

BALLEA WRITERS

The noise from next door woke baby Jemma, so I rocked her on my shoulder at the window. I nuzzled her downy scalp and inhaled the aroma of new life and watched the youth hurry from the house next door.

'That's a different kid.'

'Maybe he has lots of grandsons,' said Libby, and continued unpacking my books.

That night I couldn't sleep for the laughter echoing through the plasterboard and breezeblock wafers passing as walls. Sleepless nights had been the norm since Jemma's birth and I feared that, even when she didn't cry, I was destined to be disturbed. I listened for hours until I heard the door bang and I reacted like a greyhound from a trap, racing to the window. I saw a towering black man leaving from next door, a streetlight illuminated a halo of smoke on his domed skull.

I watched from Jemma's nursery the following afternoon. An old white man dragged himself around his overgrown garden like a leper. He wore an oversized safari jacket and I wondered if he had once filled it more fully as he, perhaps, jaunted around the Veldt as a younger man. A firm jaw jutted out from below his sou'wester. I watched as he strained to tend his plants.

'There's something odd about the old fella,' I told Libby, but she took no interest. Her moods were as changeable as Jemma's nappy these days and I missed her sharp eye for humour.

'So what if there is? What has it got to do with you?'

'Just being neighbourly. I'm going to call round there; take him a bottle of something.'

'How ever suburban and brave of you,' she said, and burred at Jemma.

His home was the mirror image of ours. The same PVC windows, mottled, pebble-dashed walls and burgundy doors. His lawn was unkempt, but his meticulous flowerbeds were laid out with rich foliage, cushioning vivacious and vibrant colour. I thought maybe that I could offer to cut the grass. I knocked three times, probably too loudly, but consciously, in case he had hearing difficulties. As I waited, I peered at the grey net curtains weighted down by time, but nothing stirred. I knocked again and saw movement from behind the curtain. The staleness made me want to suck in the heady scent of summer.

'Can I help you?' he said. His voice was strong but smooth. Clear skin held together glutinous eyes that peered out from sockets that sagged like melted wax at the base of a candle. His translucent hair was dragged back into a loose ponytail, with many escaped strands flopping down either side of his fresh face. A floral patterned shirt hung outside baggy pyjama-style trousers. Well, you're not very suburban, I thought.

'Hi, I'm Stuart...' I said, trying not to stare as I introduced myself as his new neighbour. 'If there's anything, you know, we can do, just give us a shout. I mean, I could do the lawn or something.'

'Stuart? Oh, you're the new neighbour,' he said, as if there was some strange time lag in the six feet between us. 'Of course, come in, come in, very good, very good.' I sat on a sofa of intricately woven gold threads that danced through claret velvet. Though it was worn to the shiny smoothness of Jemma's bottom, he hadn't succumbed to covering its beauty. I liked it. Tea was already made in a china pot and four types of cake were spread across a doily. He poured me a cup with a quivering grip, and then eased himself into an armchair. His blue, corduroy slippers caught my line of sight and struck me as incongruous.

'What do you do, Stu?'

He lingered over the vowel sounds and I had a flashback to playing conkers in the scouts, the last time I was called Stu. 'I teach English at the local secondary school. At least I will when term starts.'

'Excellent, excellent,' he said. 'An excellent profession and a noble subject. Cake?'

He helped himself to Battenburg and a generous slice of something homemade. Though I wasn't hungry, I accepted the cake out of manners. It was fairly gritty and I wondered if it had been made in this house, exactly how hygienic it might be. I soldiered on, finishing the cake with the aid of mouthfuls of tea.

'Another slice?'

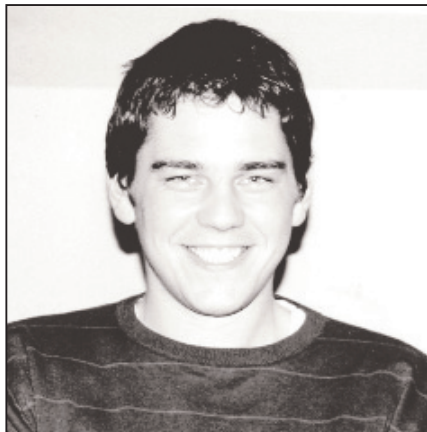
'No, thank you, I've not long eaten. It's good, though, is it pecan? or caraway seed? I asked hopefully.

'Something like that,' he said.

While we sipped our team I noticed his bookshelves were in danger of collapse from an avalanche of books, journals and pamphlets. I wondered about his background and thought maybe he was a writer or some other queer sort.

Melting Pot

By JAMES BILSON



JAMES BILSON

Bealtaine, the annual national festival, promotes the participation of adults in the arts. This year, the festival organisers launched the fourth publication in the series titled 'Consolation and other short stories'. One of the writes featured in this year's publication was James Bilson of Ballea Writers Club.

'What do they teach in English these days? He asked. 'Some modern texts; film reviews, the classics. My favourite is Shakespeare. It's got such quality. I love the challenge of getting kids excited by something so old.' I lapsed into talking, as I would to my grandfather, and felt the need to impress my host.

