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# *Or Else*

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MARION CAMPBELL

THE wind shrieks for a while, then it hisses and sucks through the cracks between the asbestos sheets, under the open eaves, down the funnel into the wood stove. It blows ash across the floor. Tim spreads his hands out as he moves in close to the fire. He treads on a piece of kangaroo meat that Scruff has dragged off the saucer. He limps off with it, flattened into the tread of his galoshes. How long I been tellin' ya t'leave them boots outside, Timmie? Mum doesn't look up as she says this. She just bashes at the block of frozen peas floating in the saucepan. Some come free. Couldya be a love and get the milk for the mash, Else? She stares into the colander as she drains the potatoes. Arrgh, I dunno, she says. She often says this. You don't answer her. The skin under her chin makes little gulping movements. What's the use of telling her about Stan. She'd just stare ahead and say: Oh, Else, you're talkin dirty. Like she done that time after

Uncle Ted got her to come and listen to the Kalgoorlie Cup on his car radio. And then Stan would bash her up for telling. Does Mum ever look at his swollen turkey gobbler? Arrgh, bloody hell, them chops are burnt again! Got the milk love? Canya warm it up for me in the little saucepan. There, that's a pet.

The rain's coming across so hard you'd think the tin was going to lift off the roof. Scruff circles and circles on Elsie's bed. Gunner make your mind up or aren't ya? There you are mate, she says. That's a nice cosy spot. Thadda boy. Not much room for both of us is it? Stan got her this stretcher four years back. A tem-ry cot for y'lass. His voice still has this bit of a Scottish sound to it though he's been in Esperance twenty years. Or so he says. If she can just hold out till the days get warmer. It was crazy to try to do it this afternoon. The rain was being flung down. Flung. Did people ever break under it? Dissolve? It would depend what was in the rain.

The wind was violent too. The bushes crouched low under it, pretending like they weren't there. She thought of doing the same, lying down in the flattened grass and letting it rain until the sky was empty. She might have been dead by the morning, what with the cold and then with the cliff-edge being impossible to see, she might've rolled off without knowing it. In the end, lying there waiting was just too much. She just slunk back to the house. Mum got mad about the wet dress and that but she was too busy to ask much. Anyway, it was for Timmie she came back. Poor Tim with no one else to stand up for him. Snivelling little siss, that's what Stan calls him. Mum doesn't dare argue back. Timmie's started to twitch lately. Also, where the skin broke along those welts he's got across his back, it's puffy and there's a bit of an ooze. He's started wetting the bed again too. Else

knows this without checking his mattress because he comes whimpering to her in the night and curls up to her back and he's all sweet and damp. Elsie props her chin on her fist to watch his sleeping face. It's not a good sleep. The lids aren't really closed and just under the lashes, the eyes make quick movements. She watches his fingers loosen around the ball of orange wool she's given him. It soothes him to tickle his lips lightly with it.

Now Elsie makes the best plan ever. There are suddenly steps she can take. She sees them in the mirror as the headlights swoop across it. She can't make straight for the highways. She'll have to leave the cities till later. Bunbury? Kalgoorlie? That'd be closer. She can't just disappear but. Because she's handy round the place, Stan'd call the cops to fetch her back. And Mum, she'd cry, for sure. If she gets a job and brings back some of the pay, that'd be different. Maybe he'd leave Tim and her alone then. And later, once Tim's older and can stand up for himself, she could take a bus to Kalgoorlie or even Perth.

Except for galoshes when it's really wet and sometimes thongs for town, Tim and her mostly go barefoot, even on days like this. But Stan's always got his workboots on, like now. He moves like a human crane, Mum says. He's making a looping rhythm as he swings from down to up and hurls the blocks of jarrah onto the trailer. He must be doing a delivery. He's got a clean white singlet on but it's the same old oily football shorts he wears on his hips, below the belly. It's a tight, fairly high belly he carries in front, like he's taking it for a walk, like he's proud of it. Even in winter, his tan's almost black and there's a blacker splash of freckles on his shoulders. He whistles as he works. It's always *Some Enchanted Evening* or *Strangers in the Night*. Whatever's been going on, he always whistles, even after him and Mum have

been having a row. Sometimes Elsie could kill him for it. Shove his head in one of the kindling bags, for instance, tie it up and load him on the trailer. She could dump him somewhere, leave him to blind man's bluff his way home. She can do the gears on the truck. He was really nice that time he showed her. How long ago was that? He mustn't catch sight of her anyhow in Mum's shoes. They pinch at the toes and cut in at the heels but no one would know.

