



I love the optimism in this photo, and the bridge, an apt symbol of transition.

Eva Lomski's short fiction has been published in *The Best Australian Stories*, *The Sleepers Almanac*, *Griffith Review*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Cleaver*, and *Island*, among others. She has won honorable mention in several *Glimmer Train* contests and placed third in the 33rd Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition. She is a past recipient of the Grace Marion Wilson Mentorship for Fiction from Writers Victoria (Australia).

THE THINGS WE BUILD



Eva Lomski

It was the summer all the mosquitoes in Queensland blew south to bite us as we played street cricket till nightfall. It was the first summer Dog was around to retrieve, and run off with, the tennis balls we used. It was the summer Estelle's house was demolished.

Jacko and I were arguing over whether a ball hit into the bird bath constituted a six, when the digger started up again. We put Dog on a lead and sat under a gum to watch the demolishing. Jack dribbled the tennis ball in the gutter.

Mum came out. "Unbelievable," she said. "The old girl only died last week." Shook her head and went back in.

I remember the digger sounded like Mum's food processor with glass added. Across the street, its claw ate Estelle's old house the same way Jacko attacked a hamburger. That summer, I felt I was losing him.

Dog growled.

"S'okay, Cuddles," Jacko said.

I hated the way he patted her as if she were his. "Don't call her that."

"You on about names?" He nudged me hard, the way he always did when he thought he was right. "Ruby, Ruby, Rubeee."

I hated that song, too. "Sit," I said to Dog. She was a good dog. She sat.

Estelle's walls buckled. They were pink boards, the same pink as the icing on the cupcakes Estelle made before she got taken away. Lucy,

one time when she agreed to field, said the house looked like a saggy sponge cake with vanilla cream windows.

“What room’s that?” said Jacko.

“Dunno.” I scratched the bites on my leg. “Never went inside.”

That last bit wasn’t true.

The digger’s cabin spun, and the driver got out. Dog barked, and the driver squinted our way as he swung the security fence shut. Show was over till after lunch.

Jacko. “I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

He tossed the ball at my head.

I didn’t mind him eating our food, but Mum sure did. She said she hoped I didn’t eat like a pig when I went to Jacko’s house. I didn’t, but that was because of the insects behind the tins in Jacko’s pantry. Plus, he didn’t invite me so much lately, said he had tennis practice. But I’d seen him and Matt Grogan down the ice cream shop.

We led Dog ’round our back garden where Lucy sat in her best pink sundress in the sandpit. Dog skidded through chewed-up toys and dived onto a castle. Lucy screamed.

“Get out!” She threw fistfuls of sand. Dog yipped.

I yelled, “Stop it.”

“Ruby,” shouted Mum from the kitchen window. “Get Cuddles out.” She couldn’t handle these new moods of Lucy’s either.

I grabbed Dog’s collar and brushed sand from her white fur. She followed close as Jacko and I banged the door behind us. Our kitchen was green and cool, and back then it smelled of either bleach or eucalyptus, depending on what was selling cheap.

“What’s happening across the road?” said Mum, smiling but not smiling, one eye on Lucy through the window. Jacko’s eyes were on the fridge. He didn’t make a move though. Mum lectured him about manners the first time he came, when he grabbed two apricots and stuffed them whole in his mouth.

“Front’s off,” he said.

Me. “How long does it take to demolish a house?”

“Shorter than it takes to build,” said Mum. She had a way of sighing

and talking at the same time. “Cheaper than renovating. So easy to smash things down. Things that have been standing for generations—”

“Can we have lunch?”

“Yes, please,” said Jacko.

Mum looked him up and down. Dirty T-shirt, football shorts. “Wash hands.”

When we came back, Lucy was at the table that Mum called “retro,” but I called old and embarrassing. Mum spread Vegemite on grainy bread and cut it the way Dad liked it, into three soldiers. It was all Lucy asked for now. Mum was saying how much she hated old houses being knocked down, what’s wrong with cream brick veneer? That housing was not the same as living. That if she had time, she’d graffiti “Ban Ugly Monstrosities” across new construction sites.

