



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

**Kunapipi**

---

Volume 9 | Issue 2

Article 8

---

1987

# Now When It Rains

Garry Disher

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

---

## Recommended Citation

Disher, Garry, Now When It Rains, *Kunapipi*, 9(2), 1987.  
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol9/iss2/8>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Now When It Rains

### **Abstract**

A kid on an early paper round had a go at breaking the windscreen of Miller's Ford Customline with bricks, and woke Miller up. The pattern of cracks pulsed and Miller was reminded of those bullets coming through the perspex of the chopper that was bringing him back to Nui Dat. He thought: Hair of the dog. Miller's two-tone home rocked on its springs as he felt beneath the seat. He had his eyes closed in case there were spiders in the windscreen web. A spring in the back seat pulled a thread on his trousers. A good car in its day, the Customline.

## Now When It Rains

A kid on an early paper round had a go at breaking the windscreen of Miller's Ford Customline with bricks, and woke Miller up. The pattern of cracks pulsed and Miller was reminded of those bullets coming through the perspex of the chopper that was bringing him back to Nui Dat. He thought: Hair of the dog. Miller's two-tone home rocked on its springs as he felt beneath the seat. He had his eyes closed in case there were spiders in the windscreen web. A spring in the back seat pulled a thread on his trousers. A good car in its day, the Customline.

'Bugger off,' he said to the kid, who was chanting now that Miller had raised the bottle to drink.

Miller settled against the door like a man accustomed. Customline, custom-tailored, custom, unaccustomed as I am with white-wall tyres and automatic gears, customer, cussed, cusp, rusk, Farex for Customline families, cusp, cusped, cuspidal shape. Miller made finger sculptures in the air, curving his fingers, his hands meeting at the fingertips.

He got out. The door shut like a dream, as rich and secret as a Rolls. Passing a Prefect, passing a Vanguard, spinning his bottle against the side of a Bedford truck, dew wetting his boots, Miller entered the lane. The rot must stop. I need a drop. I must mop up the lot.

In the park Miller put his hands in his pockets and stopped and spoke consideringly to a man with a pram collecting bottles. 'I put them down,' said Miller, 'and you take them away. You need me, sport.'

The bottlo tiddled by on his obsessed little legs, his pants flapping, the pram pitching and bouncing enough to hurt Miller badly in the guts at the sight of it. Miller turned, watching the man rush down paths to rubbish bins or across the grass to a tree. He had wet lips opening and closing without words, lips kissing bubbles in the air within the privacy of his shoulders hunched over to sort and stack and balance his load of bottles.

'Take it easy,' called Miller from the path. 'You'll get a gut's ache.' Give a man a gut's ache like mine and he's stuffed for good.

The bottlo pouted and ducked his head away.

'I put them down and you pick them up,' said Miller.

Squinting wetly the man darted down a path. He met a woman in a brown coat with no socks or joy about her, and a matching pram.

'Family business, eh cobber?' said Miller, observing. 'Got any that aren't empty?'

The man and the woman wheeled around to make for the last rubbish bin. Miller leaned into the wind and came in on their leeward side.

'Keeping fit?'

The woman sniffed and Miller saw the splits for her toes in her sandals. Miller told her: 'If it wasn't for me.' He pushed down on her pram handle and squinted for tell-tale surges of liquid in the top-most bottles. 'Springs like a Customline,' he said, rocking the pram again.

'Clear out of here,' said the woman.

'Bloody dero,' said the man.

That's a laugh. You dried up old turd. Load up your utility three times a week, right? I put them down and you pick them up, and most probably you roll your own three times a day, you haven't caught up with tailor-mades yet, you old dickhead, give the wife here a kick in the cunt once in a while. Dry guts. Pure guts. 'That's a laugh,' said Miller aloud, rocking the pram.

'You're not sober,' said the woman.

Not sober. Miller, offended, sailed away, his head down. You think his head's down because he's a dero or ashamed or tired. No, his head's down because he depends on the odd cigarette butt, coin or note, or woollen cap, or bottle not quite empty. Keeping warm. Booze keeps Miller warm, calms the pain in his stomach; he sleeps, he doesn't need to eat. If you had a bed in a Customline, you'd sleep a lot. Not sober. Christ.

