I have a job in the city that makes all this worthwhile. I do not have debts, and I suffer no guilt.

*Silence*

When I finally withdraw from all this nothing, will I too pass into a state of preservation? Painted. Pickled with grief. And how do I pay for these sins I have not committed?

*Bell rings. Bus stops. PRINCESS leaves. Blackout.*

**Scene 2**

ROBERT, *a smart young businessman, stands before his boss who sits behind his big desk in an expensive office.*

## WITNESS

Episode two: Robert Loses His Job.

WITNESS *plays the role of ROBERT's boss, and makes paper aeroplanes during his monologue.*

## ROBERT

You can't sack me because I'm late! This is not school mate. I mean, where do you get off behaving like this? I was here till nine o'clock last night closing that deal, and you sack me because I'm twenty minutes late! And so what, by the way, if I am a bit late, and so what, moreover, if I make a habit of it. You can't control the world for God's sake you should have seen the traffic this morning and to top it all off the bus stopped for ages because of this lunatic woman who didn't have any money and lost her rag at the conductor and you try getting a taxi at the Angel at that time of the morning so I just waited it out and for pity's sake I was working on the bus! Haven't you heard of the mobile phone! Eh? Eh? [*Silence*]

*A paper aeroplane hits ROBERT.*

You complete bastard. Have you any idea at all, the remotest inkling, what this is going to do to my family? There's a recession on out there, how's a man my age meant to find another job in an industry like this in a middle of a ruddy recession. [*Silence*] What is it? Tell me why you're really sacking me mate. Coward. Be a man. Be straight with me. What's wrong with me? What is wrong with me?

*Another aeroplane hits ROBERT. He picks it up off the floor, and crushes it in his hands. He leaves. Blackout.*

**Scene 3**

*A wake. DENISE is holding her young daughter.*

WITNESS

Episode three: Denise Tells Her Daughter Another Lie.

WITNESS *becomes DENISE's daughter and sits in her lap.*

DENISE

Daddy's gone to heaven. Don't cry my baby. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Don't cry my baby. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Don't cry my baby. Don't cry my baby. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Don't cry my baby. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Daddy's gone to heaven. Oh please don't cry my baby.

*Pause*

DAUGHTER

Does Daddy still love us?

*Silence*

DENISE

'Breathe through the heats of our desire/Thy coolness and thy balm/Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;/Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire/O still small voice of calm!/O still small voice of calm.' Don't cry baby. Mummy loves you. Oh Lord hear our prayer.

DAUGHTER *leaves her mother's embrace. Blackout.*

**Scene 4**

*A university lecture hall. ELOISE, a student, begins taking notes but later stops.*

## WITNESS

Episode four: Eloise abandons her university studies and takes up heroin.

WITNESS *is the* LECTURER.

LECTURER: . . . Australian history contains not only a long history of racism but also a similar one of white activism protesting the crimes of colonisation. Patently, these protestations have not been effective enough. In 1991, Federal Parliament established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to promote a formal process of reconciliation between indigenous Australians and the wider community, noting that the British Crown removed many indigenous peoples from their lands and that so far there has been no process for reconciliation. In 'governmentese', reconciliation is defined as 'working together to improve the relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the rest of Australians'. The council is currently working on a draft document of reconciliation that has been hotly contested in public meetings throughout Australia, with the hope that such a document will contribute to 'a better Australia and better community relations so that all Australians can benefit.' This 'benefit for all' factor is the one that much of middle Australia remains to be convinced about, despite the fact that the situation for indigenous Australians, in general, is 'far less advantageous with respect to health, education, housing and income' than it is for non-indigenous Australians. Some of the things the Council think should be included in the document are as follows, and they define in principle the aspirations of reconciliation: Recognition about the unique status of the first Australians; The importance of land and culture to indigenous Australians; Respect for the continuing customary laws, beliefs and traditions of indigenous peoples; Acknowledgement that consent was neither sought nor given at the time of colonisation; Acknowledgement of indigenous history and its continuing conse-