

Central Queensland University

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Bridging the gap

Biographical note:

With a background in public health and education, Denise Beckton is a tutor in Creative Industries and higher degree research student at Central Queensland University in Noosa, Queensland. Denise is currently writing a young adult/crossover novel and a related dissertation that explores the use of invented languages and their use as a narrative component of fiction.

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The day began like every other, with a trip to the letterbox, and then a short walk over the road to check for the telltale signs.

Sid could sense, almost immediately now, when someone had jumped in the night. He couldn't put his finger on how he knew. It was nothing he could see or hear – the osprey welcomed him with its usual falsetto and the waves crashed against the cliff to the same timeworn beat – it was more a feeling. The same sense of foreboding he felt when he dropped something, before it hit the ground; as though the world had paused, waiting for something to smash.

He wrestled the jam of bills and leaflets from the mail slot and shuffled them like poker cards in his hands. The real-estate brochures, which seemed to breed inside the small box, arrived most days now. Some from agencies as far away as the CBD. Sid clicked his tongue at the 'No Junk Mail' sign.

That was a waste of time.

Still, he preferred the brochures to the agents' cocky rat-a-tats at the front door. Sid could distinguish them from the Mormons by their stiff shirts and matching smiles. One had braved his doorstep just last week with slow-talking promises of money, and a comfortable life.

'What on earth would we do with more money?' Edith had asked. 'We'll be long gone before we have a chance to spend it.'

She didn't hang around to hear about cruise liners – how nowadays they cater for people in *our* condition – and only returned when she was sure the agent had left.

'I don't know why you give them the time of day, we're never going to sell, so why do you bother?'

'I like to see how long it takes before they talk themselves into knots. They think we are their ticket to a quick commission – they're worse than ambulance chasers if you ask me.'

'So, you're toying with them?'

'Yep, that's exactly what I'm doing.'

He turned away from the frown that she favoured when he got this way.

'I think I know what the kids would say to that if they were still here.'

'Yeah, I know, they'd tell me to get a life.'

He looked back at the house they'd shared for nearly fifty years. They were one of the first to build at The Gap, back when green fibro facades and picture windows were all the rage, when rows of eucalypts surrounded their house, like giant picket fences. The world had changed around them and most of their original neighbours had moved on. New growth had sprung up in their place; trees with white walls for trunks and glass sheets for leaves. Edith called them *concrete bunkers*. There was one either side of their house. Their walls eclipsed the sun and shortened their days, and cast sword-like shadows across the weed-ridden cricket pitch on the front lawn.

It made their little shack look vulnerable, like a toddler between over-protective parents.

He and Edith made a good team, he thought, and pretty much had their morning routine down pat. He had mastered a few well-placed questions: *What brings you here to The Gap?* and *It's a long way down from up here, eh?* These were usually enough to get most people talking and willing to follow him over the road to Edith for a cup of tea or a beer.

They'd married before the war and even though he had returned (like most who had seen action) a different man, Edith had stuck by him. He couldn't tell her that the faces of the men he'd killed had followed him home, haunted him. They had, at first, infected every happy thing in their lives like a contagious flu, so that the giddy suffering of childbirth melded with the image of a soldier's contorted pain, and every opened present become someone's final look of surprise. The memories tailed him like a spy, and he came to understand why some people chose to outrun them, to leave them on the cliff as they leapt from the edge of the world.

Sid dumped the brochures in the recycling bin and crossed the road. He liked to get to the cliff early, before the buses and the sightseers with their cameras arrived, before people started to mess with things. He looked to see if Sharif was there. It had become a game, of sorts, to see who would be first to arrive at the park bench. The boy's slight frame was almost always there, silhouetted against the waking sky, waiting for Sid to round the dunes.

He had, at first, thought Sharif was a jumper – the boy showed signs; the skinny frame of a life wasted on drugs, and an ink-penned story on his skin that seemed to have too many chapters for someone so young. But when he asked about the tattoos, Sharif laughed at Sid's concern.

'It's art man. Everyone's got ink, and this,' he said, pointing to the decorative script that encircled his bony arm, 'is Persian ink.'

The weather and talk turned to football, politics and everything in-between.

'Soccer is the real football,' said Sharif, 'AFL is for Neanderthals – it's a free-for-all.'

'Yeah, it does look like that at first, but trust me, there are plenty of rules, unless you're playing Footscray of course.'

He taught Sharif the difference between holding a mark and holding the ball, and gave him the dog-eared stash of comics that were left by his son under the single bed.

'Marvel copied DC you know, you can't beat the original stories,' Sharif said.

Sid worried when the boy talked about being a square peg in a round hole, and of his parents who were grateful to the country that gave them sanctuary, but ill at ease with the freedoms it allowed their children. At these times, Sid slipped into the paternal role as easily as a well-worn cardigan, only realising how much of a gap there had been in his life once it had been filled.

‘It’s hard man, nothing I do is ever good enough.’

‘I’m sure they just want what’s best for you.’

‘Nah, they don’t understand me, or don’t want to.’