“Mum,” I said. “That spells B.U.M.” Jacko snorted. “You wouldn’t?”

“The only thing I’m above,” Mum said, “is ground level.” She set down sandwiches.

“Thanks, Mrs. Heilenbeck,” said Jacko.

Mum smiled, because he’d called her Mrs. Heilenbeck and not Rebecca, or worse, Beckie, same as the kids at school. *Is Beckie the new nurse?* She leaned against the sink, waiting for us to finish. She said she couldn’t relax until we were away from the table and preferably out of the house.

“What next?” I asked Jacko.

“Let’s go in there,” he whispered.

“Where?”

“Estelle’s.”

“You crazy?”

Jacko flapped his elbows. “Scaredy-cat from Ballarat. Whaddya scared of? Ghosts?”

“What?” said Lucy, her teeth black with Vegemite. “What did you say?”

“Quiet,” I said.

“Mum!” yelled Lucy. “Ruby told me to shut up. You shut up, Ruby.”

Mum said, “I thought we had a deal, Ruby.”

“Shut up, shut up.” Lucy’s face was as pink as her dress.

“Enough, girls.”

“Shut up.”

“Lucy, go to your room.”

“She started it!” Lucy kicked at the walls all the way to the bedroom. Mum squeezed my shoulder.

Jacko was right. I was scared of ghosts.

Jacko was bored, but not bored enough to go home to an empty house.

“Can your mum take us bowling?”

Bowling costs money. “She’s busy.”

It was after four, hottest part of the day, the digger driver was gone, and there we were on the gutter again, chewing gum. *Danger* said the sign on the security fence.

“We can’t take Dog,” I said.

“Too dangerous,” Jacko agreed.

“Shouldn’t have brought her.”

“She’s our alibi,” said Jacko.

“Big word.”

“Very funny.”

“We can’t leave her here.”

He looked at me sideways through his lashes. “I’ll get Matt if you’re chicken.”

Easy for him to say “chicken.” Easy for a boy with ripped clothes and cockroaches that he caught in a tissue and killed with his hands. *They crunch.*

We crossed the street. I looped Dog’s lead around a shady tree. Jacko checked no one was coming and squeezed through the fence. I looked back at our cream brick veneer with its striped awning eyelashes, then squeezed in too. My heart beat faster than Dog’s tail at dinner.

“You coming?” Jacko’s voice was far away.

My insides rumbled. I imagined the digger claw eating its way through timber and plaster. *Come to me, sponge-cake house, and I will eat up your secrets.*

“Rube!”

Jacko’s shout got me skittering over planks.

I was in what used to be a corridor, if you could call something that

small a corridor. Estelle's was one of the low-cost bank houses, built in the thirties for employees to buy at reduced mortgage rates. It was what they knocked down to build the brick veneers. It smelled of mold and old cooking, the same as it had before Estelle disappeared to the nursing home. On the right was the partly smashed living room and on the left was Estelle's bedroom.

"Come here," Jacko called from the room by the bathroom.

"Can we go?"

He didn't answer.

"Jacko?"

I hated it when he did that, and he did it all the time, and I thought, *Not this time*, but it was so quiet in there, I couldn't stand it.

"You okay?" I stumbled over plaster, paint and dust coming off on my palms. The door to the second bedroom was open, and Jacko was up against the wall. He stared at something.

"R...Rube."

Icicles rushed through me and I thought, *He's seen it too*.

He laughed. "Should have seen your face, Rube! Thought you was gunna be sick."

The first time I'd gone to Estelle's house was after she started bringing us cakes, not long after Dad left, leaving a puppy in a box on the veranda instead of saying goodbye.

"Like he hasn't done enough damage," said Mum.

Lucy, who'd started demanding to sleep in Mum's bed, showed Estelle the pup and squeezed it till it squealed. "She likes cuddles."

Estelle presented Mum with a lemon pie and told her, "Even in bitterness, sweetness can be found."