'I put them down and you pick them up,' yelled Miller at them from a distance. What we've got here is a precious balance going. A balance situation. A balance-type situation. A pacify a region situation. A terminate with extreme prejudice situation. A pre-emptive, re-active strike situation. The doctor tells me I've got delayed stress reaction syndrome, a name for all the things that have gone wrong. You come back and you're the arsehole of the world. It was the Americans who lost — we didn't lose anything.

You're on patrol in the jungle, right, keeping off the tracks, along comes a Yank patrol, guys in ten-gallon hats and t-shirts and aftershave, doped to the eyeballs, there's this guy with a transistor to his friggin ear, singing 'Sky Pilot', they're all coming down the track, you can smell them and hear them, but you keep quiet, keep clear of the bastards,

that's the first thing you learn, that the friggin Yanks attract a fire fight, they're so stupid you can get 50 dollars off them for a boomerang. So, the Viet Cong fire one shot, right, the Yanks dive into the mulga, only there's these panjee stakes point upright in the bushes, smeared with poison or shit or something, and soon there's guys squealing like pigs. You bloody melt away, call up a chopper maybe, you don't bloody go in and free the bastards.

'We have a fine balance-type situation here,' said Miller alone in the park. Would you prefer me to hoard my bottles or drink in the pub, eh? Eh? 'I'm straight with you — don't bloody bite the hand that feeds you,' yelled Miller into the empty air. I'm straight with you, like a plumbline. A pop, that's what I need. Ease my guts.

Miller dirtied a cubicle but washed his hands and splashed his face for the new day. His guts hurt him. He would scrub and scrub his hands but always they would film up again. He felt it every day, a hot, corrupting film of oil creeping across his skin, burning to get inside him and stuff up his guts and his head. There was this fixed-wing plane spraying the jungle; the doctors painted our sores with this pink paint and called it tropical ulcers. Not like any tropical ulcers I ever saw.

Miller considered the morning on a park bench. Somewhere there was a band playing, with whistles and a parade-ground cry now and then, people gathering. A fly complained around spots on his clothes, causing him to cross and uncross his arms and legs. 'Oh, bugger off,' he said.

The Edinburgh Castle would be open. Miller traversed the park; and, at a point half-way across, he began to jig and reel, on top of the world, calling out, 'Missed one, you evil little shit,' pointing one blithe foot and then the next, hands on hips everybody, gentlemen to lead, one two three: a bottle in a paper bag, empty on the ground for all to see, waiting for to be collected, and they bloody missed it. Wacko.

Miller stood and correctly looked left and right. Like pitfalls, like bars on a ladder, like entry wounds tapping one ahead of the other up the back of some coon, the zebra lines on the road linked Miller to the Edinburgh Castle on the other side. Delicately Miller gathered himself and stepped out, putting his heels on a white bar, perhaps, and his toes on the tar, stepping on lines: I couldn't care less about what's going to get me around the corner because I'm not going around any corner, I'm going straight inside.

But, 'Be on your way,' they said, or words to that effect. Miller swayed on the footpath. People were gathering, men in suits or jackets and ties who were conscious of their age and health. Miller watched them shake hands and say, 'G'day, you're looking well.' Men were gathering and

Miller was fascinated. Big men in expensive outdoor suits and shoes for walking went to the front row, and tired men with cardigans on underneath smoked with the burning tip pointing in to their palms, and here and there an untidy fellow rocky on his feet, tolerated and passed from group to group. Miller warmed to these fellows but had his eye on the other kinds.

‘You wouldn’t have twenty cents for a cup of coffee?’

Some of the reactions he got Miller wanted to say: You must really hate yourself, dressed like that, those buttons and collars and ties pinching in your soul. But after ten minutes Miller learned his lesson. He could run a bludging school, the lessons he was learning these days. The impulse was right but the wording was wrong. Never give the bastards an escape route, right? Ask a question like you wouldn’t have twenty cents for a cup of coffee and they’ll say straight away no I wouldn’t, and think they’re bloody clever to boot.

