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Toasting an Honorary Jet and Okay Son-of-a-Bitch'

Luke M. Johnson

University of Wollongong, lukej@uow.edu.au

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Toasting an Honorary Jet and Okay Son-of-a-Bitch by Luke Johnson

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Luke Johnson's work has appeared in numerous journals and been shortlisted for such awards as the 2014 Josephine Ulrick Prize. His novella *Ringbark* was published by *Going Down Swinging* in 2015 as part of the Longbox series. He lectures in Creative Writing at UTS and UoW.



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Toasting an Honorary Jet and Okay Son-of-a-Bitch

What a circus. Old people wearing red-rimmed wayfarer sunglasses and riding scooters, bums getting around in toupees made from real human hair, ugly teenagers dressed in t-shirts that say, *so fucking ugly! so fucking what!* I stopped in Newtown once before, to look at a sofa bed for sale. The man selling the sofa bed said to me, I can tell you it's the most comfortable sofa bed I've ever screwed on; that's a fact. It was his guarantee to me against discomfort, I guess. He was wearing a vest and I thought comfort was clearly not his big thing. I looked at him in his vest and asked him, Have you ever let somebody fact check you with that vest on? I tried pronouncing the word the way he had pronounced it, *fact*, with my nostrils forming a diaeresis over my vowel of a mouth. He flattened out his chin and said, Go back to the north side, arsehole. I said, Don't be so sore. He went inside his apartment and left the sofa bed on the street out front with only his dog to look after it. I have a suspicion the mutt might have been named William Carlos Williams after the poet William Carlos Williams. At least, it had the initials WCW engraved on the pendant attached to its collar and when I petted it and asked it to tell me something interesting it barked in an offbeat, syncopated sort of way.

That was a year and a half ago. Today it's, 'Sir, we are trying to raise money for racism.' Yes, reluctantly, but sure enough, I'm in Newtown again. Not looking for furniture but to help honour

my father with a bronze cast in the foyer of the theatre where they staged his first ever play. Of five children, I'm the only one to have followed in his decrepit, artistic footsteps. My participation is expected. Something in the order of, 'Yes, he was a tyrant to live with—but didn't he know how to pull at the heartstrings.' Maybe even an elaboration on how my own writing is going after that. Provided there's some genuine interest, of course. Often hard to tell. But I'm getting ahead of myself. See, before any of this conjecture can take place, the man walking in front of me needs to drop a dollar into the girl's *bucket for racism*, so that I can slip past without being harassed and the world can become the stupider, albeit slightly more tolerant, place she dreams of. 'Against racism,' he corrects her, impatiently putting his hand into his pocket. He's black, she's white—he should know, I guess. I'm tempted to ask him if he's sure. She nods her head enthusiastically and in it goes. And on I go.

Past the red and white barber shop where dad used to get his beard trimmed and neck shaved. Of course, it's a café now. The kind that expects its patrons to bring their own chairs. Not completely true: there's a pile of dirty red and white cushions on the footpath out front. Then again, I suppose people who drink their coffees at places like this—places that have their web address built into their clever, lower-case titles, `thejitterybarber.com`—probably don't have any major prejudices against parking their skinny-jeaned derrieres directly on the asphalt anyway. They can watch to make sure their pushbikes aren't being stolen while writing in their journals (they write with pencils in this suburb) or working on their MacBook Pros (and process with three-thousand-dollar Macs). What's the wireless range like? I wonder as I pass. Not really; I know it's excellent—I can see the simultaneous looks of contentment and annoyance. Actually, what I really can't help wonder is what happened to the old barber who used to have signed photos of the '51 and '53 premiership winning teams on the wall of his shop and who drank cider and listened to the races while he was working and who'd dash out of the shop mid-shave to place a bet at the last minute. He used to think of my dad as an okay son-of-a-bitch too. At least, he never cut open his throat and let him bleed out over the floor after one of his horses got picked at the post. I'd call that an endorsement.