Mum said, "I'll tell that to the debt collectors."

She made me take the pie dish back the next day. "Be sure to say thank you. I need to rely on you, Ruby."

Estelle, wearing all gray except for a sunflower apron and a diamond ring, led me with that old person's shuffle into the tiny kitchen. A yellow stove sat in the corner.

"I smell gas," I said.

“Always smells like that, lovie. Never done me any harm.”

She poured lemonade and showed me to the back garden. We sat in plastic chairs overlooking a broken-down shed, weeds, and a lemon tree. “Ah, the bittersweet tree.”

I nodded because even at that age I knew that Estelle, like most grown-ups, talked about one thing when they really meant another.

“It’s been difficult for you, hasn’t it?” she said.

I drank my lemonade and pulled at my baggy shorts. Mum made me wear them even though I told her butterflies were for babies. The only good thing was Lucy would be forced to wear them next year.

“You’ve cut your beautiful hair,” Estelle said. “Why?”

I didn’t really know the reason, and I didn’t know the reason Mum let me, but what I told Estelle was that I wasn’t a girlie-girl, carrying on about hair and fashion and boy bands. “Stuff that doesn’t matter.”

“I see,” she said. “And what matters?”

I scratched my knee, looked for mosquitos. “Mum matters. And Luce and school and stuff.”

She took her glasses off. “That all?”

“That’s about it.”

“Fair enough.” Then she told me how a hundred years ago, she went to some place called “The Dug Out” to dance with American marines who called her *sweetie* and *sugar*. “Our men were gone, but the marines lit up the whole city.” She winked. “When it’s tough times, sometimes the best thing to do is to try and have a little fun.”

I smiled like I knew why she was telling me that.

The next time Mum made me take back a cake plate, Estelle was wearing red lipstick and perfume so strong it made me sneeze. We drank lemonade in the garden again, and she asked about the boy she’d seen me with. “So many new faces in the street. Living closer together but further apart.”

“Jacko’s my best friend,” I said. Then I found myself telling her about Matt Grogan and the ice cream shop, and about how the last week of school, Jacko didn’t pick me for his hockey team and instead picked aerobics queen Natalie, and then he asked me to tell Natalie he thought she was hot.

What was left of Estelle's eyebrows shot up. "Hot?"

"Hot."

Her laugh turned into a cough. "You don't know hot till you've worked a summer in an ammunitions factory. Sweated like pigs, we did. Now, let's forget Natalie and have some fun."

She strapped the sunflower apron around my waist, and in the kitchen we bumped into each other as she taught me how to make cupcakes. She talked all the time. There was a picture of her in a museum over the river somewhere, standing with other girls next to a row of bombs. "Came from everywhere, we did, during the war. Real sense of community. Best days of my life."

The third time, Estelle wore a white blouse, yellow trousers, and pearls. I'd taken Dog along, and she asked about Dog, who ran sniffing like a hunting dog through the weeds. Estelle said nothing when I told her about the cardboard box. I told her Mum said dogs were *healers*, and that Lucy called the dog Cuddles.

"And you call her Dog? Come. I want to show you something."

She led me and Dog into the house and opened the door to the room by the bathroom. "This is my son's room."

I was thinking, *Oh, someone else lives here too*, until I saw the cobwebs and the cot. Dog growled.

Estelle said, "Robert's a very special boy."

She showed me around. Teddy bear. Toy train. Packet of cigarettes. Briefcase. Photos of a baby. Photo of a man with long hair. She pointed to a bookcase filled with snow globes. "Terrible problems with his teeth. I bought him one each time he went to the dentist without crying."

She picked out a globe with little red houses in it, labelled *Santa's Land, Vermont*, and I wondered where Vermont was, and why Estelle might have gone there. She shook the globe and watched the silver bits float down on the rooftops. "You ever seen a snowflake?"

"On Christmas cards."

"Tiny crystals joined up to make one beautiful whole. The colder it gets, the more complex they become. Here." She handed the globe to me. "You have it. I'm sure Robert won't mind."

