

Mistake City

Ian C Smith

At last he lands a real job, regular, not stop-gap: reasonable wages with overtime, albeit monotonous graft reached by driving in peak hour traffic, the idea of the car as freedom thwarted. He hasn't been told he shall be clocked by a time and motion study manager. The search for fulfilment a narrow curved tunnel, he seeks the metaphorical light at its end after surviving an upbringing looked back on in anger. Just days before his debut in new overalls he accidentally sets fire to his home. Breathing smoke stink, arm slung in plaster, hope for legitimacy appears, yet again, to have led to a handful of dust.

Still kids, they danced to the tribal throb of pop music at their reception. This was where his bride introduced him to her friend, a beauty with wide eyes and full lips, her body a pageant squeezed into a tight black dress. After dancing with his new wife he beelined for this friend who had stared hard back at him, eyes glittering. Absurdly, he wanted to kiss her right there but managed not to. What the hell's going on? he thought in a delirium of confusion.

An avid movie fan, he escaped the marauding flames by crashing through a window like a stuntman, shielding his face with his forearms, almost losing the use of one hand permanently due to his deeply sliced arm that bled everywhere requiring numerous internal sutures. Instead of exiting via the narrowest window he could have opened the outside door but, believing he was unlocking it, trapped himself by locking it.

Envious friends competed with ribald remarks, he and that sexy girl gyrating, his breath ragged with exercise and desire. His bride claimed him for the next dance joking about the danger of introducing him to her friends. Though he knew his behaviour sparked this jealousy his eyes met that girl's again as she danced with another hopeful. His marriage only hours old, too unsure of himself to have been a skirt chaser, this craziness maddened him.

His colony's clamour like living in the painter Brueghel's bathos, he strives for acceptance but errors honeycomb his history. Knowing he needs this new job with its requirement of his two good hands, he reasons that, rather than phone the factory, he should present in person to plead for time. Hair cut, managing his vehicle's gear shift with cast-free fingers, a lips moving, anus-clenching drive, he practises his accident/recovery synopsis, rearranging and deleting certain negative details in the way writers construct braided narratives.

The prospective new boss listens in an office with imposing diplomas on the walls, intrigued by this age-old winter's tale of lighting a fire: the freezing house, damp firewood, a sudden cataclysmic chimney downdraft the sympathetic insurance assessor had suggested. Edited out with the insurance guy are the mower fuel, the trembling hands, panic at the door. Included, generous with clichés, is a sturdy picture of the virtues of family life. What once was a recurring fantasy of unzipping the tight black dress of an ardent girl he never saw again remains his secret.

He doubted the nuptials would have gone ahead if he met the sexy girl a month earlier but shied from that scenario. Because he attracted trouble, its sometimes sidekick, anxiety, rode with it. Their wedding night more conforming than aroused, they began marital co-operation nagged

by something intangible. Being sensible, but cynicism creeping in, they saved for stuff as the shadow of time's passage came swiftly to meet them. The job that was held open for him, and the heft of persistent memories glimpsed like lighted windows of a train passing in the night, became fading domains of his beating heart.

Author Bio

Ian C Smith writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island. His work has appeared in Antipodes, cordite, Griffith Review, Journal of Working Class Studies, Meniscus, So Fi Zine, Text: A Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, & Westerly. His seventh book is wonder sadness madness joy, Ginninderra Press.