

Angela Pope – Open Division, 1<sup>st</sup> Place

## Lies

When people ask me about the walking cane, I tell them I fell twenty metres to the ground and splat! I'm lucky I'm walking again. I should be in a wheelchair.

They always want to know how I fell, and this guy was no different. I knew what he was thinking, 'What a bloody shame, a girl like that.' He'd been in the shop a few times and we'd shared the odd joke, but if he thought that meant I was gonna spill my guts, he had it all wrong.

He stood waiting as I moved towards the food cabinet. There was the meaty smell of pie and a warm rush of oily air as I slid open the glass door. It was an awkward one-handed manoeuvre to scoop out the chips while I leant on the cane. It had been a bad day. The Gabapentin I'd taken that morning was starting to wear off and the spasms were beginning to kick in. I lost my grip and the cane clattered onto the cold tile floor.

'Shit!'

'Here, I'll get it for you,' he said, and then he was scooting behind the counter like a bloody Good Samaritan before I could even say 'Jesus!' under my breath.

'Customers aren't allowed behind the counter,' I told him, taking the cane from him and leaning it up against the back wall. I handed him his chips. 'You better get yourself on the other side of the counter before Mrs Lee sees you, or she'll have me fired.'

'Sorry, sorry.' His cheeks were flushed, which made his green eyes seem darker. Not that I was noticing. Just like I didn't notice how warm his hand was when he handed me the cane and how his fingers were long and slim like a pianist's.

'My Auntie Elsie was always knocking her stick over,' he said. He spoke in a rush, like he was trying to cover up how awkward he was. 'So she got one of those walker frames.'

‘Good for her. That’s \$3.’ I gripped the counter for balance. I wasn’t gonna use the cane again while he was in the shop.

He pushed the buttons on the eftpos machine but still he kept talking. ‘My auntie has arthritis,’ he said. ‘So what about you? You didn’t say.’

Sometimes I tell people I was a trapeze artist, how I flew through the air wearing a leotard, sequins sparkling under the lights of the Big Top. How I loved the whoosh of the air flying past my face, the thrill as my hands caught the bar at the very last moment. How my partner, Leonardo, was so shit-hot that every girl in the troupe wanted to shag him. How I gasped every time he caught me by the ankles and flung me through the air.

People love that stuff. I can see it in their eyes, the guys especially, imagining the high-cut leotard with the cute little skirt rippling in the air as I’m swinging on the high bar, my legs lean and tanned and muscled. Their eyes widen, taking it all in. And then I tell them that one day there was an accident. It was my fault. I spent a little too long rubbing in the fake tan on my inner thighs and adding the shimmer that would make my skin sparkle under the lights. When Leonardo went to catch me I felt his fingers grabbing hold like they always did. I gasped in ecstasy, but it turned to horror as I realised they were slipping, and I was going down.

‘What about the safety net?’ they always ask. I tell them the guy who was supposed to be in charge of health and safety was high on weed half the time. He didn’t do the safety checks. The net gave way and I crashed to the ground.

People love that story, not just for the sexual thrill but because there’s someone to blame. It gives them the chance to rant on my behalf and tell me they hope the bugger’s gone to jail and how it’s a terrible thing to be let down like that, literally, by someone not doing their job right. And then there are the ones who like to go on about drugs and how they’re the scourge

of society and how they have a cousin twice removed who was killed by a drug driver who was high on meth.

My second-favourite story is that I fell off a cliff trying to rescue a dog. People always want to know what kind of dog it was. Sometimes I say it was a bichon frise with a bouffy haircut; other times that it was a St Bernard and it was a hell of a job lifting that bitch but the adrenalin must have kicked in. People nod in that knowing way, as though they spend half their life with their adrenalin kicking in and achieving unbelievable feats of strength.