He chuckled to himself as he strained to lift his frame. I watched him shuffle towards a shelf and take pamphlet from between two hard backed volumes. As he struggled to do this, I noticed his knuckles were wizened like walnuts. He wheezed his way back to his armchair and lowered himself into it with a grimace, then reached for a large amount of cake and swallowed it down with tea.

'It's the only thing for it,' he said.

I wondered what he meant as he handed me the pamphlet.

'The Merchant of Venice.' I felt obliged to read aloud the title. It was a 1972 theatre programme for a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

'I have my allegiances too, eh?' he winked. 'How rude I have been,' he added and extended a knotted hand. 'Marcus Greenholme.'

'Very good to meet you Marcus,' I said, and looked down to where I had just read the name Marcus Greenholme, and where it said 'Director' next to it.

'And that's not all. There was The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet, Much Ado, Midsummer Night's and of course the Scottish play. All of them to packed houses at the RSC.'

'Very good, very good,' I said, instantly aware that I had lapsed into his phraseology, yet quite unable to stop it.

'Very good indeed, Stu.' He paused for dramatic effect and looked towards the grubby window; or stage right as I thought of it. 'Until this cursed disease besieged my very limbs.' He held up his clenched fists like a willing prisoner might offer his wrists for binding. 'This infernal, belittling disease.'

'Arthritis?'

'Yes, a cruel, cruel condition, Stu. It robs a man of his freedom, his livelihood and eventually his dignity. And all

the while inflicting incessant pain.'

My eyes moved back to his twisted hands and I remembered his painful gait that I'd seen in his garden, and thought that shards of pain must contort his every sinew. He slumped back in his chair, as though the exertion of such a performance had exhausted him. I felt strangely at ease slouched on his sofa and, as I finished another cup of tea in comfortable silence, he seemed to doze. I may have drifted off myself, but I was brought back to attention by three loud raps. Marcus looked at me through bloodshot eyes.

Whatever charms he exuded captured me, and I found myself starting towards the door. The short hallway was like an endless, narrowing tunnel, and I felt myself inexplicably touching off the walls as I approached the door. I had a momentary awareness that this was not my house and that I was greeting someone I did not know. I opened the door to an African warrior, or so he seemed in my mind, standing over me. He raised an eyebrow and I felt an irrational fear.

'Marcus in?' he said with baritone London accent.

Despite my best efforts, words wouldn't come and I pointed, feebly, standing side before following after him. 'Who's the doorman? I heard him say as he entered the living room.'

'Ah, Anthony,' said Marcus.

'Tony,' said the warrior correctively.

'Anthony, this is my new neighbour, Stu.'

'Stuart', I said, extending a hand towards Tony. He grasped my loose hand, contorting it into a fierce grip, as if we were about to arm wrestle, almost knocking me off balance.

'Tony,' he said in a deliberate Caribbean drawl.

I nodded and, feeling my legs quiver, slumped back onto the sofa. I became fixated on a solitary dreadlock that trailed down the nape of his neck from an otherwise polished skull.

'So, we good then, Marcus?'

'Yes, of course, of course Anthony.' Marcus pointed towards the bookshelf. Tony went over and reached down a tin and removed a bag and replaced it with a wad of tatty notes.

'Nice one Marcus. I've left you the usual.'

'Yes, yes. Carry on, Anthony.'

Tony sat down next to me and I became aware of staring at him intensely. He took some of the contents of the bag and rolled the biggest joint I'd ever seen. He folded six cigarette papers and his fingers operated nimble for their size as he created the joint. No one spoke, all of us seemingly mesmerized. He sparked it up. This released clouds of fragrant smoke that enveloped the room. He drew deeply, holding the smoke in his lungs, before he passed it to Marcus.

Marcus grows the best stuff this side of Amsterdam,' said Tony. 'You smoke?'

'Gave it up.'

'Try this,' said Marcus, handing the joint to me. Then, with full theatrical delivery he said, 'You know, Stu, it numbs the pain. Without it I'd have killed myself by now.'

'He, he he.' I heard deep rumbles of laughter from Tony; a contagious laughter that we all succumbed to. I laughed at the laughter, laughed at the peculiar get up of my hosts, unable to stop laughing and not wanting to stop the laughter, which I hadn't experienced for so long. 'You tried the space cakes, Stuart?'

'So that's what it was?' I said, nearly rolling off the sofa in hysterics. 'Well I can't roll joints anymore, not with these hands. Perhaps you might help me out in the future? Now that would be very neighbourly.'

I nodded and we all giggled like schoolboys. 'I don't suppose you'll be wanting to mow the grass then?' I said and we howled with more laughter.

I declined the next two joints, but attacked the Battenburg in a fit of appetite driven by the weed. Getting home was like an out of body experience, as I seemed to float across the hedge and up the stairs.

'You've been gone ages,' said Libby stirring from her afternoon nap. 'So, what's he like then?'

'He's a theatre director. He's thinking of putting on a Comedy of Errors.'

'How very nice for you.'

'Yes, I'm thinking of playing a part,' I said as I crept into bed next to Jemma. As she stirred, she smiled and gave her first laugh, and with it came the laugh from Libby that I had not heard for so long.