

Shirley Coulson

The Millstones

Awareness dawned. There they were – the millstones – sitting accusingly side by side on the small caravan table. The blue exercise book, neatly ruled columns, the flowing cursive script of her mother-in-law – gift, name, address. She could still hear her:

Important to thank people for their generosity. Here I've started a list for you. I bought flower thank you cards – hydrangeas – they're your favourite flower aren't they? There's a box of stamps. When I told the post office man what they were for he gave me these biros – isn't that kind? Said lots of people have been thinking of you and Tom.

Beside the blue book the insurance forms – headings of Room, Item, Value. Her mind catapulted to the phone call from the officious clerk.

It's clear in your policy document madam. If you can claim against another body you have to do that first. Yes I understand it will take some time to action that with the State Railway, however the police report says the bushfire was started by the train. It's easier to list the items lost if you do it room by room.

They had left her with the millstones – him to work, her home to suburbia. She went to pick up the pen but instead her hands went to her throat tearing savagely at the neck of her donated too small work shirt, wrenching it away from her, trying desperately to remove the millstones weighing her down. She raged.

Small print. Thank you. How kind. List. Flowers. Train. *Choo! Choo!* ...

The words became increasingly incoherent.

And then it came to her. She cast around for the matches. There they were -- she'd hated trying to light the gas burners – the long Redheads helped. Grabbing the millstones she flung the caravan door open almost falling headlong down the steps. Steadying herself her eyes registered the blackened ground, the tree stumps, the chimney sentinel, the growing order of rubble piles.

But the smell, always the smell, nothing would ever remove that – it hung in the air coiling itself around her, launching itself into her mouth, settling into her nose. As she walked in the grey car tracks towards the front, gate no more, the heavy silence was broken by her chant, *Choo-choo Whoosh!* They'd had lots of fun building their stone wall, attaching their homestead name in carved cedar – HEREWEARE HAVEN– corny but they loved it! Their forever home. *Choo-choo Whoosh!*

Choo-choo Whoosh!, she chanted over and over, kicking, pushing, pulling the stones, in time to her chant, until she had a pile of loose stones spread into a circle. The only sound now the tearing and crumpling of paper mounding in the centre. Taking the

Redhead box she lit a match. Flames, ash, sparks, that smell, that sound. She threw the rest of the box into the flames – whoosh!

That's where he found her when he came home from work. Her bare feet black, her long hair flying wildly, dancing in circles around the stone circle.

Choo-choo Whoosh! Choo-choo Whoosh!