

## EOFY

George Hirst

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With the hill road fixed, Brian could now just make the ferry. Not finding his wallet wasn't fatal anymore. He had his phone.

Brian loved the 7am. Friendly crowd. Even a bit posh with all those sciencey types.

Then. A grey blur. A tap. Barely a bump. What the? No! Then the replay. Wallaby. Probably. Shit. Poor bugger.

Should stop and check. Coulda been a joey. But, it's friggin' end of financial year!

Brian kept driving as if on auto. This is me just driving to the ferry, he told himself. Same as everyday, he told himself.

And there's someone else behind. Woulda seen it too. Where are they? Musta stopped. Good.

Brian loved the drive. Glimpsing Alma, Geoffrey Bay coconuts. Bowls Club, tidy and prim. And the habit, the weekday pattern - a comforting order to it.

But Jesus. Who was behind? Everybody knows the ute. It'll get around.

The grey blur, again. The little tap, again. The car behind, again. I have to work. EOFY! Can't be late today. Wasn't my fault. They just leap out of nowhere. Then Jasmine's voice, 12 going on 20. 'Can we be wildlife carers dad?

Jasmine was that kind of kid. Passionate for animals, even snakes! Always soft for nature. Like the island had planted this inside her. He'd noticed his pride in her for this too. So could he say no to the, 'Slow down for wildlife' and 'I brake for snakes,' stickers she'd just stuck across his tailgate?

Left at the round-about, hole in the ground, no time for a reverse-in park. His morning routine was preserved but the moment on the hill gnawed at him. If I stopped I'd miss the boat for sure. Couldn't. Not today. EOFY. He quickly inspected the front of the ute. No blood. No scratches.

The low cloud which had followed the unexpected winter showers seemed to both climb and slump down the rockfall behind Nelly Bay. Pinkish silver strands catching the morning sun had several locals join the backpackers holding their phone screens aloft. The ferry accelerated and Brian watched too but felt accused by the beauty. As if it knew.

The scene from the hill replayed. And, with it, the growing dread that whoever saw it, most likely, knew his twin cab.

Work was EOFY madness. Bank statements, clearing accounts, payroll, reporting, stocktakes, outstanding bills and invoices - the emails kept coming. Brian pushed himself but the achieving couldn't block a dull persisting regret pricked with anxiety - of word getting out. Jasmine's face.

The replay ran again: Curlew Flat approaching; grey blur and tap! Then, oh my God: the hotline! Yeah, there's the bloody hotline. Should'a rung. Jasmine even stuck it to the fridge! But that's four hours ago! Call now and it will be like, 'Why didn't you call us sooner? You'd leave an injured animal suffering for hours?' The car behind. They would have sorted it. Surely? Who was it?

What could he do? Keep his mouth shut and hope who was following were tourists. A weekend of anxiety lay ahead.

Better check facebook. A quick scroll of the island pages. Nup. Good.

He'd ploughed through work which had kept the grey blur somewhat at bay. He'd stayed back to check the stocktake. Rang Bec. 'Let's do fish n chippies on the beach. Shit of a day.'

Nothing to see where it happened on the way home.

Jas was full of beans. 'Dad, Selina's are gonna let me volunteer with the animals on Saturdays. I'm starting in the morning!'

'Good Jas,' said Brian, struggling to sound alive.

'You orright?' said Bec.

'Yeah, yeah. Long day' '

Brian, Bec and Jasmine found their favourite picnic table on the foreshore and rolled out the dinner. Jasmine blew onto her first chip, 'Dad, did you know that the agile wallabies could make the little Island rockies go extinct?'

'Really sweetheart,' Brian felt heavy and his back suddenly ached.

'They shouldn't be here dad.'

'Didn't they just let them go from the old wildlife park when it closed?'

'We're gonna need a big high fence if we want a garden' said Bec. 'They eat everything'

'They chase the rockies away when they come down to eat at night,' said Jasmine.

'You need to eat too, Brian!' said Bec.

Brian picked up a chip, but stares beyond it .

'Sure you're ok darling?'

‘Yeah. I’m good.’

Jasmine devoured her chips while the gulls arrived for the late shift under the lights.

‘Can we go down the far end on Sunday dad?’ asked Jasmine.