So, one hand in his pocket, collar up, a cold hand pinching together his lapels, Miller stammered, a small man diminished in the chilly air: ‘I can’t get warm, mate. Could you let me have twenty cents for a cup of coffee.’ No question mark either. They wouldn’t like it but more than one would say: ‘You’ll need more than twenty cents I should think. Here, take a dollar.’ A nod or a short thanks will do. And don’t bleed your territory dry. Get out while you can and come back to new faces later. Miller got out with eleven dollars in his trousers, wanting to say to more than one man: You must hate yourself, dressed like that, binding yourself at the neck and wrists like that, cutting off life, cutting out light.

In the bottle shop Miller chose thoughtfully, going for cheapness and impact. He warmed to the woman serving him. All the fractures of the day were mending. It was like a three-day leave, when he wore his Hawaiian shirt and some hippie beads in the hair at his throat, and went to wipe himself out in some bar, some place smelling of come and dope. It wasn’t home, I told myself, but it was a way out. So, some bar chick switches your money when you’re having a bloody shower after, or their feathers or brothers or pimps roll you in the bloody lane out the back, well, you bloody don’t let it happen again. Next time, you hide your money in *her* clothes while *she*’s having a shower. It kept the adrenalin going. And then if you’re really after some action the White Mice have closed off the street to do a sweep for deserters or VC infiltrators or guys in the black market. Blow you away, you look sideways at those White Mice bastards.

‘Been a bit of a bad boy, I hear,’ said a voice.

Oh, Christ, what now. Miller, his poor bony behind on a cold

flagstone in a doorway near the Edinburgh Castle, looked up at the policeman. According to Miller's gestures the bottle in a paper bag on the step next to him might well belong to someone else, might well have been left there from the night before, missed by the bottlos this morning. And, for all the policeman knew, judging by the way Miller now eased his limbs up and fussily brushed away the dust, Miller might well live behind this door.

'I've had reports you've been botting money off people,' said the policeman. 'That's an offence.'

'Don't know what you mean,' said Miller.

'You just knock it off, all right pal? Stay away from here or some bloke's going to put the boot in and I can't say I'll be able to get to the scene on time to prevent a serious injury, if you get my drift.'

Miller and the policeman moved along. Back at the Customline it would be warm and soft; a bloke could lead his life in peace and quiet in its back seat. 'All I want is peace and quiet,' said Miller on the footpath. His guts were acting up, there was no peace and quiet until he had another snort. All around him blokes were getting into lines and other blokes held banners, and then the marching tunes on bagpipes set them off and away, group by group down the road.

Miller was consumed. Like a sergeant-major, he goose-stepped alongside them, beaming, matching some old duffer pace for pace, doing a little hop and skip with him to help him get back into step. Miller hooked his finger under one bloke's medals. 'Twinkle, twinkle,' said Miller, 'little star.' Off into the crowd on the footpath sometimes, beaming at some old dear shocked with him. Miller stood at rocky attention, eyes wild, chin in, beaming at the crowd.

'Out of the way, mate.' Channel 2 was covering the event. Poor old diggers marching, they couldn't stop or look away, straight into the gobbling camera and out at mum sitting home in the lounge-room. Miller got in on the act, but they pushed and shoved and he spun round and then he heard positive, definite, affirmative clapping, not the other kind, getting closer too. People craned to see, then nodded yes, clapped hard and proud and stern, hands clapping high at chest level, a way of telling the boys that, while the rest of the country raised a clamour back then, they had been behind them all the way. Personally, Miller clapped for the orange arm bands. Poor buggers, they aren't sure what they're doing here.

Miller, absurdly marching and an embarrassment, careened on down the road with them, deflected by light poles and here and there his difficulty in judging distance when it came to putting down a foot on the

ground. Until a smart khaki arm nabbed him, spinning him round.

‘Okay, pal,’ said the soldier. ‘You’ve had your little joke.’ Everyone wants to be Miller’s pal today. Spitting chips, beside himself with bastards like you, stirrers who had it easy while these blokes. The soldier couldn’t get his words out. On and on, giving Miller hurtful little jabs, bending his arm up his back.

