

Short Story from

***WAITING FOR THE FERRYMAN* by Geoffrey Waring**

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THE COLUMNIST

The cell phone woke while I tried to chew my toast quietly. My head throbbed.

“We need 500 words.”

“You’ve got this week’s column. It went yesterday and you’re interrupting brunch.”

“At one? No, it’s another five hundred words. Tony’s sick and hasn’t filed his column. We need something local.”

“I don’t do local.”

“It’s about time you did; we need it.”

“When do you want it?”

“By five latest.”

I went for a walk up the hill seeking inspiration in air untainted by stale tobacco smoke and spilt wine. I didn’t care much for Tony or his prattling column recycling the gossip of the chattering classes. I would write something acerbic, incisive, and confrontational even. It would generate letters to the editor.

“If they’re writing, they’re reading. If they’re reading they’re buying,” the sub-editor had said.

There was plenty of subject matter; Government deploying SAS ‘bridge builders’ in Afghanistan, rates increases for a multi-million bypass as petrol prices climb towards the price of a good cabernet and another piece of God’s Own hocked off overseas. All were fertile grounds for cynicism and I, the long failed idealist, was a cynic *par-excellence*. I went downhill to the computer and sat looking out over the bay. Nothing came except the woman’s face.

It was an outdoor concert. She wore a black leather trouser suit and black boots. After spreading a blanket in front of where I sat on my camp chair, she knelt beside the wheelchair. She was twentyish, no beauty, with Afro-crimped hair in a loose ponytail. The wheelchair held an older woman whose body was wracked and twisted

as the damaged neural pathways of her brain. During the overture the young woman opened an insulated hamper and carefully mixed liquid food. She fed the handicapped woman from a child's drinking cup while gently wiping dribbled food from her face. It was slow work - the guest soprano had sung a second aria before she'd finished.

Later, for a few minutes, she rested, laying her cheek on the arm of the woman in the wheelchair while holding her claw like hand. The girl's free hand made small conducting motions as the symphony played and the head of the woman in the wheelchair lolled and jerked. I was fascinated, yet appalled, by the juxtaposition of harmony and confusion, rhythm and spasm.

As warmth faded from the sun words came. The cursor flew across the screen. They were angry words. They castigated Tony's readers, cursed their gratuitous preoccupation with trivia, with consumption, with greed, but most of all they reminded people of humanity without which they were *lumpen* consumer units. Humanity would prevail, I knew, for I had seen its face - seen its strength. I quickly edited and proofed, tapped 'send', then reread the article - slowly this time - and realised my mistake. The article implied hope for the human condition; I was now a failed cynic. The cell phone vibrated.

"You left it late," he said. I waited for the explosion. "It's good, damned good - for you." He hung up. That surprised me. I went to the kitchen and opened a Reserve Pinot for sundowners.

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