



**THE
JENNIFER
BURBIDGE
SHORT
STORY
AWARD
2023**

FIRST PRIZE

THE NEIGHBOUR *by* ANDREA PAVLEKA

It's early. As I move through the house, icy air creeps through an open window and touches me, making me shiver. I'm trying hard to be as quiet as a mouse while I get ready for work. You see I don't want to wake up my mum. She's having a sleep-in. She's been doing that a lot lately because of her 'dicky ticker'. Even though it's serious, I laugh when she says that because it sounds a bit rude. But that's what she calls it, so I call it that too. It'll be fixed up soon though.

It's almost time to go, so I tiptoe towards the front door. 'See you later Ged,' I whisper. The blinds are shut, but I can see his lumpy shape on the couch. He looks over at me, and then looks away. He's so grumpy since mum got sick. Bit worried, I guess.

The front door clicks shut behind me and it feels so good to be outside. I breathe in, filling my lungs with air. Rain's coming. I can smell it.

On the way to the front gate, giant weeds grab me and block my way. They've made damp circles on my clothes all the way up to my waist. I know I'm short, but they're taller than usual. They look a bit like those monster plants in *The Day of the Triffids*. Mum and I really love that book. We've read it together hundreds of times.

The garden's not all bad though. I smile and give a fist pump for the little yellow daffodils that poke through the tangle of green. But the daffodils won't be enough to make Boofy happy, that's for sure. That's not his real name, of course. But we call him that. Short for Boof Head. That's not his real name either, by the way. Mr Williams, that's his real name, is our across-the-road neighbour. When we moved in, the garden looked nice, but mum and I aren't much good at gardening. Everything we planted died. But the daffodils were already here. We haven't managed to kill them yet.

Anyway, Mr Williams is fussy about his garden. Mum says he's always 'buggerising around on his hands and knees' pulling out any little thing that shouldn't be there.

Mum told me she was 'absolutely rovable', when, a few months ago, he had a go at her about 'the jungle'. That's what he calls our garden. 'Just because ya live in housing commission doesn't mean ya can't keep the garden nice,' he yelled at her.

Well, if you knew mum, you'd know she wasn't going to stand for that rubbish. She told him she could 'smell the beer on his breath from the front gate' and to 'get off his high horse

before he fell off it.' She says people like him love to pick on people like us because we're the only housos in the street. Since then, we started calling him Boof Head, or Boofy for short. We laugh our heads off every time we say it. He'd be rovable if he knew.

I look for Boofy as I head for the bus stop. No sign. I don't usually go on my own, but it's too cold now for mum to come on the bus like she usually does. I'm not really on my own anyway, 'cos there are some kids up ahead. I hear them before I see them. It's Saturday morning and they're headed to netball. They're running and jumping around, laughing and screaming as they wait for their mum to back out down the driveway. I give them a big smile, but they don't seem to notice me.

These days I'm working at a café called The Secret Recipe. And before that I worked at a bakery. I don't like to think about the bakery much. Things didn't work out there. I remember the day mum put on her best dress and headed off to see the manager. She told him in front of all the customers that he should be ashamed of taking advantage of me, ripping me off. She was fierce, like some sort of wild animal. Maybe a lion or a tiger. I'd never seen her like that before. Everyone in the room went quiet and the manager's mouth hung open as she yelled at him. 'You can stick your job,' she said, and she slammed the door behind us.

Mum was a bit funny after that. On the way home, on the bus, she was blinking her eyes a lot. And when she saw me looking, she said she couldn't wait to get home because her 'bloody shoes were pinching her bloody toes'. I was a

bit worried though, because she looked like a balloon that had lost all its air.

After that, it was ages before I got another job. But one day we got up early and went job hunting together. Mum said we were 'on a mission'. We went to all the shops in the shopping centre, even though her breathing was sort of funny. Then, just when we were going to give up, we bumped into Mrs DeSanto, who lives around the corner from us. She owns The Secret Recipe and she said she'd give me a go. She reckoned because COVID was pretty much finished, lots of businesses were hiring and she was really struggling to get staff. That was six months ago. I help in the kitchen on weekends and get paid exactly the same as everyone else. I still get a bit mixed up if I have to help take orders at the counter, but Mrs DeSanto says it will just take time to get the hang of it. Can't wait to tell mum I'm not 'on trial' anymore. I'm 'permanent part-time' from today.

After work, I sneak some hot chips onto the bus to celebrate. Frank, he's the driver, he sees me do it and gives me a wink. I can't eat them at home anymore and he knows it. 'Health hazard,' the doctor told mum. So, mum said she was 'whacking on a temporary chip ban' 'til she has her operation. She's told everyone about it, even Frank. I'm pretty sure the ban doesn't apply to the bus, but I'll need to finish them off before I get home. They're hot and salty and delicious, but they're fogging up the window next to me. When I wipe it with my sleeve it feels wet and freezing.

