

*Melissa is a Steiglitz resident who works as a drug and alcohol counsellor and has a love of creative writing. Her serialised piece of fiction, **Once Upon a Benson**, first appeared in the February 2023 issue of the Meredith and District News. Here, we present all episodes as they are published. Enjoy the read.*

Once upon a Benson...

An original short story by Melissa Arch

EPISODE ONE

Margie yawns, as she switches the kettle on. Sammy the cat is curled up on her feet. The jug gurgles to life, a morning familiarity. Coffee was always first priority in the Benson household!

“Merv, you want a cuppa?” Margie called out to her husband, who was freshening up in the bathroom.

Merv had already been out milking since 4am.

“Yes please luv”. Margie knows Merv loves toast and would be ravenous by now.

Smiling, she pops a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. Butter, check. Vegemite, check.

Still shaken up about her dream last night, Margie grimaced at the memory-Scott had been refused parole.

Their son, Scott had served 7.5 years in prison and was coming up for parole any day now. It was playing on Margie’s mind. Margie wondered what her husband’s thoughts were, leading up to the time?

The toaster pops, jolting Margie’s attention back to the present moment. As she spreads the butter and Vegemite evenly across the slice, she says a silent prayer for their son.

Where would Scott live? He was welcome home, if he could toe the line. He would have to look for work though, that would be a must.

Merv appears in the doorway, his eyes bloodshot, as he scuffs across the lino in his worn moccasins.

“Morning luv”. Merv plants a kiss on Margie’s lips. Just like he had every day for the past 40 years they had been together. Margie put the coffee and toast down in front of Merv, on the table he had crafted himself, all those years ago. Three generations had sat at that table, shared their daily goings on, triumphs and tears alike.

Margie felt a desperation to talk with Merv, about their son and his pending release. Something was holding her back.

Merv had never been much of a talker. Typical bloke. This needed to be discussed, Margie thought adamantly.

Scott sat pensively on the bed’s edge, awaiting the guard to collect him. He was visibly nervous, palms and lip line sweating, 7.5 years in this place, all due to an avoidable accident. Scott would never use a mobile phone whilst driving again. People don’t ever think it could happen to them. People are stupid thought Scott, as he wondered again what the time was?

Scott had done much reflecting on that regular, unsuspecting afternoon, yet the images would haunt him for the rest of his time. He may have a chance to walk free today. Scott would never take freedom for granted again.

“Benson, you’re up” the guard bellowed. Scott rose to his feet promptly, nodded at the guard and walked forth hesitantly, as if prolonging an answer he may not want to hear....

“Merv, do you reckon Scott will get out?” Margie asked, wary of Merv’s reaction.

“I really couldn’t tell you luv. It’s up to the magistrate isn’t it? If he’s kept his nose clean, he should

be right”.

Merv had not been to visit Scott for a good while. Margie, on the other hand, visited Scott weekly. She was his mum and needed to help keep his spirits up. Margie knew that Merv still dwelled on the accident, that it needn't have happened. The locals had all chipped in their two bobs worth, which stirred Merv up. If either Merv or Margie ever saw Scott with a mobile phone in his car again.....

“Mr Benson. All reports state that your behaviour and participation over the course of your sentence has been admirable”, remarked the magistrate, his gaze firmly fixed on Scott.

“Yes, your honor”, replied Scott meekly.

“So today, I am granting you parole, on account of your consistently good record. A most regrettable and preventable tragedy happened, but I am sure that you have had much time to reflect on the consequences to all parties.”

Scott lowered his gaze in shame. He still felt it. What if he ran into Lauren's parents down the street? Perhaps to move away, start afresh, would be best? Nobody would then know what he had done.

The truth is that Scott took away someone's life, an innocent person. Her loved ones would never see her again. The pain he had caused, simply by being distracted.

EPISODE TWO

“Lottie, can you get a move on please? I need to get ready for work!”

Bonnie could not wait for their downstairs bathroom to be finished! Lottie, her daughter, was at THAT age. She would spend hours in her parents' ensuite.

“I'm coming Mum. Just finishing my hair”. Bonnie rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come on! I haven't even had breakfast yet!” Bonnie yelled.

Bonnie was feeling anxious about work today. The emergency department had been extremely busy lately.

The ensuite door flies open and Lottie swans out, looking every bit the teenager.

“You are NOT wearing that face full of makeup to school young lady!”

“Makeup? What makeup?” Lottie said, as innocently as a teenager could. Bonnie grabbed some facewipes, thrusting

them into Lottie's hand.

“Go and wipe it off. NOW!” Bonnie insisted. Lottie skulked off, knowing it was no use arguing with her mother. Especially before coffee.