That was then. When even the gutters smelt like they'd run with Brut. Even Brut couldn't save this suburb now. What it needs now is one big long moving walkway. The kind with glass panels down either side. High glass panels. You could stroll from Darlington to Enmore without being licked by some bohemian's gypsy dog that way. On this occasion the mutt in question—not at all like the dignified beat-mutt I met the last time I was here—and its owner are standing at the stairwell entrance to one of the street's many sex shops, two doors down from `thejitterybarber.com` (or is it just the *jittery barber*, dotcom implied, like PtyLtd?), trying to argue their way in. For a moment I'm not sure which one of them has been refused the entry. 'Come on, if she was a seeing-eye-dog you'd let her in,' the mutt's owner is defending his right to bring his non-seeing-eye-dog shopping for pornography with him. 'Blind people don't buy pornography,' the shop keeper is arguing back, 'they jerk off by sound, like whales.' There's your answer, I tell myself, feeling sorry that the dog should be discriminated against on account of its able-bodied mammalian jerker owner. I consider offering to stand there and hold the leash so the owner can dash upstairs and buy some new DVDs—or magazines, if it's the sound of pages crinkling that tingles his blowhole. But I don't want to be late to the theatre do, so I just pant my tongue at the poor mutt and press on.

Jesus, the theatre do. I can see it already. A soiree of handsome actors and actresses milling about with scarves wrapped loosely around their uncollared necks, volunteer drama-academy students playing the roles of waiters and waitresses (black-tie costumes borrowed from the department

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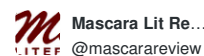
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wardrobe), celebrated choreographers appalled with the pitiful range of vegan alternatives, and one or two professional bar staff—the poor RSA-trained sons-of-bitches—acknowledging *shom-payne* orders with the tireddest of nods. If there is time to elaborate (returning to an earlier thought, circa paragraph two), then I'll state now that I intend to bite down on my lip, look them in the collective eye and respond, 'Difficulty.' Let them lower their heads then and understand how tough things must be for me—the talented bastard's untalented son. 'But we find a way to go on,' I hear myself filling the awkward after-silence, signalling the end of my dismal blessing. 'Hard as it is. We find a way, right?'

And between you and me, I must say, it gets harder every day too. The writing, that is. The letting go part was decisively easy. My father let go of us long before we ever had the chance to let go of him. He was an expert in letting go. First he let go of us and then he let go of himself. When it came time to grab hold of something again, the patch of chest covering his heart was about all he could manage. Even the number 0 at the bottom of the phone's keypad was beyond his reach by that late stage.

A word on my dad, as I pass by a schoolkid with his socks pulled right up to his knees in a way that was squarely unpopular in my heyday: he hated the theatre. My dad was meant to be a famous rugby league player, not a divorced playwright. He trained with the Newtown Jets' reserve-grade side in 1982. That was the year the first-grade team played their home games in Campbelltown in preparation for the merger. Dad probably would have been a second-rower for the rest of his life if the alliance hadn't failed and the Jets hadn't been booted out of the competition. As it was, dad fell in with the theatre crowd and never played rugby league again. This isn't as dumb as it sounds. Well, it is, but we're talking about a period when the players still held regular jobs during the week and worked out in public gyms at night and on Saturdays and held diplomatic immunity against DUI charges. My dad worked out at the Newtown gym every night and was the second strongest bench presser in the suburb. (By the time us kids came along he could lower the thing right down onto his sternum plate and shoot it back up with such force it felt like a special gravity ride you paid to go on.) Only one person in the gym could out-lift dad in those early days, and he was tied in with the theatre as a stagehand. That's where dad started. With Roger. In the day Roger worked as a cop, at night he shifted props. He was a prop cop. Shifting props with the cop: that's where dad met mum. And then some. (Like I told you, *difficulty*.)

