

See Change

Mairi Neil

Ted's white van slid into his usual parking spot by Highett railway station. He glanced at his watch with a sigh of irritation - 12.15pm. *So late!* The traffic slow because of a faulty set of lights on the highway. He looked at the windows of Tony's Barber Shop caked in grime. *There goes my cuppa with Jude. No way will I finish before 1.00pm.*

He retrieved a blue plastic comb from the glove box. A few strokes fashioned his thick, greying locks *a la* Elvis Presley. The panel van's tinted windows made it difficult for passersby to see, but a little boy pulled along by a middle-aged matron twisted sideways and peered at the windscreen. Ted grinned, turned the comb into a microphone and mimed Elvis performing. *That should bring back memories Grandma.*

His gyrating silhouette distorted and grotesque. Grandma's sour face mouthed Ted was 'a perve' and the kinder kid poked out his tongue while giving Ted the finger. As the audience moved on, Ted lamented the lack of courtesy in modern society. He muttered aloud what he would do if the boy were his son, then struggled to prevent the usual melancholy descending when he thought of Mark. He missed the teenager who was staying with his mother for several days.

He'll come home with more questions to explain or clarify. Kate, never gives up poisoning the boy, twisting memories, even making up details of our life together. Ted put the comb away and slammed the glove box shut. *I wasn't perfect but neither were you Kate!*

The van door creaked as Ted eased out of the driver's seat. He made a mental note for the hundredth time to give the hinge a squirt of oil. After straightening his navy wind-cheater and brushing imaginary fluff from his jeans, he sauntered to the backdoor to collect his tools. The shiny duco of the Commodore parked in the next bay a flattering mirror. The early morning walks paying off, summer's visible paunch gone and waistline trimmer.

Ted's mood improved but the smug smile disappeared when he examined the row of shops. 'Jeez, you're like a footie team after a rough game in the rain,' he muttered.

He plonked his bucket down with a frown. He couldn't even see Jude's shadow sitting at her polished mahogany desk in the Tax Agent's office. It had become a habit to seek the familiar outline framed by a pile of papers and her computer. Whenever Ted popped his head inside the door to say hello her smile a ray of sunshine even if chatting on the telephone giving advice. Jude, a lady of the old school with courtesy and competence synonymous with efficiency and results.

Ted considered her a good looker but not a head-turner, pride in her appearance but not a slave to fashion. He shook his head. Kate's shopping sprees each season accumulated so many clothes, they spilled into the wardrobe in the spare room. Her overuse of the credit card a contributing factor to their failed marriage.

The bucket filled and *Windoleen* sprayed, Ted scrubbed the nearest window. Thoughts of Jude stirred excitement. The pleasure he remembered from a night out with the boys when young and single. He hummed, *'Looking for love in all the wrong places...'*

The tyranny of his poor relationship with Kate forced him to examine his lifestyle, improving his confidence that he'd changed for the better. The morning newspaper reported life expectancy for men in Australia 78 years and climbing. Ted shuddered - the thought of thirty lonely years terrifying.

Meeting Jude a godsend after no close female companionship for three years. The same newspaper splashed a picture of a fifty-something couple's wedding. A month ago, Mark confided Kate had a boyfriend, although the man just a voice on the telephone.

Why should I be a social hermit? A vision of a smiling Jude appeared. I need a mate too and Jude's greetings seem warmer... she's often wearing apricot after I commented the colour suited her.

For the last few months, he and Jude lunched in the kitchenette at her office. He looked forward to the regular date. *I need to ask her out to dinner.*

He paused and considered his task. If he went to the other end of the block, he'd pass Jude's window, could explain his lateness, and perhaps convince her to rearrange her lunch hour. Butterflies fluttering in his stomach, threatened to lodge in his throat. Hands trembled as he gathered his gear.

Get a grip, mate, you're fifty years old, not fifteen. This is Jude, a friendly lunch date. She must be lonely sometimes with only those two poodles for company. There's chemistry working Ted, got to build on it mate. Seize the moment.

He marched with a confident stride to squirt and wipe windows with expert ease. An upbeat tempo of swishes and swipes as he whistled, *My, my, my, it's a beautiful day ...*