If I'm in a foul mood I'll say the dog fell with me and it died, that as I lay there on the ground I held the dog in my arms and saw it take its last breath. Once I made a little kid cry with that story. If I'm having a good day, I'll say the dog was okay, that it licked my face as I lifted it up over the top, that I lost my balance then and fell.

Once I said I won a bravery award for saving the dog and that the Queen even wrote me a letter about it. I knew that was going a bit far when some kid came in and asked if she could see the letter because she was doing a project about it. I told the kid I had a brother who was one of those anti-royalists and he burnt the letter. I don't know if she wrote that in her project.

I chose the straightforward dog story for this guy. It was a toss-up between that and falling from a coconut tree while working with orphans in Nouméa, which was a new storyline I'd been working on. I wanted to watch his face while I told him I was shimmying up the tree in my bikini, but I thought better of it. I decided to save that story for another day, for some other stranger who thought they were entitled to know everything about me. I mean, how would they feel if I walked up to them and asked, 'Hey, tell me about the shittiest day of your life?'

'I was saving a dog stuck on a cliff.' I sighed. 'And I fell.' The pain levels were really kicking in now, spiking their way like needles through my vertebrae.

‘What happened to the dog?’ he asked.

‘The dog went to the vet for a check-up and it had a bloody tumour, didn’t it? Had to be put down. Shouldn’t have bothered saving the fuckin’ thing.’ I’d gone too far. I knew that. But the pain was making me irritable.

‘Right.’ He picked up the pottle of chips and looked at me like he was all sad and disappointed at the same time. ‘None of my business, eh?’ Then he left.

I hobbled over to the back wall and grabbed the walking cane after he’d gone.

Mrs Lee says I shouldn’t swear in front of the customers, but I know she won’t fire me because I’m a cripple. She’s never asked what happened to me, but I know she’s listening when I tell my stories. She’s heard a few different versions so she must know it’s all lies. Once the guy had left she came out from the storeroom. She’d been eavesdropping again.

‘He’s a nice boy, that Marty. His brother died last year,’ she said. ‘Rolled a tractor on the farm. You’re not the only person in the world with problems, Tracey.’

I felt a bit crap after that.

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I came to live with my nan after the accident. She didn’t want me, but neither did anyone else. Nan lives in an old villa with large cold rooms and damp patches growing daily around the ceiling roses. The white paint on the walls is peeling and comes off like flakes of dandruff when you brush against it. The wooden floorboards are bare and scratched.

It’s easy enough for us to avoid each other if we want and most of the time we do. But one morning, about a week after I arrived, I went into the kitchen for breakfast and Nan looked at me blankly and said, ‘What are you doing here?’

I said, ‘I live with you, Nan.’

‘I thought I had rats,’ she said. ‘I kept hearing tapping up and down the hallway.’

‘I have to practise my walking so I can get stronger.’

‘I don’t like rats,’ she said.

‘It’s not rats, Nan, it’s me.’ I walked up and down the kitchen with my cane so she could hear the way it tapped.

‘You been eating all the cornflakes?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I lied.

‘Must be rats then,’ she said.

I went to the cupboard, but Nan was right. There was no cereal left.

‘I can’t afford to buy any more,’ she said.

‘It’s all right, I’m loaded,’ I said. I was joking, of course. The truth was, I was broke. ACC wouldn’t give me the wages compo ’cos I’d left my job to go travelling the week before the accident, and so I was on the disability benefit, which wasn’t a lot.

I found some bread, but as I went to put it in the toaster I saw it had mould growing on it. When I turned around to say something to Nan about it, she was holding a mirror up in front of her face and putting lipstick on her eyebrows.