Bonnie considered Lottie's recent blossoming, since turning 15 -she had developed physically and emotionally. It was hard not to notice. Bonnie recalled herself at the same age. Oh, never again would she wish to be a teenager! Sure, as an adult, there is more expected of you but you got to make your own decisions-or mistakes. That was life's essence.

Oh, dear daughter of mine. You have so much of your story to write yet, Bonnie thought as she squeezed shampoo into her palm. Bonnie hoped that Lottie would be resilient to life's often “rough and tumble” style.

Lottie wiped her face reluctantly. She just wanted to be like her friends! THEY were all allowed to wear makeup!

It's not fair, thought Lottie. I'm 15! She looked at her reflection, in the heavily stickered mirror she'd owned since a young child. I'm closer to grown up than what mum thinks, she thought, giving herself a wry smile. Lottie had recently tried to smoke a cigarette, coughing until she almost vomited. Given the chance, Lottie would probably try it again though.

Gerald Crocker clicked his Audi locked and proceeded to the shire building. Another day, Gerald sighed. He had worked for the shire for 13 years. It was well known he was looking forward to retirement by his consistent lack of enthusiasm.

"Morning all. Another day, another dollar", Gerald said resignedly. Nobody answered. Nobody even looked up from their desks. Gerald was not popular among the community but he did not care. He had been paid good money, over the years, to not achieve too much at all. Weekly long lunches, overseas junkets, running personal errands on council time-Gerald had enjoyed free reign. His role at the shire would certainly be his last..

Gerald would never admit he was lonely. Desperately lonely, in fact. He had married 3 times, all ending in animosity and divorce. He had fathered 3 children. Grown up as they were now, with families of their own. He did not know about any of their lives. They had stopped communicating years ago.

"Johnny, can you come and give me a hand please mate?" Jason was digging some seedlings into the family vegie patch.

"I'm about to go down to Levi's for a jam, Dad!" Johnny replied, agitated.

"This won't take long son. I need you. Can you please unload the rest of the seedlings from the trailer and bring them here?"

"OK", Johnny groaned. Jason thought, as he continued shovelling, what is it with teenagers?!? Both Johnny and his daughter, Lottie, never seemed satisfied with their parents' efforts. Jason didn't recall being so expectant and entitled when he was seventeen. Perhaps it was that generational thing that everyone talks about?

"Kids today!" Older people loved to exclaim. Jason silently agreed. He was very grateful to have been raised in simpler times. The internet and social media of today's society had much to answer for. Jason worried for his kids' future, with all that he saw go on.

EPISODE THREE

Scott raises his head from the cloud like pillow that he was no longer accustomed to.

"Where am I?" It took a few seconds for Scott to register that he was safely tucked up in his childhood bedroom.

That old familiar scent of home. Scott recalled his longing for this, in prison, during his darkest and most reflective hours. He now had the chance to rectify his life, define his future. The feeling remained that Scott may have to move away, in order to make a fresh start. The scene of his unintended crime.

Perhaps a cabin, in a caravan park, would suffice?

Mum and Dad have given such unwavering support, thought Scott. Mum, more so than Dad. Scott thought about his father and the sore disappointment he had shown towards Scott, since the accident. A wave of shame and guilt washed over Scott yet again.

Will Dad ever forgive me?

“What’s done is done, son” Scott imagined his father would say, if the subject was ever broached between them. Most likely though, it wouldn’t be.

Eunice Kingsley sat quietly at her dining room table, eating a slice of swiss roll. These sure aren’t as generous in taste as they used to be, she thought, making a dissatisfied face. Eunice continued with her crossword.

“A something NA....” The answer popped into her head. Gleeefully, she shouted “anagram!” to nobody.

Eunice lived alone and had done since her husband had died, 17 years ago. Eunice still missed him but life went on.

Not that she didn’t get lonely. Eunice didn’t like pets-too messy, too needy! She liked people watching. Perhaps a little too much....

Merv and Margie had been out to lunch, with some longtime friends. Once home, Margie kicked off her shoes, relieved to feel the air between her toes. She had always despised shoes and loved the feeling of freedom that came with Summer. Margie felt tired and felt like she needed to lay down. Merv was out tinkering in his beloved shed, a daily ritual. It kept him out of Margie’s hair for a bit!

Margie enjoyed that floating feeling, just before sleep, when your thoughts didn’t make sense. She awoke to Merv, gently rousing her.

“How long have I been asleep?” Margie dopyly asked her husband.

“Not sure Luv. Would you like a cuppa?”

“Yes please”. The heat of their bedroom had made Margie thirsty. She could hear Merv cluttering about in the kitchen.

Margie went to sit up, when a sharp pain shot up her right side.

“Ooooh!” Margie cried out in surprise. Merv came rushing back in.

“Everything OK Luv? What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. A really sharp pain in my side. Never felt it before”. Margie grimaced. “I’ll be right”.

She alighted from the bed and ambled into the kitchen, for her cuppa.