‘Min said she saw an echidna there and (in the squeakiest, tiniest voice), it was having a swim!’

‘Magical darling!’ said Bec.

Brian stared at the squeezed lemon.

‘We could have a swim too.’ said Bec.

‘Need a pee’ he said, standing to leave.

The gulls parted as Brian shuffled away.

The argument in his head rolled on: They jump out of nowhere -no road sense. But shit, I was probably doing 70. Car behind woulda noticed. Wouldn’t deliberately hit wildlife! ‘Cept toads. They’re different. But Jas will go nuts and cop it at school. Bec will be really shitty and the island’s gonna call me a friggin’ hypocrite.

Brian passed Manfred and Naomi from Sommerset Street.

‘Hello Brian’ said Manfred. There was a hint of a grin and the tone sounded just a little proper. Did he know? Was Manfred in the car behind? Were people talking already?

‘Hello you two,’ said Brian, walking on.

Just beyond earshot Naomi said something. Manfred groaned and laughed. What was that?

Damn. Haven’t checked Facebook. Brian lumbered past the jetski hire, his sagging face glowing pale blue from the screen. Nothing. Phew!

Sunday afternoon. Jasmine had found Zhang Min and invited her for a swim with them to where she saw the echidna. These two were inseparable and Jasmine was just a little in awe of Min who had a pet blue-tongue she fed huge maggots from the compost bin to and had now posted 25 of her wildlife sightings on inaturalist. The girls ran off down the beach splashing in the foam and squealing with joy.

Bec looks ahead. ‘Where are you Brian? What is it? ‘Interest rates?’

‘Everything’s gone up. Everything!’ Brian was relieved for the alibi.

‘We can cut back hun. We can still walk on this beach!’

‘Yeah!’

A few more paces and the whining drone of an outboard slapping the chop at full throttle, fifty metres offshore, and a cheerful wave from the silhouetted fisher.

‘Must think we like his noise. Watch out turtles!’ said Bec.

Brian lurched in the soft sand.

Monday morning. Is that supercilious grin at me? Lily Rodrigo is sharing her screen with Jeremy. Did Lily just grimace? Are they ignoring me? Cold shoulders?

Facebook! Shoulda checked after the beach. His heart begins to race as his finger swipes greedily past pictures of more South Americans wanting island work. Then he felt the words before he’d read them: ‘Road killer!’ With shots of a tiny joey, saved and in the arms of, oh no, not that self-righteous bitch!

It reads, ‘We know who you are! Dude hit and left a rock wallaby and her joey to die at Curlew Flat on Friday morning.

With, wait for it, save wildlife stickers on your tailgate.

There’s a word for that! Poor mum’s gone but after a touch and go weekend and amazing carers, looks like this little fella will make it.’ All followed by a chorus of ‘So cutes,’ abuse and fuming emojis and plenty from people who’d never lift a finger for anything. Let alone, wildlife.

Brian felt full of lead as he stared at the symmetrical, arrow-shaped backwash and the accusing island behind.

He turns to cast an eye over the commuter crowd, chatting or glued to their phones. Eyes mostly averted except for Jo Cowper. Of course. He feels sick and heads for the stairs, ‘I hope it wasn’t you who hit the wallaby Brian?’ says Jo with that sweet precision she saved for her public speaking voice.

Brian felt the blood pump in his neck. Faces turned. Some hints of pity but others were grinning.

‘I couldn’t... End of financial year! End of financial year,’ he spluttered, palms squeaking on the railing as his feet staccatoed down the stairs to the disabled toilet.

The floor is wet and there’s pee on the seat. He wipes it and sits, fearfully examining the space beneath the door where, outside, shuffling feet cast shadows and random voices drown in the roar of the big cat’s motors.

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**Judge’s Comments:** In Second Place is “EOFY” by George Hirst, a lively work of short fiction dealing with the ethical dilemmas of wildlife conservation and the complexities of dwelling with other creatures in a place. The piece is distinguished by its command of satire, irony, and dialogue including the language of local residents. The “grey blur” of a wallaby interrupts the commute of the main character, an accountant rushing to his office because it’s “End of Financial Year.” Despite the conservation stickers adorning his car, he speeds off but remains haunted by the repercussions of his choice, some of which surface in conversation with his 12-year-old daughter about wildlife caring.