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Mrs Lee’s dairy was next door, which was about as far as I could walk back then. There was a walking frame sitting in the corner of my bedroom, and a wheelchair too, but I wasn’t gonna use them. I got my walking cane and I walked—sixty-seven steps by the time I’d made it down Nan’s garden path and through the gate and up the ramp into the dairy. It was good that there was a ramp because I couldn’t get up steps easily yet. Later, Mrs Lee told me the ramp was there because she had a cousin in a wheelchair, and he always used to come by on a Friday for a hot chocolate in the days before he left town to go and live in the city. She was proud of him, she said, because he had a good job working for an IT company. I didn’t know if she was proud of him because he was clever or because he was in a wheelchair and he’d still managed to get himself a job.

There was a card in the window of the dairy, advertising for an assistant. It was written in blue biro in capital letters. I asked Mrs Lee about it as I put a box of Weet-Bix on the counter. (She'd run out of cornflakes.) She asked to look at my fingernails and I held out one hand at a time, so that I could still hold on to the walking stick. I've never been one to bite my nails, and I hadn't been digging around in any dirt, so they looked okay.

'You can start tomorrow,' she said.

Mrs Lee gets this sad look on her face every now and then and asks me if I'm okay, like she wants me to talk about my life. Sometimes she even opens up a packet of custard creams so we can share them over a coffee in the back room when the shop's quiet. I'm not one for talking but I'll eat the biscuits. She was the one who said me and Nan needed some chickens. She stuck her nose over our fence one morning to check out the size of Nan's section. There were some battery hens that needed saving or else they'd be for the chop, she said. I told her it was a dumb idea and that the only chicken that was making its way into our house was from the frozen section of the supermarket.

She wouldn't let up about those chickens, though. It was like she was turning into one of those animal rights people. She put a sign up in the dairy window, and every time a customer came in she'd be on at them to get some. It began to feel like I was working for the fuckin' SPCA.

'If no one wants them, we could roast them,' I said. 'We could put them on special, do a combo with a scoop of chips and a milkshake.'

She frowned. 'I know life's hard for you, and this is your way of coping,' she said. I nodded and pretended to be sorry. 'Looking after some chickens would give you a purpose in life, Tracey,' she said. I was trying so hard not to laugh that I had to pretend I was having a coughing fit.

In the end I gave in, partly because I was bored with her nagging, and partly because I wanted to meet the chicken farmer guy that Mrs Lee kept whingeing about. She made him sound so evil that I half expected him to walk out wearing a long dark robe with a mask like Kylo Ren. If he looked anything like Adam Driver, it would be worth getting those chickens. Shit, I might even make a few trips and get half a dozen more if that was the case.

Mrs Lee said she would take me to the farm in her pink Honda Jazz. Before the accident I wouldn't be seen dead in a Honda Jazz, let alone a pink one, but that's how much my life had changed. But it turned out to be a lie anyway.

'I've asked Marty to take you,' she said, as I put my coat on. 'Ruth couldn't make it.' Ruth was Mrs Lee's friend who sometimes helped out behind the counter. She was supposed to be looking after the shop while we went to the farm. I didn't believe a word of it and I was so angry that if Marty hadn't walked in right then and there, I swear, I'd have whacked Mrs Lee across the shins with my walking stick.

Marty seemed surprised too, when Mrs Lee told him that it was me, not her, going to the chicken farm. His face took on a scared kind of look, like a kid who's just been told he has to buddy up with the class bully.

I followed him outside to a black ute that was standing in the five-minute park outside the dairy. He hovered around and I could tell he was wondering whether to open the door for me, but I did it myself. He put the radio on as we pulled away. I got the impression he didn't want to talk to me just as much as I didn't want to talk to him.

He was in his work overalls and his dark hair was tied back in a man bun so I could see he had his ears pierced with small black studs. He had a light stubble across his chin. I turned away and looked out the window. I didn't want him to know I was looking at him.

'You like working at the dairy?' he asked after a minute or so. I wondered if he'd been thinking about what might be safe to talk about.

‘It’s okay.’

‘What did you do before?’

‘Roofing.’

‘Ah, right.’

I could tell what he was thinking but I couldn’t be arsed explaining that he had it all wrong. He could think what he liked.