Merv was looking concerned but was on his way back outside.

“Sing out if you are having trouble, won’t you Luv?”

“Yes but I reckon I should be OK,” Margie replied. She did feel though, that something was not quite right.

Call it women’s instinct. Margie did not want to further worry Merv, after the stress of waiting to see whether Scott was to get parole.

Scott? Where was their son? Margie could not recall seeing him since this morning. He has only returned to the family home a week ago but was not saying much. Conversations between Merv and Scott had been virtually non existent. Margie could cut the air with a knife some evenings.

What can I do to fix this situation? Margie thought. Should I call Bonnie and see what she thinks? Margie and her daughter, Bonnie, had always been close.

Bonnie will just say “Let them sort it themselves, Mum!” Margie decided that Bonnie is usually right.

Margie flashed back to that awful pain of 20 minutes ago and resigned herself to making a doctors appointment.

Prevention is better than cure, her mother would always say. Margie happened to agree.

EPISODE FOUR

Gerald found himself sitting at the hotel bar after work.

“Another Gerry?” Morty the barman asked, looking at Gerald’s empty glass.

“No, I’ll grab a takeaway bottle of the usual, thanks Morty”. Gerald always drank the same chardonnay.

He paid Morty and headed for his car. Another night-just me and the bottle, Gerald sighed to himself. He was sick of wine and six minute microwave meals. He wanted company. Female company.

As Gerald poured his first glass, he had an idea and turned on his laptop.

“Morning Lottie”, said her father, Jason, anticipating a grumpy response. Or none at all. Her morning stare could frighten the devil himself.

“Morning Dad!” Lottie replied, as she glided across the kitchen tiles.

“Well, someone’s chipper today!” Jason replied, surprised.

“It’s a beautiful morning and I’m alive!” Lottie replied enthusiastically.

“Something special happening at school today then?” Jason was happy that his daughter was unusually cheerful.

“Nah. Just another day”. But it wasn’t just another day. Lottie was secretly meeting a boy after school. Not just any boy-Kye Palmer. The dreamiest boy in the school. And he was in year eleven! Lottie felt so much more regarded by her friends right now.

Lottie’s made up face escaped her dad’s attention-wearing foundation, mascara and pink lipstick.

Lottie’s mum, Bonnie, was finishing a nightshift and would arrive home after Lottie had left. Lottie’s perfect opportunity.....

Gerald was startled awake by his bleating alarm. Reaching for the snooze button, he knocked a glass of water over his bedside table.

“Damn!” Gerald cursed, as he wonkily got to his feet. What had he done last night? Oh yes! He had signed up to an online dating site. Gerald winced at the empty chardonnay bottle that remained, a sip remained in the glass.

Gerald wondered if he had approached any women on the site? He did not have time to check, already running late. Gerald’s head ached. He inhaled two paracetamol and clumsily brushed his teeth. Grabbing his keys, he ran out the front door.

Normally, Gerald would back his car into the driveway but he was frazzled last night, so he drove it in forward. Putting the car into reverse, Gerald accelerates too hard and careers backwards, across the road, straight into old Eunice Blake’s little Toyota Yaris!

Gerald sat stunned for a moment or two.

“Did I? Did I...just do that??” he muttered to himself. The rear view mirror showed Gerald that there was extensive damage to Eunice’s car.

Eunice barrelled through her front door. “What on EARTH??” She slapped her hand to her mouth, eyes wide.

“My car! You stupid man!” Eunice shrieked.

Gerald stumbled from his car, still shocked.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Blake. It was an accident, truly”.

“How am I to get around now? This will take weeks to get sorted! If it’s not written off..” Eunice replied angrily.

Gerald felt and must’ve looked awful. This did not escape Eunice. She moved closer, then reeled back, a disgusted expression on her face.

“Are you drunk? You smell like a brewery!” she exclaimed.

“Certainly not! I had some wine last night is all,”Gerald replied.

“I’m calling the police!” Eunice turned back to her place.

“No, Mrs Blake! Please don’t do that! I’m insured, honest. I will arrange for your car to be fixed,” Gerald pleaded.

“What will I drive until then?” Eunice began to see that she could use this to her advantage.

“Um...I know! I’ll pay for a hire car until then” Gerald offered,in hope.

“Well, in that case, I may let you off. So long as you keep your word”.

“Of course, Mrs. Blake!” A relieved Gerald blurted.

“And I want it in writing”, Eunice smirked.

Whilst Gerald signed the declaration, he thought how lucky he was. If police had attended, he would have been breathalysed and he most likely would have given a blood alcohol reading over the limit.

If I lost my licence...the mere thought filled him with dread.

Gerald couldn’t help thinking, as he watched Eunice wander back across the road, “crafty old bag!”

He called for 2 tow trucks and an Uber.