

# Carleton

## For the love of Candy

By Carleton Chinner

Fred sat at the bar and stirred the spilled beer with one stubby finger. It was the dark hair growing between each knuckle that bothered him. Why did it grow so well there and never on his head? He doodled idle curves on the sticky counter and smiled. That looked a bit like her; Candy, that fit sort down the hall. She was such a hotty. He was crazy about her... nah, let's be honest, he lusted after her toned bod, even if she was weird—always spinning down the hall like a top when she saw him. Someone said she used to be a dancer, real fancy with the Australian Ballet Company and everything. She'd never go out with no-hoper like Fred.

A flyspecked pedestal fan, on the bar, struggled to move the molasses-thick air. It didn't help. He wiped his brow and dried the back of one hairy hand on the tired white t-shirt that was his going out gear. The bar was an escape from the Wickham Street flophouse. No better, just different, four other walls for the gainfully unemployed to stare at. He couldn't sit here all day or the bouncer would kick him out again. Time to go.

Outside the summer sun burned the sky white, like the flame of an arc welder wielded by angry god, hell-bent on splitting the dome of heaven. The burning sky made smudges of the shadows, torching into corners and leaving no shade in the concrete wasteland.

The busker had taken the one good spot under the bus shelter awning. He was playing that odd ukulele, the one with no strings and singing. Oh Gawd! He was singing again. The busker had the most beautiful voice, but all he ever sang was Yellow Submarine. People said it was amazing. Fred had heard it so often; he was ready to club the busker to death with his own ukulele. He sauntered over.

"Ever think of singing something else?"

"Why would I want to do that?" The busker spoke a clipped upper-class English that Fred never tired of hearing. The guy was a real puzzle, between the weird accent and the missing fingers that he never wanted to talk about, there was no telling what his story was.

"Mate, I've been thinking about Cindy again, you know that good sort who lives down the hall from me."

"Ah, the ballerina. You do realise she's much older than she looks."

"Nah, c'mon, she can't be a day over twenty."

"Try thirty. All that ballet has kept her in good shape."

"Doesn't matter, she'll never look at me. What've I got?"

The busker tapped a slow steady beat on the ukulele. "You should go ask Bethel."

Fred knew all about Bethel Crank, the strange old cat lady that lived at the end of the lane near Breakfast Creek. Everyone said she grew weeds in her front yard, but Fred knew better. The weeds had names like feverfew, nightshade and belladonna—the kind of stuff that could end up in your cup of tea if you weren't careful. She was a scary old bat all right. Fred had asked her once why dogs stepped across to the other side of the road any time they got near her place. "Wolfsbane," was all she said and for an instant Fred had seen past the mask of a potty old lady to something older and darker than he wanted to think about. Maybe the busker was onto something if he thought that Bethel could help.

He wandered down the lane taking his time like an errant schoolboy on the way to a good talking to, but got to Bethel's house soon enough. She was tending

her weeds dressed in full gardening gear; a sensible floral print dress topping a pair of dusty blunnies. She saw him coming and stood as he reached the gate.

"Hello deary, you seem a bit down. Fancy a cup of tea?"

"Er no thanks, it's too hot for tea, just water for me."

"Come inside and tell old Bethel what's troubling you."

Fred stepped through the front door with its peeling blue paint into a comfy lounge. Shadows slunk away behind overstuffed furniture; Fred hoped they were cats.

He bent Bethel's ear about being poor and not so good looking, and how he had no chance with Candy. He knew Bethel was listening because she turned to offer an opinion to someone who wasn't there called Harold.

"It's a bit of a pickle he's got himself into. What should he do Harold?"

"Really? Are you sure that's wise? She can be so cranky."

"Well, that settles it then," she said to the non-existent Harold. She turned to Fred. "We're going to see Arabella."

"Who?"

"That's Mrs Arabella Huntington to you Fred. Now you mind your Ps and Qs when we visit her."

Fred unsure of what to make of this followed bemused as she led him through the suburb; her Blundstones clumping a steady rhythm as she forged out into the hot midday sun. They marched clear up to the hill in Newstead and stopped in front of a rambling sandstone building that echoed its colonial past from every sagging window. Bethel's hearty knock was answered by a frail old woman with a shock of white hair that seemed to defy gravity. She led them inside to a formal Victorian sitting room.

"Hello Bethel. I see you have recovered from your little misfortune."

"Hello Arabella, this is Fred."

Arabella Huntington cast Fred the kind of look that is usually reserved for the wheely bin on Tuesdays. "I suppose you should sit."

Fred sat. There was history between these two. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

He looked around. The room was laid out with an obsessive neatness. Chairs aligned with an exacting precision to the edge of the gleaming mahogany table. The carriage clock on the mantel gleamed from years of polish. A display case dominated one side of the room, the shelves crowded with ceramic owls. Their glass eyes seemed to stare at Fred. Each owl was unique and almost had a personality. Most seemed to be caught in a state of fright. Fred could almost swear he saw one blink.

"Do you like my collection young man?"

Fred said he did and saw Bethel suppress a faint shudder.

"I crafted each of those by hand."

"Why don't you tell Mrs Huntington about your troubles Fred," said Bethel clearly wanting to move on from the owl collection. Fred told her.

"Oh that Candy. The little girl who stole my peaches. I got Sir Tibbet to teach her a lesson. From what I heard she tripped over Sir Tibbet on the night of her grand opening."

A large grey tom leaped into Arabella's lap. It looked at Fred like he was a something small and in need of being eaten. Arabella absently scratched the cat's head. "I hear she's never danced again. That will teach the little tart not to steal. Won't it Sir Tibbet?"

"So Fred, what is it you really want?"

Fred spouted the first thing that came into his mind. "I want to be super smooth so Candy will like me, And I... I want to be filthy stinking rich."

Arabella smiled. Fred knew that smile, it was the one sharks used when dinner came swimming past.

"Very well, young man, I shall see what can be done."

Bethel stood. "We should be going then Fred."

The next morning Fred wobbled down to the communal bathroom at the end of the hall. The shower stalls had brown mould growing between the tiles and a collection of assorted hair around the drains. A faint odour of decay followed him around. He stood under the weak stream of a caked up shower head, staring blankly at the floor.

Hair was circling the grimy tiles. It was his. The rug on his chest was falling out; leaving bare pink patches behind. Sweet, he thought, I'm getting smoother. The odd smell was getting stronger. Must be the drains he thought.

He sauntered down to the pub feeling good about the world. The busker was in his usual spot, hammering away at his ukulele.

"Play us song."

"Maate, that's quite the death breath you've got going. Stand a bit further downwind and I'll sing something for you."

Fred obliged as the strains of Yellow Submarine, filled the air. He beat a hasty retreat to the pub.

Time had forgotten the pub, since he left. He bought a beer and sat at the same chair. His beer doodle still etched in the sticky surface. He had a few dollars left in his pocket so he put them up on a keno game. Seven, Three, Eight... the numbers fell in line and Fred sat there with his mouth wide. Had he just won? You beauty! Six hundred was a lovely round number. Fred couldn't remember the last time he had held so much cash. He had to celebrate. He would ask Candy out to dinner.

Years later Fred would think back to those two days and wish he had thought more before asked the old woman for help. Sure, every time he gambled, he won big. The money had paid for the house, and the car, and the butler. He never seemed to age, wrinkles and hair were not super smooth apparently. Candy had the finest therapy money could buy and apart from the occasional pirouette was more or less over her fear of cats and tutu attachment issues. She loved him but couldn't stand to be near him because he stank. The doctors said it was some viral thing they had never seen before. Yeah, he really was super smooth and filthy stinking rich.