The mud splatters her calves as the heels strike the gravel track. She should've brought a damp flannel to clean up before she gets there. On the other side of the highway, she'll be invisible, anyhow. She can already see the shiny silver of their roof going down behind the hill. Does that mean they can't see her any more? If he calls after her, she can say she's going shopping for Mum. The sky is heavy, dark clouds rolling over. The sea crashes; like in a dream. Like in *Rebecca*, that she's seen three times, surging up, calling you in. *She was beaten in the end*, that housekeeper, Mrs Danver said. *But it wasn't a man. It wasn't a woman. It was the sea.* But who'd want to be like either of them: Rebecca, the wild beautiful one they treat like she's a witch and who's dead, anyhow, or the second Mrs de Winter who doesn't even have a first name. Or does she? In any case, she's a real mouse.

Elsie hauls herself up the path to the vacant lot. There's a burst of hot light. It does this in spring. The scrub glows really bright. She feels the heat escaping in little ripples from her cheeks. They mustn't see her flush. Let them just notice her eyes. Her eyes are all right: sea-green and edged with thick black lashes. Elsie knows this geographical fact about the place and lets it fill her head now. It must cool her, control this flush. The current coming up from the Antarctic makes the sea here freezing, even on the hottest days. She

thinks: eyes sea green up from the Antarctic, body filled with cold sea, sea-smelly since he ... Seaweed sucks and strains through the rock, body trap for weed rotting it, weed and algae mustn't let their secret out, keep body clenched, shut, tight.

Afterwards, when she held the shower nozzle up close to get rid of the slime, she wondered whose it was, his or hers. That's what their towels on the rack said back to her: His, then Hers. Elsie hauls herself up the rise, and now the road is flattening out. It's broad and open. Oh, she does know another fact, she knows that when the French called this place Esperance, they were being sarcastic. They couldn't see anything to hope for, no crops growing ready, no deer to hunt for in the forest. No forests like the ones in Europe. But she can hope, she can. Mum reckons hope's just thinking positive. Where'd we be without hope, love? she says. As long as she doesn't run into any of the kids from school. She can chant the tune all right, she can do it even better than them, the words and the slow time:

Hey-dee hey-dee ho  
Else the Elephant  
Watch her go

So many times she's dreamt of curling up in a cave where no one would think of looking. With the sea whooshing up through the blow holes, you wouldn't know one day from the next, sun up, sun down and the fat would melt away as she lay there on the rock ledge, catching the sun. She'd get brown too. No one would recognise her when she came back, except for the clue of the eyes. They wouldn't be able to get over it. But Mum doesn't seem to understand: whatever she looks like, she's just good ol' Else to her. There's the stack of white sliced bread and jubilee twist, the

pat of cold butter and the pot of jam on the table every day after school. Nothing better for the afternoon munchies, Mum says. If you've got to diet, Else, it's better just to eat a bit of everything. Nothing truer than a little of what you fancy does you good. It's okay for her. She's skinny as a ... rabbit? That's what her mum's like these days, a rabbit. Nervous, twitching. Sad too.

Stan made Elsie come out with him one night on a rabbit hunt. She had to hold the spotlight, direct it at the rabbits. It was hot and close on the bench seat of the ute between Stan and Brian. In the back the dogs were going mad even before they spotted any rabbits. Elsie dropped the light and Stan yelled at her. Brian was nice, he said: Lay off her Stan and passed her the spotlight. The batteries made it blink for a moment and then come on full bore. Then there it was, the rabbit: the light had it pinned and trembling. Were its eyes really pink? Brian's rifle let out a blast and the rabbit slumped. Stan whistled for the dogs. With any luck there'll be foxes further on, he said. That was when Elsie heaved. She tried to push past Brian to the window. She really did and if she'd talked it would've happened anyhow. The vomit went over Brian's legs into the tread of the rubber mat.