‘There are plenty who will try, like youth workers and the church?’

‘Those dudes are mostly whities who’ve never missed a Sunday roast, and religion, Sid, is opium for the masses.’

‘Take it from me, it’s the real opium that lures the masses. I know because most of them end up here. When you’ve had as much tragedy in your life as some people have, you will come to realise that churches are the only stable things that some people have to cling to.’

They differed on most topics but agreed that war was pointless. Sharif spoke of the tennis-like conflict that still played in his homeland, and of the generations who were born into it and knew nothing of peace.

Sid talked, for the first time, about his own experiences and the people at The Gap; those he was able to help. Like the husband who preferred to end his own life rather than see his wife waste away before him, and the wife whose cosmetic surgeries could never outweigh the value her husband placed on younger women. They wondered about the ones that couldn’t be saved and the demons they left behind. Sid told Sharif that black, white or brindle, people just wanted to be heard, and taught him how to recognise those who needed help; the depressed, the lonely and the lingerers. Now the boy was asking his own questions and listening.

He hadn’t told Sharif about the letter he’d found many years before. He pulled it from his pocket; the soft paper was splitting at the folds and the words, which he knew by heart, were faded and hard to read.

I came here fully expecting to return home feeling happy with my lot. I told myself that if just one person asked how I was or showed they cared then there was still hope in this world. As you can probably guess (as usual), things didn’t go to plan.

Sid patted the empty bench on his way to the viewing platform (he’d made it there first, for once) and scanned the ground for signs, which he sometimes found, illuminated in slanted columns of daybreak, like prizes on a television game show. It struck him that people left the most ordinary things, like wallets (sometimes full), cigarette packets (usually empty) and shoes. He knew though, that however insignificant the gesture of emptying pockets and removing shoes might be, to friends and family they were farewell gifts, so he tried to collect them as best he could.

There were precious things too; heirlooms that held a catalogue of lifetimes were willed to sons and daughters on whatever scrap of paper could be found. Sometimes, there would be nothing at all but the disturbance of gravel at the edge and a headline in the Morning Herald announcing that a John Doe had been ‘cradled by the waves’, carried to a southern beach, as if the sea were trying to hide its shame.

Sid wondered what was keeping the boy and decided it was, most likely, the weather. The easterly squall was seeping through his swollen bones and, though it would probably die-off by lunchtime, the wind was brisk enough to keep all but the most vigilant joggers in their beds. The cold was never an issue for him. He'd spent too many years facing it from the decks of naval ships (where the only respite was standard issue coffee and the soothing draw of cigarettes) and was thankful just to be on dry land. He sat down and filled his lungs with salty air. The past had a habit of haunting a person. If he'd known then what he knew now, perhaps he would have laid off the tobacco.

A steady flow of thank you cards and photographs, from people he'd pulled back from the edge, told him that maybe he'd appeased some of the ghosts of his past. The faces that smiled back at him were often so transformed that he struggled to remember their names. He looked at the pictures when the tortured faces of those he'd encountered in the war played on his mind.

His watch told him that a screech of hydraulic brakes would soon announce the first convoy of tourists. They would form an unbroken line along the barrier fence, like a cheap necklace of brightly coloured beads, and block his view. Sid sheltered his eyes with the arc of his palm and watched a cloud pass over the strengthening sun. The Gap fell silent as the cloud sat suspended above him, creating an oil-spill shadow that swallowed the colours of the sea. It reminded him of a closing eye and made him anxious. He took the hollow feeling as a sign of hunger and, rubbing his stomach, scanned the dunes for Sharif, one last time, before turning back home. He was sure that Edith would have the cake iced by now.

Endnote

1. This short story was inspired by the deeds of the late Donald Ritchie whose actions saved the lives of many people at The Gap. I never met Mr. Ritchie or any of the people he assisted. This piece of writing and the characters portrayed within it are entirely fictional.

Research statement

Research background

This short story was inspired by the actions of Donald (Don) Ritchie who prevented more than 160 people from suiciding from The Gap in Sydney (SMH 2012). Building on Nabokov's story 'Signs and symbols' (1948), this work juxtaposes two narratives within a larger structure and relies symbolism in order to gradually unveil plot elements and build suspense (de la Durantaye 2006, Rosenzweig 1980). The measured revelation of information highlights nuances within the narrative, and conveys information about how characters' relationships change over time, according to shared experience.

Research contribution

This work highlights issues that contribute to mental illness in Australia (ABS 2014) and contemporary attitudes about multiculturalism, immigration and Australia's involvement in international conflicts (SMH 2014). The narrative is constructed to create awareness, and foster contemplation, about current contentious issues and the belief systems around them. It also implies that, through simple acts of interpersonal kindness, people can facilitate societal change and that 'a simple conversation could change a person's life' (RUOK? 2014).

Research significance

By replicating Nabokov's use of textual devices to build suspense and drive plotting, this work shows how fictional narratives can profile contemporary societal issues. This story has been accepted for publication in a leading peer-refereed journal.

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