After the accident, all I could think about was how I might get back to roofing. I missed the thrill of it, tiptoeing across the tiles of the city skyline. The world looks different from up high. You can look down over the top of everyone and most of the time they don’t even know you’re there because they don’t bother to look up. They’re too busy hurrying off to places, stooped, half of them are, like they’ve got a world of worry on their shoulders. You can’t be like that when you’re on a roof. If you were too busy thinking about other shit, you’d lose your balance and fall. There’s nothing but you and the moment and the job right in front of you. That’s what I loved about it.

As we pulled up in the unsealed driveway to the farm, a huge guy with calloused hands came out. He wasn’t wearing a black cape and he didn’t look like Adam Driver, but I tried to hide my disappointment.

‘I went to school with George,’ said Marty, as he got out of the ute. ‘He’s okay.’

When Marty said we’d come for some chickens, the huge guy strode off towards the big shed. He came out carrying two hens in each hand, upside down by the legs. Marty put the chickens in a large cardboard box in the back of the ute.

‘You got a coop?’ he asked as we pulled up outside Nan’s place.

We didn’t, but there was a big wooden kennel at the bottom of the garden. Nan had once had a great dane that had died and was buried near the rhododendrons. Mrs Lee had put peastraw in the kennel and said it would do for now. She’d given me a bag of chicken pellets

and some scratch grain that she'd bought from the farm supplies shop. 'Just to get you started,' she said.

Marty lifted the box with the chickens and carried it into Nan's garden. I followed behind and watched as he put it down on the grass next to the kennel. He bent over and lifted the flaps of the box. The chickens were so still, I was worried they were dead already.

'They'll take a while to come right,' Marty said. 'It's a bit of a shock for them.' Gently, he turned the box over onto its side so that the chickens could get out. One of them stood up and ruffled its feathers a bit. Two of them lifted their heads. The fourth one lay there not moving at all. It reminded me of how I was after the accident, the way I lay there in the hospital bed feeling broken. It made me want to tear up, so I had to look away. That's when I saw Nan watching us from the house. She was standing at the window, her hair sticking out in all directions like she'd stuck her finger in an electrical socket. I figured she'd lost her hairbrush. I'd seen it sitting in the bowl where the toilet brush normally went. I didn't want to think about what had happened to the toilet brush.

'I'll be going then,' said Marty. He was looking at me, I could tell, but I didn't want to meet his eyes. 'You okay?'

'Why wouldn't I be?'

'Okay, none of my business.'

'That your new boyfriend?' Nan asked, after he'd gone. She'd come out to the garden to see what was going on. 'Didn't you kill the last one?'

'Yeah, Nan, that's right. I killed him.' I turned to the chicken lying on the ground. 'Come on, hun,' I coaxed, but she didn't move.

'I'm not plucking them,' said Nan.

'We're not going to eat them,' I said.

‘They’ll all be dead before Christmas.’ Nan’s voice sounded creepy, like one of those people in a horror movie. I figured she’d been reading too much Stephen King. I’d noticed the books lying around the house, borrowed from the library’s large-print section.

‘Don’t listen to her,’ I said to the chicken. It cracked an eye open and stared at me. It kind of gave me the heebie-jeebies. ‘I’m gonna call you Hannibal Lecter,’ I said.

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Every morning when I came out to feed the chickens, the weirdo hen would be standing there on one leg with one eye open.

‘You better lay some eggs,’ I said, ‘or I’m sending you to KFC.’ She stared right back at me like she didn’t give a stuff. Weird how she seemed a lot like me.

Mrs Lee asked me every day how the chickens were doing and if they were laying any eggs. I didn’t tell her there’d been a few eggs without shells that had grossed me out. I’d thrown them away. I figured it must be my fault, that I must be doing something wrong. I did a bit of research on chicken nutrition. Sweetcorn seemed good, so I started sneaking a few tins out of the dairy to give them. I even took some apple cider vinegar to put in their water. If Mrs Lee knew, she never said.