The next stop is mine, so I jump off, and that's when I see there are black clouds all around

me, racing across the sky. I dash for home and quickly empty the mailbox on the way in, just like always. And then I shut the front door behind me. Gently. Quietly. Click.

Inside the house, I stand still and listen. Mum's bedroom door is still closed. The old clock on the mantle is the only sound I hear. Tick tock.

Today's letters go on top of the others in the kitchen. They all sit unopened, piled up on the bench. Even though the kitchen's gloomy, I can still see the angry looking words stamped on some of the envelopes. Overdue Account. Some of the other letters are from the hospital. Probably about mum's operation. There's one letter from the NDIS. That'll be about me.

Ged's still sitting in the lounge. 'Have you moved at all today, mate?' I ask. He whimpers. He's always doing that lately, so I grab his lead. 'Let's try and beat the rain, Geddy.' He looks up and his tail gives a tiny wag before he remembers he's in a grump, and it stops again.

We head off on our walk and a police car whizzes by. Looking for someone I reckon. Probably the Papazoglou twins. They live in the next street. The twins are on the war path throwing rocks at people's roofs. They told me the other day that their dad has run away with a woman. But the woman wasn't Mrs Papazoglou. I told them my dad's not around either. Mum says he 'hoofed it' when she got pregnant. Makes it sound like he rode off on a big horse, or something. But he only caught the train down to Melbourne and that was that. She said she got 'such a bloody shock' when she found out she was pregnant, because she thought she was

too old to have kids. Forty-five is really old to be having a kid apparently. But dad must have been even more shocked by the sounds of it. Anyway, the twins aren't that bad. They don't throw rocks on our roof, which is a good thing because of mum's dicky ticker.

Mrs Mulvaney is up ahead, on the other side of the road. She's sweeping up some dead leaves. She used to be one of my teachers at high school. But that was years ago. Neither of us is there anymore. 'Hello Gracie Davis. Haven't seen your mum around for weeks. How is she going?' she asks. Mrs Mulvaney always uses my full name. Don't know why. It makes everything sound really serious, like I'm in trouble or something.

'Hi Mrs Mulvaney. She's resting until she has her operation.'

'Goodness me, I thought she had that operation months ago.'

Then, she starts going on about the weather 'closing in'. She's blaming Nina again, who I think must be the weather girl on TV. I don't understand why it's all Nina's fault. Someone to blame I s'pose.

Ged and I wave goodbye and keep walking. I reckon Mrs Mulvaney is okay, but maybe lonely since she stopped teaching. Maybe she could get a job at the café with me. I could show her what to do. Mum says she's a bit of a 'nosey parker'. She used to pop over 'unannounced' and mum didn't really like it. So, what we'd do if we saw her coming was to switch the TV off and scrunch down behind the couch so she couldn't see us through our front windows. And we'd stay like that. Hiding. Frozen like statues. Until

she gave up and went away. Sometimes, when we hid, mum would look at me and I could see her eyes crinkle and go all watery. And her body would start shaking. And then she'd start giggling. And then I'd start giggling. And we'd put our hands over our mouths so that we didn't make any noise. It was hilarious.

Big, fat raindrops are smacking into our heads, so Ged and I take the hint and head home. It's pretty dark now. And the thunder is loud and right above us, so we step on it, and jog around the final corner.

And that's when I see them.

Their car is parked outside our house, with its blue and red lights flashing. My heart is thumping so hard that I think I might have caught what mum's got. I look across the road and see Mr Williams's venetian blinds moving. And then they snap shut. I wonder if the police want to talk to us about the weeds. If I promise to pull them out, maybe we won't be in trouble anymore.

A policeman walks slowly towards me. He doesn't seem in a rush at all, not like in the movies. When he reaches me, he says my name and other things, something about mum, but his voice sounds far away, and the words are

getting mixed up in my head. I'm not really hearing him very well. My eyes feel watery too, but not in a good way, like when we're hiding behind the couch.

We go inside and the house is full of people. This is wrong. It's not how it should be. We need peace and quiet for mum to get better. I can see a stranger reading one of the letters on the bench. She looks up and says to the policeman, 'Sixty-five-year-old female. She had a heart operation scheduled for two weeks' time. Cancelled twice due to COVID restrictions by the looks of it.'

Now someone is in mum's room. She'll hate that. They've put her on a bed with wheels and they're pushing it through the front door. There's a sheet over her too. I can't even see her face to say goodbye.

'It's probably been about six weeks by the looks of things,' I hear someone say.

The policeman sitting on the couch is still talking to me, but I'm not listening. He gets up and goes to the kitchen to get me a glass of water. Ged is right next to me, and I tug on his lead. We get up and scrunch down behind the couch so no one can see us. I hug him close to me. We are wet and smell of rain.