She is like a rabbit, her mum. She once said: Look, I know he's giving you a rough time at the moment. Don't think I'm happy about it. But Else, for all our sakes, I've got ter make a go of it this time. Otherwise where would we ... what would we ...

Else could have said it for her. She can answer it too. What you do is get a job. Else will get a job. They needn't be trapped. She's not going to be forced to stick with a man if he turns nasty like Stan. What is it that's made him go nasty? He was young and happy in the marriage photo. He was nice

to her too, said she was a great flower girl. He used to laugh a lot, then. What happens?

Elsie goes around to the latticed area at the back of the hotel. It's a green shade that she enters. The air is wet. Water seeps up through the cracks in the cement. The smell of choked drains. Grey mops are propped against the wall, bottle crates stacked up by the kitchen door. Nothing's to stop her going straight back home now and she won't have to say anything about it. They'll take one look at her and laugh at her thinking she could get a job here. Their eyes will track up slowly from her mum's shoes, up the mud-splattered stockings to the puckered hem of her dress.

They'll see what the kids at school see, Elsie is fat, Elsie is slow and they'll laugh. Elsie has to point to the words to stop them dancing on the page. Elsie has to point, they point at Elsie pointing. What they don't know is she can read all right in private. Well, she can, slowly, if no one's counting how long she takes to turn a page. Sometimes, if she's at the kitchen table, opposite Timmie, who can already read faster than she can, she'll turn the pages in a blur, just in case he's counting and then she'll turn the book face down and pick up the story a few pages earlier on. One word, then the next. If only they'd let you keep on pointing. No, she'll get this job and show them she can do a few things. And they'll be standing at the bus-stop in their lumpy uniforms and their shiny red noses and won't recognise her when she steps off in her smart clothes. Somewhere the things she knows will count. Like she can tell by the way people turn their eyes if they're true or fake. She can pick what's fake. And she can trust her hands. Her fingers practically think. Dishwashing, never breaks a thing, butter spreading, never tears the bread, vegie slicing,

even Mum says bloody perfectionist, sewing, plaiting, knitting. Her fingers carry through. She'll knock on that screen door.

It's a boy who thrusts the door open with a broom, pushing its load of dirt and fluff and crumbs forward. He sweeps it past her into the drainage grid. His eyes flick over her. He sniffs, rakes his fingers through his hair. It springs back again, in greased coils down his forehead. He's serious. He has a job. He knows what he's doing.

What's he seen then? That she's fourteen and her breasts have started but they're more like a fat boy's breasts, more like Larry's. Larry's not in with the slow kids but, not dumb like her, he doesn't need to point to the words. The sun sort of leaks between the new leaves on the virginia creeper. She knows the names of a few plants. And birds. Does Larry? The leaf edges go bright gold, like egg yolk running over the toast crust. Does Larry think things like that? Is that thought? Larry's thighs rub, overlap, rub, overlap. She's watched him on the steps. He used to wait for her at the bubbler on the way to the bus shelter, maybe just because she's fat like him. He hasn't been doing that lately. Let him walk alone then, catch his breath around the corner.

Norma said to ask for Doug. In her quick sharp voice, like glass breaking, she said: Wanna job? Ask Doug, he says there's always work, always someone leaving, that's if you want that sort of work. Norma's in Remedial too so what makes her think she can be so high and mighty? Now the rain comes down like bullets on the corrugated iron over the trellis. How's she going to get away with the light floral dress now? Maybe men don't notice things like that. The water bubbles back up the drain, bringing to her feet all the stuff the kitchen boy swept into it. Elsie gulps and knocks.

He looks a bit like a jockey, small and sunburnt with comb tracks in his ginger hair. He sucks on a flat hand-rolled cigarette. He holds it inwards, towards the palm.

Yer want?

Norma said to ask for Doug. It's about work. About a job. Did she now? Well, I'm your man.