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# For better, or for worse

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### **Abstract**

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A blanket of smoke and the hum of familiar voices encircled the two friends. They could feel at ease here amongst their mates. They had all known each other for years. In the corner, near the jukebox, sat five or six youths ('upstarts', they called them) with some painted floosies. Henry's friend caught sight of them now and thought they would make a good change in conversation. He and Henry could talk about these youngsters for hours. 'Look at them all now...' he complained, swaying slightly, but Henry cut him short.

'D'ya know what that old raven said to me terday? She said I was a lousy —! What d'ya reckon? Me, who's slaved all these years so that madam could have everything, even a television set. And remember the washing machine I bought 'er last winter?'

'But that was second hand! And didn't 'er aunt leave 'er the TV when she died? I remember last winter — we were standing at this very counter when you told me...' His mouth froze, still half open, as he glanced up at his friend from the amber depths of his beer. For Henry looked really mad, maybe he shouldn't have been so ready to correct him. No, this could have been the wrong time for such recollections! But before he could utter a conciliatory phrase, Henry disappeared out of the pub door. Oh, well, he couldn't help it if Henry got shirty over such a trifle. He would make up with him tomorrow. Henry was sure to be here again after he knocked off work from the wharves, and then he'd slap him on the back and let him know that there were no hard feelings. And it would all be forgotten. Henry, he mused resentfully, had a very nasty temper.

Eva sat in front of the television. She hadn't heard the door open. Henry usually made a clatter when he arrived home, giving her fair warning to be out of the lounge and 'asleep' in her room. It had come to that between them. Tonight she hadn't really been able to concentrate on the film; her thoughts had kept straying back to Henry and his ever more frequent angry outbursts. She had been brooding over their lives, trying to discover where they had gone wrong. She had only just reached the conclusion that she could have in some way made their marriage more pleasant, when heavy footsteps on the kitchen lino startled her out of her reflections.

'Oh,' she exclaimed. And then, more gently, 'It's you.'

He didn't reply, but stood with the refrigerator door ajar, staring at the empty racks.

'Why is there no beer in this house?' he roared suddenly.

'You only gave me fifteen dollars last Friday...' she replied.

He stood there, hands shoved deep in his trouser pockets, his protruding stomach pushed out even further in a show of strength, as he slowly and venomously lashed out his vindictive sentence. Then he slammed the door and went to his room. 'No electricity from tomorrow, did he say? Has he gone mad?'

Blinded by sudden tears, she made her way through the narrow corridor to her own room. Closing the door behind her, she collapsed on her bed, her back heaving convulsively as she sobbed. 'He wants me to leave,' she thought. 'He wants to freeze me out. No electricity, not enough money for groceries...'

She had brought up their children and made do with the little money which had been left over from his daily visits to the pub. And now, at fifty-seven, she was used up and dismissed. She relaxed a little on the bed, finding a comfortable position for her legs. Then, as the thought passed through her mind, a faint glint started to shimmer in her eyes, and she went to sleep with an innocent smile still quivering on her lips, in peace for the first time in many years.

'No hard feelings, mate?' asked Streaky, placing a calloused hand on his friend's fat shoulders. And Henry, warmed by the gesture, replied by calling the barmaid over to their side of the counter.

'Two of the usual please, Elsie,' he boomed. Then, with the two glasses still frothing over he led the way over to a table. Streaky followed him. Henry manoeuvred his huge, sweaty bulk through the crowd, exhaling noisily as he lowered himself onto the stool. Streaky sat down

opposite him and waited quietly for Henry to speak. His friend was in high humour today, he could tell. Sipping the froth of his beer, Henry assumed a sullen, pensive air, prolonging the silence and relishing Streaky's barely suppressed expectancy.

'I'm gonna be a free man soon, mate,' he finally began. 'I see no reason ter support a woman who does nothin' all day. And when I arrive home dog-tired and needin' to relax, she's instantly at me throat — that's the only thanks I get!' He paused dramatically, then leant over the table confidently,

'I went to the County Council terday an' asked 'em to cut off the electricity. I'm hardly ever home, anyway, thanks ter 'er naggin', and d'ya know, she said nothin' when I told 'er. Nothin' at all!'

