

## *Without Grace*

**Mairi Neil**

‘What do we do now? You told me nothing could go wrong. That the car had been serviced.’ Fred slammed the car bonnet in disgust, ‘Now look at us? We could die out here.’

Grace yelled, matching his anger, ‘Well, I didn’t bargain for you driving like a maniac. No wonder the engine overheated.’ She stomped back to her side of the car, ‘and don’t be so dramatic,’ she mumbled, before climbing in and slamming the door.

Fred refused to take the blame and stuck his head through the open window, ‘The engine overheated because the gasket blew. The car’s a piece of junk!’

They glared at each other before Fred said, ‘admit your Dad sold us a lemon. Up to his old tricks as per usual.’ He kicked the front tyre farewell and marched off down the deserted road.

‘Well, that was childish,’ Grace screamed at his retreating back, ‘where are you going? There’s no farmhouse for miles.’

A kookaburra laughed from atop a nearby electricity pole and another joined him. Apart from the birds, the road and surroundings as empty and silent as the desert. Grace rummaged in her bag and produced a bottle of water as she stared at endless brown scrub. She shook her head in disgust - of all the places to break down...

Through the rearview mirror, she watched Fred march into the distance. His silhouette shimmering in the summer haze. Where did he think he was going? They really were in the middle of nowhere but some farmer or truck would turn up and offer assistance if they stayed put. People helped because it was the country way. The sense of community and support out here was what she missed in the city. This was why attending her sister’s wedding so important — although Fred said they should catch the train.

She wanted to believe her Dad had changed, but Fred proved right once more. Dodgy Dave, as he nicknamed her father, ripped them off, yet again. Just like the blokes he called mates at his local pub, her Dad spent his days thinking up schemes to get rich at other people’s expense. His own family not immune from tricks. She stemmed tears with a tissue.

Her sister warned her, ‘Don’t bring Dad to my wedding. A leopard doesn’t change its spots. He abandoned us years ago and he’s only got in touch with you to rip you off. I don’t want anything to do with him!’

Grace sighed. She’ll eat humble pie when Fred returns. She remembered the road dipped, and looked around, but Fred no longer in sight. She stabbed at her mobile phone but they were still in a blackspot. She thumped her fist on the dashboard, ‘Bugger, bugger, bugger.’ The kookaburras laughed. ‘Oh, shut up,’ she spluttered and then threw her head back and joined them.

What a ridiculous situation! Once Fred cools down he'll come back. He always calms down after a walk. She smiled at the thought of kissing and making up. They'd have a giggle and wait for rescue. When he's able to use his phone he'll ring the RACV, if a passing motorist hasn't stopped.

Grace climbed into the back seat and stretched out. Until Fred returned she'd lose herself in the prize-winning thriller by new crime writer, Minette Walters. Fred bought the book for her birthday. She smiled at the inscription, 'If I ever lost you, life would indeed be cold ...'

She congratulated herself in having the foresight to pack water and nibbles – at a pinch they could last the night. Soon the words danced and wobbled on the page, as the emotion of her predicament and the heat sent Grace into a deep sleep.

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Tap, tap, tap...

The man's face peering in the car window startled her. She fumbled to sit upright before returning his smile as he signalled her to unlock the door mouthing through the tiny gap she'd left for air, 'You Grace? Fred sent me.'

She climbed out of the car yawning and stretching with relief. She looked at the battered ute parked beside the Commodore, 'Where is that bad-tempered husband of mine? Too embarrassed to show his face?'

She turned to pay attention to her rescuer who called himself Stan and that was when she noticed his jeans and boots. The dark stains on the trousers could have been anything but the blotches on his boots were definitely blood. Grace saw plenty of similar stains in the butcher shop where she worked.

As if he sensed her demeanour change Stan grabbed her in a stranglehold before Grace could return inside the car. He pressed a smelly cloth against her nose and mouth.

'Your Fred is resting,' Stan hissed as he frogmarched a struggling Grace to his ute. The last thing she remembered seeing was Fred's bloodied body crumpled in the back of Stan's ute beside a slaughtered kangaroo. The last taste the bitterness of chloroform; the last sound a kookaburra's laugh...

Stan ransacked the car for any valuables and pocketed the Minette Walters novel — he liked the sound of *The Ice House*, although Grace and Fred will be going straight into the ground as fertiliser for his marijuana crop and the 'roo will go in the freezer.

### **STOP PRESS**

Police confirm they have arrested a farmer in Central Victoria regarding a missing Melbourne couple whose car was found abandoned a year ago. The man is helping them with their enquiries after a local Op Shop volunteer identified him as the person who donated a book belonging to the couple...