



Short Story Comp 2023
OPEN category WINNER
Kerrin O'Sullivan

The Coop

It wasn't that Marcie didn't love her children. Nor that she didn't want them in her life. It was just that she didn't want to live with them anymore.

One by one they'd left home, three grown-up offspring with backpacks and passports, off to see the world. Packed up and gone, just as Tony her husband had done years before, although he'd taken off with her savings and the kids' Gymparoo teacher.

Nick, the first to leave Melbourne, had followed the American girlfriend he'd met playing online poker, and ensconced himself in her Manhattan condo. The mobile gaming app he'd been developing was close to launching and New York was the best place for that. He said so. Everybody said so. He said everybody said so.

'But aren't there lots of those sort of apps out there now?' Marcie asked, as she was waving them off to the airport.

'Mum,' Nick said, mouth twitching with frustration. 'It's like designing a better Pringle.'

Marcie nodded. 'I see,' she said, although when she thought of the hyperbolic paraboloid shape of the crisp, she wasn't sure she did.

'This app is going to be big,' he'd confided through the cab window, locking his lips with an invisible key. 'With a capital B.'

Marcie had blown a kiss and waved like the Queen until the taxi was out of sight.

Loz, the middle child, had left for Sydney to study experimental theatre, moved into a South Bondi share house. 'I need,' she said, 'to create freely in the moment unblocked by the judgmental limitations of rational thinking.'

'Like improvising?' Marcie had asked.

'Like liberating restrictions,' Loz had answered, brow furrowed. 'Like changing sex, species, relationships, time, space...'

Marcie had helped pack her bags, making sure to include lots of black clothing.

Jay, the last to leave, had gone globetrotting with his Sanskrit Honours tutor who was in the throes of a messy divorce. He and Mary-Rose planned to 'do' India south to north—maybe crash in an ashram for a bit, maybe hang out in a vegan agricultural community, maybe do volunteer work with trafficked child prostitutes in Kolkata's red light district. There were lots of options.

'You see, mum,' Jay had explained to Marcie, 'there's so much poverty in the sub-continent.'

Marcie had bought him a copy of Lonely Planet India and driven them to the airport.

The chicks had hatched. Fully fledged, they'd flown the nest to chase their dreams—the family fragmenting, scattering in the best possible way.

'Anyway,' Marcie said when they messaged from afar. 'If ever I'm missing you, I can always go into the spare room and look at your stuff.'

While the brood had vacated the house, their possessions had not. Boxes filled with their treasured belongings—toys from childhood, school photos, sporting trophies—teetered



Short Story Comp 2023
OPEN category WINNER
Kerrin O'Sullivan

precariously. Hockey sticks and hula-hoops remained wedged in against golf bags and cricket kits. Puffer jackets and animal 'onesies' hung from a mobile clothes-rack, waiting in a kind of temporal time-warp.

None of the three wanted their 'stuff' right now but they didn't want it thrown out either.

Marcie adapted to the hush in the house and her new solitude. She shopped at the local market, bought what she felt like and cooked for one. She loaded Van Morrison onto her iPod and played it at volume. She claimed the bathroom for herself and sang in the shower—no queues, no clumps of body hair clogging the plughole and never an empty toilet roll left swinging on the holder, bereft of 3-Ply

She serviced her old Singer sewing machine and set it up in the second bedroom. Fabulous quilts emerged, some of which she donated to a nearby dementia care unit, hoping they might add colour and a sense of home to the lives of the residents. Paisleys, vintage florals, happy prints with appliqués. Each quilt unique and extraordinary and stitched with love.

She joined a patchwork group and they moved their fortnightly meetings to her house because she had space and quiet for them to work on their quilts in-progress, with no interruptions from family. The patchwork clan cut fabric into shapes and pieced the fragments together, the hum of the sewing machines providing a soundtrack as bobbins rotated and needles rose and fell pulling stitches tight. Her new friends sipped Spanish rioja and nibbled cheese and olives as they sewed and chatted and everybody laughed a lot.

Most evenings, after work at the lavender nursery, Marcie would relax in front of the computer. She found an online course, 'The American Quilt', and immersed herself in learning about the evolution of eiderdowns through the ages. 'Who knew!' she would say to herself as she learnt some obscure fact about mourning quilts or the Amish tradition. 'Well, I never.'

Her life ebbed and flowed with a peace and a richness that surprised her, happily interrupted by an occasional call from South Bondi, Times Square or some Mumbai internet café. Not all were pleas for emergency cash, sometimes the kids pocket-dialled her by mistake—and they always rang on her birthday.

Marcie understood how keeping in contact could be a chore for her children with their busy lives, especially when overseas in a different time zone.

'Don't worry,' she'd say, 'I'm fine.' And she was.

Days spilled into nights, tumbled into weeks. Months passed, a year. Two.

One by one they returned—homing pigeons returning to the nest.

Loz, who'd dropped out of drama school, or been dropped (she was vague as to which) reappeared with a reconditioned fridge, an Ikea bed and a coke habit.

Nick jetted home minus his American girlfriend but instead with her best friend Candy, sporting a new online identity and trying to evade writs concerning a failed digital start-up.

'Call me Nikos, Mum.'

'Why?'

'Bad hombres,' he said, lowering his voice. 'After me... Wanting money.'