Dog growled, the curtains moved, and I went cold. "Gotta go."

Her face sagged. I thanked her and scooted out. Out the corner of my eye, I saw something, some *thing* in the mirror, and the shivers followed me all the way home.

“Check this out, Rube.”

No way was I going in that room.

“Chicken,” Jacko called.

I went in. The room was just hot and empty, apart from some boxes, and I wondered why whoever cleaned up after Estelle died didn’t take them. I kneeled and put my hand deep inside the nearest box. There was something in there, cold and smooth against my fingers. I pulled it out and put it in the pocket of my shorts.

Jacko looked at the ceiling. “Maybe we...”

Somewhere, something banged. A dog yelped. We looked at each other and ran. Over the door, down the corridor, stumbling over bricks, scraping through the wire fence.

Dog’s lead and collar were attached to the tree, but Dog wasn’t. I whistled.

“She can’t be far,” said Jacko.

Barking from Estelle’s back garden. I squeezed through the fence again. My face was on fire.

“I’ll get her,” said Jacko.

“She’s my dog.”

Rusty nails. Tin cans. Something white. I whistled again but she ran the other way toward the back fence. A high yelp.

“No!” I ran to where she was whimpering, breathing three times her normal speed. Jacko was next to me, his stupid face scrunched up, his sweaty boy stink choking me. “She okay?”

“Don’t touch her.”

“But...”

“Shut up! This is *your* fault.”

He said something, but it was like I was under glass and couldn’t hear. I picked her up gently and weaved my way out of there. She was hot against my T-shirt, and her heart beat against her ribs. She was so light. I couldn’t remember ever noticing how light she was.

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The day Estelle gave me the Vermont snow globe, I told Mum about the cobwebs and the cot. “Is her son still alive?”

“No,” said Mum. “He died before you were born.”

“Is she crazy?”

Mum circled the kitchen. “There’s crazy and there’s crazy. Sometimes people don’t want to let go of something because there are too many years of living gone into it.”

“Like you and Dad?” I said.

Mum didn’t say anything, but I felt better.

We raced Cuddles to the vet where she had her paw stitched, and I cried so hard, I couldn’t see out the windscreen on the way home. That evening, when I was hoping to sit in Mum’s lap like I was little and tell her about the snow globe I found in the box, Lucy started vomiting up the sand she’d swallowed.

A few days later, Lucy went to a friend’s, and it was quiet, so I sat in the front room. Dog was in her bed. The blinds were down to keep it cool, and I watched through them as Jacko stuck a package in the letter box. He peered at the house and left.

Estelle’s house was gone. Only the lemon tree stood between the digger and the fence. Mum come in and slipped Jacko’s package into my lap. It was dog treats and a scuffed, but proper, leather cricket ball.

Mum looked out the blinds. “Soon,” she said, “nothing but a flat patch of earth, and then ten units or one monstrosity. Who needs five bathrooms?”

The dog struggled out of her basket, and I reached down to pat her. Her whole head fit in the palm of my hand. She licked my fingers, one small warm lick, like any more was too much effort.

“Mum,” I said, “why doesn’t Dad phone?”

She sat next to me. After a minute, I let her pull me onto her lap.

“And here I was,” she said, “thinking you were fine.” She smelled of the lavender body wash I bought her last Christmas. “He’s working things out. Doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you.”

We sat like that for a while, until Cuddles started whining. I gave

her one of Jacko's treats. Looking at the treat box I had an idea. "If I'm going to make cupcakes, I'm going to need some ingredients." I knew where I might find some lemons for the icing, if I was quick.

"Maybe you'll let Lucy help?" Mum said. She saw my face. "Maybe not."

That night, as I sat in bed, I held my snow globes. The new one was of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, with a green ferry floating underneath it on blue liquid. I shook the globes over and over, so that in my left hand, snow covered the red Vermont houses, and in my right, the bridge was blanketed. I found that the closer I held the globes to my chest, the warmer they got.

