

The Lock House

Kevin Price

There was a time in my childhood when I seemed to be surrounded by crockery carrying art of bygone eras. I had my own dishes, and my brothers too had theirs, with the *bunnykins* images of May Gibbs. At one grandmother's house were tea cups with Constable's wheat fields, and at the other's colourful still lifes of fruits and flowers. To tell the truth, I never thought much about it; certainly it never occurred to me to consider these touches of old England on an Australian country kitchen table to be any more than a decal on a tea cup or a saucer.

Until I passed an old shop where a flimsy curtain of dust rose on a stream of morning sun splashed inside the door and shielded the musty history of assorted bric-a-brac hidden in dark recesses where only priests and magicians might find uses for their business.

No more than a step inside the doorway—a timber-framed affair from which hung webs of varnish no longer able to render its protective services—the beam of light fell like a Super Trooper on a rickety three-legged washstand and the jug and basin, yellowed and crazed with age, that perched stoically on top.

It wasn't characteristic for me, at least not normally, to examine the detritus of other people's lives in antique or second-hand shops. I'm the sort of person who sees a sign to a garage sale and slinks off in the opposite direction. But that water jug had something. And it took a moment for me to see it clearly: the image painted on its side.

Even though age has impaired my sight, the red jumper and white dog on the far bank struck me with the kind of chord a church organ uses in the opening phrase of the epiphanic hymn. Its crunch was like a penny dropping in the centre of a tin can a millimetre from where an ant danced for its supper: deafening in its stillness. And yet the specks of red and white held me as firmly as any iron shackles. They were miniature, a splash like a lone quondong in

a green salad. But I knew I had seen that jumper before.

The old lock house, with its creaking water wheels and frayed thatching had no hold on me; nor the roar of the river as it crashed down the spillway foaming the air and spattering the wild jungle of bramble and prickly pear lining the near bank with its fine mist of rain. Of course the water wheels were no longer in use. The lock was raised and lowered by electric motors now, a false whine that cried pitifully as the timbers of a hundred years or more groaned under the strain of clanking chains. With every rise, the river's release thundered out its new arousal, flinging wild spray skyward, soaking the air, drowning out the calls of the larks and robins that hunted bugs in the grass and shrubs. And blotting out the red jumper and the white dog.

I knew her when she was a child. When she would walk to the bank of the river and throw sticks for the dog. When she would laugh out loud at the dog's failed attempts to snare the birds as they swooped in playful aerial dogfights. I knew her when she dared herself to cross the lock on the rickety beams that bridged the river, and the hundred times she did it. So often we laughed about the adventure. I knew her before the storm came and left the trap. One small piece of river kelp. One small step in the wrong place. One small memory.

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