Good on you said the crowd to this smart young lieutenant marshalling away the troublemaker. ‘Well, well,’ said Miller. ‘So they made you a lieutenant, did they Jessop?’

Because Miller was small and quick Jessop had made him forward scout. You know, you went some distance ahead of the main group to make contact or check things out, you’re completely by your bloody self out there, it’s you the VC zaps first, silently so as not to alert the others, or sometimes you surprise one another and you find yourself in the centre of a firefight. Creepy, out there in the mulga by yourself. Three bloody months I did that job. It was nerve-wracking. Gave me the willies. You know, you’re only supposed to do it for a short time because it’s such a tense job. High risk and all that. So I ask Sergeant Jessop if I can have a break from it. I was really getting the willies. I thought I’d stuff things up if I didn’t get a break from it. The bastard refused, so one night when I got pissed I took a rifle to him in his tent. Bailed him up in his tent for a few hours. He’d try and talk me out of it and I’d let him think I was having second thoughts, then I’d stick the barrel up under his chin again. Had him bluffed for hours. Then the next day they dock my bloody pay, take away my leave, and I find myself forward scout on some bloody patrol again. Cruel. It was cruel.

‘Do I know you, pal?’ said Jessop, marshalling away Miller, an embarrassment on this day and occasion. He hustled Miller between parked cars, across the footpath and with a hard bang against a warehouse door. ‘Do I? Do I know you, pal?’

‘I should have fragged you properly, Jessop,’ replied Miller. ‘I should have chucked a grenade in your tent or shot you while I had the chance.’

‘I know you,’ said Jessop, dancing on the spot. ‘I know you...’

Because he had been tired and jumpy, Miller had led the patrol into an ambush. The jungle was wet, deadened by falling rain. They were all shot dead and Miller, forward of the shooting, smallish, quick and scared, hid until it was hours later and quiet. Rain fell, wetting the leaves and chilling him. Not like the VC to make a mistake like that, mis-count, allow him to go ahead of the ambush and then forget about him. So he stayed until it was hours later.

Then it was time he found the radio and called in a chopper to pick up

the dead. In the ambush clearing Miller found an old woman searching the bodies. I saw red and blew her away. I emptied a whole magazine into her, criss-crossing her and up and down. She bloody didn't have a chance, she was cut off like a light switch, pieces flying off her. And then I stabbed her.

I told the inquiry I had reason to believe she was booby-trapping the dead, but I don't think she was. Something snapped. The rain was falling and I'd just done the worst thing I've ever done in my entire life.

'You should never have sent me out on that patrol, Jessop,' said Miller. 'I had the willies, I needed a rest. All the blokes killed.'

Wrought up, Miller battered at Jessop down a side street of the city, in the padlocked doorway of a warehouse, while, on the road above, the crowd was packing up to follow the last of the marchers, to hear the Governor's address, observe two minutes, and go home.

'You can't go around saying things like that,' said Jessop. 'You'll get into strife saying things like that.' His mind wasn't quick on its feet. Clearly this wasn't a case of if there's any trouble today, and no policeman to deal with it, officers marshalling the march may, with discretion, deal with it themselves. 'Settle *down*, pal,' he said. Miller was windmilling in the grip of awful memories and would not be calmed down. Inspired, Miller got at Jessop's officers' pistol on its lanyard, cocked it, and said, his eyes alight:

'I'm going to blow you away.'

He pulled the trigger and the hammer clicked on the empty chamber. Officers marshalling today's march will, of course, make certain that their weapons are not loaded.

Miller's energy drained into the ground. Jessop backed away, poking his retrieved pistol approximately at his holster and getting into a tangle. Miller — he just wanted to get back to the Customline with something to keep him warm and ease his guts.

A student with a tape recorder after varieties of experience for her media assignment swooped down and overwhelmed Miller cadging coffee money outside the pub. They came to an arrangement. Beaming, Miller talked and talked into the tape recorder. He has developed a nice turn of phrase over the years. 'And now when it rains,' he said, 'I can smell death.'