Short Story Comp 2023
OPEN category WINNER
Kerrin O'Sullivan

Jay, who'd crashed doing tricks snowboarding at a Himalayan ski resort, was medi-vacced out of Indian Kashmir. He arrived home with a fractured tibia and a sizeable bill over which he was feuding with his travel insurer. Mary-Rose had apparently returned earlier—something about missing her ex, or was it her eldest child was starting school?

Marcie's offspring all moved back in, riffing, 'just short-term Mum'.

Loz took the spare room and shifted the stored boxes into the hall. It made the corridor a little tight, but if you squeezed by side-ways, no problem at all. Marcie helped her assemble the Ikea bed and went to the local hardware shop when they found there were bolts missing.

Jay and Nikos argued over the second bedroom. Jay won the toss and really, it made better sense; the bathroom was a closer hobble on crutches. Marcie put a cover over the sewing machine and shifted it into the hall next to Jay's snowboard.

Nikos and Candy took over the lounge room and slept on the fold-out sofa. They positioned the flat-screen at its end and Marcie took to reading detective novels in her bed rather than watch 'Big Brother' beside them, perched amongst their pillows.

The dryer gave up in protest at its new workload and the laundry fan blew a fuse, belching an acrid smell in its death throes that refused to leave the house. Sans dryer, the offspring opted to hang their wet washing inside. With no backyard, let alone a clothesline, it made sense. Duvet covers draped over doors like designer throws, blouses dripped from the kitchen chairs and Loz's tights slunk black and shiny like a sea monster from the shower head.

Without consultation, the patchwork group abandoned sewing nights at Marcie's and moved to someone else's house. Perhaps Marcie might re-join them, they said vaguely, without disclosing the address, 'when things settled down'.

A new strangeness became the norm.

People came and went, and throughout the dark hours the iron grille of the front door squeaked open and clanged shut like a cell slamming on Alcatraz. One night a bikie with a baseball bat came looking for Nick.

On another, a clown arrived at the door with the wrong address. Marcie suspected he was an undercover cop — it was a little late for a children's party.

On Sunday mornings there were often surprises to be found on the kitchen bench—a half-eaten fish tortilla or some soggy fries, a carton of left-over Noodle Queen or shot glasses of... what exactly? It provided the forensic fascination of a crime scene.

The shower seemed to be in constant use and for longer than Marcie felt was sustainably responsible. Lights too; she moved through the house turning off switches convinced the glow from their house was guiding astronauts back to earth.

On rubbish night she had flashbacks of reminding Jay at fourteen to carry the garbage out and replace the bin-liner. Now a decade later, and despite being in the grip of global warming, nobody seemed to care about putting out the rubbish, let alone separating the recyclables.

'Nothing's changed,' Marcie said to the green wheelie-bin as she stood in the dark pulling plastic margarine tubs and aluminium cans from amongst the tissues and lettuce heads. 'I've just got older.'



Short Story Comp 2023
OPEN category WINNER
Kerrin O'Sullivan

Loz adopted a rescue dog (as her rehab counsellor had suggested) and named the labrador Naughty Lola. They shared the bed from Ikea and watched Narcos on Netflix. One day, the dog swallowed the spare keys to Marcie's Volkswagon Beetle. With the original set misplaced by Nikos (he'd made enquiries with the rave organizers, but nobody had got back), someone needed to taxi the dog to the local clinic.

'Loz,' Marcie said, suddenly cranky. 'This dog could die!'

'You take her, Mum, you're so good in a crisis...'

And Marcie was, so she did.

Quietly seething.

'Naughty Lola lives,' Marcie told Loz after an Uber dropped her and the dog home. The vet had administered a dose of something eruptive and Naughty Lola had delivered the keys, along with a lot else. '...but I've just paid enough to buy twenty Naughty Lolas.'

Loz laughed and beckoned the dog up on the bed; she was keen to get Episode Five of Narcos rolling. Pablo Escobar was waiting in the Columbian rainforest and the Cartel was in a spot of bother.

Marcie stood for a moment at the bedroom door, puzzling life and the universe. Parenthood. Adult children. Pondering whether motherhood had a contract. Whether, if there was one, it had a get-out clause... some sort of parenting expiry date? Whether she had signed on the dotted line, or left it void...

Spread across Loz's bed, she recognized one of the earliest quilts she'd made—one that had gone missing. The quilt was a favourite, created at a low point when she'd been floundering after Tony had taken off with the gymbaroo teacher, the life she knew in pieces. She'd designed it to remind herself of the vastness of the universe. Of hope. Of reaching for the stars.

Each night she would work on it after she'd got the three children to sleep—measuring, cutting, top-stitching. It had taken so much time, so much stamina. Now, underneath Naughty Lola's sprawling paws she could see the colours of her beloved star quilt: the clusters of floating stars, the tiny rainbow pinwheels, a cosmos of diamonds.

She could also see a lot of moulted dog hair.

She leaned her head against the doorframe, suddenly weary, fighting a rising familiar feeling that she was disintegrating into fragments.

On sleepless nights Marcie would pull out her laptop. She'd look up charities that took donations of pre-loved Singer sewing machines, car yards that bought second-hand VW Beetles.

She would punch destinations into the search engine, places for sale, long-term rentals. A derelict villa on some obscure Greek island. A cottage in Puerto Rico. A shack on the beach at Goa. Visas. Insurance. Vaccinations. Information on loans, currency, how to transfer bank accounts overseas. One-way flight deals.

She would fly the coop, unify, become whole. Go as far and as fast as she could.

Any day now.

Any day.

~