The first chicken died after only two weeks. It was lying there, its legs splayed out, when I went out to check for eggs one evening. I was worried it might be because of the sweetcorn coming out of a tin. I didn’t tell Mrs Lee about it. I didn’t want her getting upset.

When I told Nan she looked up from the Stephen King book she was reading. The book was upside down and she had her glasses on lopsided.

‘I told you,’ she said. ‘Dead by Christmas.’

The next two chickens died in quick succession over the following week. I hid them all behind the rhododendrons, but I was going to have to bury them. I sat down on the grass and began to dig with a trowel. The soil was hard and it was taking a long time but I kept stabbing

at the earth with the metal blade. Hannibal Lecter stood on one leg watching me the whole time. She was the only one still alive.

‘Jeez, I’m shit useless,’ I told her. I was just about ready to dig myself a hole and climb into it, I was that upset with myself. ‘Just me and you left now, Hannibal,’ I said.

The more I dug and the deeper the hole got, the darker my thoughts became.

‘What’s happening, Hannibal?’ I said. ‘Is Nan poisoning you all?’

The chicken blinked. Did that mean ‘yes’?

When the hole was big enough I clambered onto all fours, crawled over to the dead birds and dragged them into it, one at a time. It didn’t feel respectful, like a proper funeral should be, so once I covered them up I started to sing.

‘Always look on the bright side of life.’ It was what they’d sung at the funeral, apparently, the one I hadn’t gone to because I was lying in the hospital with tubes sticking out of me.

When I finished singing I didn’t know how I was going to stand up again. Nan had pulled the curtains inside the house, and it was starting to get dark. The cold was seeping up from the ground through my jeans.

Hannibal Lecter made her way inside the coop. I sat there alone in the dark. Next door I could see the lights from the dairy were still on. Perhaps when Mrs Lee closed up I would be able to call out to her. Or perhaps I would be out here all night, catch hypothermia and die. I wasn’t sure which option I preferred.

‘Hey.’ I heard the voice in the dark. ‘Are you okay?’ It was Marty. ‘I was just popping into the dairy for some milk and I heard you singing,’ he said. He sounded nervous, like he was frightened I was gonna yell at him or something. ‘Everything all right?’

‘I’m stuck.’

Nan was sitting in the lounge in her pyjamas watching *Murder, She Wrote* when Marty helped me inside.

‘You need to watch her,’ she said. ‘She killed the last one.’

Marty looked confused.

‘I think Nan’s been killing the chickens,’ I told him.

‘No, I haven’t. It’s the rhododendrons,’ she said. She turned the volume up higher and tutted at us.

‘What the fuck?’ I said.

‘You must be freezing,’ said Marty. ‘I’ll put the jug on, yeah?’

In the kitchen I looked it up on my phone, and Nan was right. Rhododendrons were poisonous to chickens. ‘Shit,’ I said. ‘I’ll have to find another home for Hannibal Lecter.’

‘What did your Nan mean, that you killed the last one?’ asked Marty as he passed me a cup of tea.

‘Don’t listen to her, she’s off her trolley,’ I said.

The next day I told Mrs Lee the truth about the chickens, the whole story from start to finish, how they’d been dying on me and how I hadn’t wanted to tell her.

‘I’ll take Hannibal Lecter over to my place,’ she said. Then she looked at me real stern, like she was a school principal or something. ‘You’ve got to stop telling lies all the time, Tracey.’

A few days after that Marty came back into the dairy. I hadn’t seen him since the night I’d been stuck on the lawn in the dark.

‘There’s something I have to tell you.’ I handed him his pottle of chips. ‘I didn’t rescue a dog.’

‘I figured.’

‘It was a car accident. My fault. That’s how I killed someone.’

‘That sucks.’

‘Yeah.’

'I preferred the dog story,' he said.