Streaky didn't know what to say. Henry obviously wanted his reassurance. Then, finally, he conceded,

'You're right, mate, it's no fun having these whinin' females around our necks. All they're ever good for is to put a bad conscience in a good bloke.'

Henry's face glowed. So Streaky felt the same way! Henry was sure, he'd done the right thing. He always did. He had a reputation among the boys — honest, dependable cobbler, that's what his mates thought of him! Hadn't he broken up that fight last Easter outside on the footpath...?

Eva heard his shuffling approach on the gravel outside. She remembered how they had spread the gravel together one Sunday afternoon, while the kids whooped around them excitedly, eager to offer their help. In those days, Henry had been a different man, he had shown in lots of little ways that he cared. She dished the sausages and potatoes up on a plate and placed it on the dining-table. Henry came into the kitchen and sat down. There was a tense silence, punctuated by the knife and fork scraping on the plate. Finally he opened his paper noisily and propped it against the sauce bottle, reading as he ate. When he had finished, he got up heavily, and opened the refrigerator. Eva wondered if it was from force of habit, or if he was just making sure that the power had been cut off. Then, with a satisfied grunt, he picked up his paper and went out the door.

The next day's dinner progressed in much the same way. Eva, Henry noticed, looked rather pale. The sight of her face caused him a momentary twinge, but remembering his plan, he escaped to the solace of the pub and his friends.

Streaky was waiting for him at the bar. He saw Henry enter and thought for a moment that he looked a bit strange. Sort of greyish, a bit green around the gills. He had even noticed it yesterday.

‘How’ve ya been?’ he greeted him, masking his concern. Henry was a vain man, always boasting of his good health.

‘All right, mate,’ Henry replied, then turned to the barmaid to order his beer. ‘Feel a bit seedy,’ he thought to himself. ‘Sausages might’ve been a bit off...’ remembering the fridge. He went home early that night. Somehow his usual enthusiasm had been lacking; Streaky had actually left him at the bar and had gone off to talk to the other blokes about the weekend races. When he got home he felt his way through the dark hallway and fell exhausted into his bed, not bothering to undress. Later that night, Eva heard him in the bathroom, retching violently. He didn’t go to work the next day, but by dinner time he felt well enough to eat.

‘The sausages might’ve been a bit off last night,’ he offered, as Eva carried his plate to his bed. But she remained silent and her face was unyielding as she left the room. After his meal, Henry went to the bathroom to spruce up. He was determined to feel well tonight. As he walked the block to the pub he took a deep breath, noticing the flowers in the neighbour’s garden for the first time in years. He decided that he would look after his health from now on. At his age he shouldn’t take his health for granted! But again that night the cheerfulness was missing from his voice, and at times he saw black patches floating in front of his eyes. He didn’t feel well. ‘Must be a wog,’ he confided to Streaky. The blokes had moved a few feet away from him, their voices hushed as if his mere presence was disturbing their conviviality. He went home early again.

The next day he could not get out of bed. Two weeks went by. Henry didn’t seem to get any better. Around noon of each day he would pick up a little, but by nightfall he would feel worse again. Streaky went to visit him one evening, but was too embarrassed to stay more than a few minutes. There had been a painful silence between them. He didn’t come again.

One day Eva called the doctor. After examining Henry he informed her that Henry’s heart had taken a bad turn. It was probably all the years of neglect. ‘A steady diet of beer...’ he had hinted professionally.

On the night following the visitation, Henry’s condition suddenly deteriorated. The doctor arrived just in time to take his last feeble pulse. Consoling, he placed a hand on Eva’s slight, slumping shoulders.

'You have done all you could, my dear. Please don't torment yourself,' he added as he noticed silent tears rolling down her furrowed cheeks.

'No one could have done anything for him. He had only himself to blame for this kind of end.'

Then he went down the hall, placing his hat on his head. With a final, sympathetic glance at Eva, he left.

She stood by the closed door for a long time, as if lost in thought. Then, slowly, a smile spread across her thin face and she whispered gently to herself,

'Yes. He had only himself to blame...'

# Geoff Page

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## TWO STEP FOR JIM LEE

First year out  
as teachers say  
first year in  
a wild west high  
where kids fired bobby  
pins not pellets  
first year out  
in wood and fibro  
a bachelors' house  
with divorcee  
who wore always  
a failed kimono  
and had an 'under-  
standing' with her  
gentleman SP