Meeting mum was one of the stories dad didn't wait till I was old enough to tell me. 'Your mum, she was trying to be an actress,' he liked to start, thinking I'd enjoy the bawdy rhythm he used to inflect it with right from the opening. 'But the thing is,' he'd whisper, 'she was terrible. No matter what it was, they only used to give her background roles—usually playing the part of some piece of scenery, a tree or a rock or a farm animal or something. Then one day I see her waiting backstage, getting ready to go on and I say, "Hey, you're too good to be playing a tree again. I'm going to write you a lead part. How'd you like that?" "You're a stagehand," she says. "Hey, I'm a stagehand like you're a tree," I tell her back. "I'll write you a lead role but you gotta promise you'll go out with me." A week later, I finished *Willow* and when they cast her in the lead role, not only did she go out with me but she gave me a suckjob on the first date. Midway through she stopped and looked up and said, "I can do it like a tree if you want?" I just looked at her without saying anything and she went back to it, waving her arms about and making whooshing sounds as she did.'

Less than half a block from the theatre I come across dad's old pub. This was where he used to go

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after each performance. Often he wouldn't even bother with the show, he'd come here and get drunk instead and threaten to kill himself by driving his car across to the Sydney Football Stadium without stopping at a single set of lights regardless of the colour. This feat was one he famously achieved during his internship with the Jets. It's what made him a club legend without having ever even sat on the reserve bench for a first-grade game. Another time he reversed his car all the way to the top of an eight-storey parking garage. They were set to inaugurate him for this. Then the collapse.

I decide to stop in for a drink. I tell myself it will help me with those questions which require an answer beyond *difficultly*, or the condolences which come in the form of tedious stories, beginning, 'You know, I never told anyone this, but it was a performance of *The Brave* they put on at our university which convinced me to drop out of my degree in the final year and pursue fulltime acting...' 'You don't say?' 'See, arts-law was the dream my parents had for me, not the dream I had for me.' 'What about your student loan debt?' 'Sorry?' 'Never mind. How about *swooshing* your arms like tree?'

What shall I drink to? I ask myself, taking a seat at the bar. Besides me there's only two other people in this hotel. One's a permanent shadow on the wall of the poker machine room, the other's the bartender. Maybe it's too early to expect a crowd. On the north side anything before eleven-thirty p.m. is too early. I thought this was the suburb of premature crowds. What about those pagans I crossed coming out of the train station? Camped out with their sleeping bags like dedicated rock fans. Their toupees might have been made from the hair of the prophet Kurt Cobain, the way they shone up at me. The girl trying to raise money for racism could have learned a great deal from the way they went about their business too: head shamefully down, letting *the sign* do the talking. 'To dad,' I say, charging my glass.

After four beers and four toasts I'm just about ready to front the scene awaiting me, when a very unexpected thing happens. Russell Crowe comes into the bar. I know it's him straight off because tucked into the front of his tracksuit pants, with the flap that contains his licence and Medicare card hanging visibly over the drawstring crotch area, is a South Sydney Rabbitohs wallet. That is, a bright-green Velcro wallet with a big Rabbitohs emblem on its front and red hemming. Before I can say anything the son-of-a-bitch comes right up to where I'm sitting and orders himself a beer. He doesn't just order himself a beer, he leans over the bar and pours himself one. A stout. At first he drinks from his cupped hand the way we used to drink water from the taps when we were down at the netball courts kicking the soccer ball around. When he's taken his fill that way he grabs one of the dirty glasses sitting on the sink top—could even be one of my lager glasses—behind the bar and fills it, leaving no room for head. He doesn't sit down to drink either, but stands with his hairy forearms soaking the spilt beer back out of the soggy bar mats.

'What's your story, morning glory?' he says to me.

'My dad used to play reserve grade for the Jets,' I say.

'Then your dad's a bloody legend,' Russell says back.

'My dad's dead.'

'Yeah, cheers to that,' Russell nods his head, decent son-of-a-bitch that he is.

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