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For a Pen to Hide the Name.

By

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John Wickham started at the squeal of a car's breaks on the road outside the pub. His heart hammered in his chest, his head jerked towards the door. He looked at Heinlein in his corner where the bar met the outside wall. He was frozen, his face pale, the pen in his fingers gripped so tightly it was bowing.

Then he breathed in deeply and returned to his furious writing. Wickham took away his empty beer glass, replacing it with another, then rested his arms on the dented and cigarette-burnt bar, immersing himself in the sweet, mouldy smell of stale beer that saturated his pub.

The bar room darkened as a new patron strode in. He paused at the entrance to gain his bearings, entered and settled himself on a stool, his tanned forearms resting on the timber. His work shirt sweat stained.

'New to the area?' Wickham asked returning to his post.

The newcomer gave him a broad, measured grin. His body was long and thin like a pole, he sat tall.

'Know all your customers by face?' he asked, his voice a tangle of the labourer and professional, and shoved out a weathered, calloused hand.

‘Don’t get many new faces this time of the afternoon, just the regulars, the old lags who don’t seem to have a home,’ Wickham said and shook hands. The grip was firm, comfortable, friendly.

‘The handle’s Saygin. James to everyone that knows me.’

‘John Wickham,’ Wickham replied, already at work building a beer. ‘So, what part of Sydney are you from, James?’

‘Me? I grow up in Campbelltown. Down south. Know it?’

‘Only of it. We lived in Sydney, my father had his pubs there. There’s not a laneway around the Rocks I haven’t seen. So, what brings a Campbelltown lad way out west, James?’

Wickham placed the beer in front of Saygin. To the raised eyebrows, he said, ‘To a new face, first one’s on the house. I’m guessing you’re an “Old”.’

‘Too right, mate. Oh, the peace and quiet, for one thing. Get away from the drugs for another. I’ve got kids,’ he thought for a moment. ‘I can get a house here I can afford. And it’s safe. When I was a kid my parents didn’t know where I was all day. But we were safe. I want the same for my kids.’

‘You’d be with the new factory then?’

‘You’re on the ball! How’d you pick that?’ Saygin’s eyes joined in with his grin and he ran a hand along his forehead, wiping the sweat off on his jeans.

‘New face, new factory, the morning shift just finished. One, two, three.’

Wickham grinned back.

A clatter of feet on lino caught Wickham’s attention. He turned to the rear entrance, smiling.

‘Ursy, don’t leave your bag in the hall, there’s a love.’

He turned back to Saygin, his face alight.

‘Yours?’ Saygin asked.

‘Cheeky monkey!’ He laughed. ‘Her name’s Ursula, but we call her Ursy for short. Well, I do. Her mother gave her the name, not one I’d choose but you get used to it.’

‘How many’ve you got?’ Saygin asked.

‘Just the one, God bless her. And you?’

‘Boy and a girl. Five and seven. Light of my life.’

‘Same here. She’s what gets me up out of bed in the morning.’ Wickham looked back through the open doorway. The child was out of sight but he listened to her play. ‘You probably think it’s odd, an old bugger like me with a kid that young?’

Heinlein paused in his writing, got up and said, ‘John, could you keep half an eye on my stuff?’

‘Yeah, Robert. She’s apples.’

Wickham collected Heinlein’s empty beer glass and replaced it with a fresh one. Saygin was watching and he smiled ruefully.

‘You’re pretty free with your beer, mate. Not many pubs I know of run a tab these days. Or am I missing something?’ Saygin asked, sipping his beer.

Wickham’s eyes traced Heinlein’s path, a mixed expression crossed his face; one of happiness and sadness, of knowledge and guilt.

‘Me and the wife, see,’ Wickham said, taking a breath, ‘we were hoping to have a bunch of kids, we both love them. We gave the natural way a hell of a bashing but no luck.’

Wickham wiped the bar down, used a finger nail to remove an invisible speck from the old timber. ‘We saw the doctors, then. Every kind there was, did the whole alphabet. Tried the IVF...’

‘No joy?’

‘Nothing but heartache,’ Wickham said.

‘Life can be cruel.’

‘You’re telling me, brother. Put a strain on the marriage, it did. My wife, she never said anything, but I saw it was getting to her. The worst was those commercials for baby stuff, nappies and things. Tore her heart out. We’d just about given up, and then she starts on about adoption.’

Wickham’s eyes flicked into Saygin’s for a second.

‘But it wasn’t what she wanted,’ he said. ‘She wanted a kid of her own. Her own blood. Me too for that matter. Then a friend says to her, ‘Off you go, you and John, you have yourselves a holiday. Put it all out of your minds.’ She said, ‘Go have some fun.’”

‘Gave it a go, a?’ Saygin finished his beer and Wickham replaced it with a fresh one.

Coins jangled on the bar top and Wickham swept them away.

‘We took a month up on the Barrier Reef. Just lazed about, put the whole thing out of our minds. It took years off her. And blow me down when we get back she’s sick all the time, mostly in the morning.’

Saygin winked at him, ‘Morning sickness.’

Wickham nodded.

‘Never happened like that before,’ he said. ‘Never sick like that before. All the time she was preggers she was as sick as a dog. Got to know the bottom of the toilet real well. But I’ll tell you something, James, she looked serene. She knew, you know? She knew. Women are like that.’

Out on the road, a truck squealed as the driver slammed on his brakes.

Wickham shivered. 'Does it to me, every time,' he said, nodding towards the road.

'I'm looking for a pub somewhere else, away from here, somewhere quiet.'

Saygin looked out into the street, as the traffic cleared and the truck moved on. Then through the doorway to where the child, Ursy, was playing and listened to her ball bouncing, first on the timber floor and then the harder bang as it struck the rendered wall. His gaze wandered down to Heinlein's books and notepad, to the scrawl on the open page.

'How does he read that?' Saygin asked.

'Damned if I know. Good memory, I suppose.'

'So, what's his story? I guess he's part of it, right?' Saygin asked.

'His names, Heinlein. Robert Heinlein,' Wickham said.

'Heinlein? Yeah, I know that name. We did him in school, he was a writer. Science fiction I think? That's right, in the sixties.'

Wickham frowned, then shrugged.

'Coincidence I suppose?' Wickham said, then, 'Last year, I had a plumber round to fix up the toilets. Old place like this needs a bit of work. A friend recommended him, you know how it goes. I thought I could trust him.'

The muscles of Wickham's jaw worked as memories haunted his eyes.

'I had to go round the back to take a delivery, so I gets the girl I had helping me to tend the bar. While I'm gone, this plumber, well he only goes and leaves the outside door open,' Wickham nodded to the hallway. 'I thought I'd told him. It's kept closed, always. Closed and locked for Ursy, so she doesn't run out on to the road chasing her ball. Everyone knows that. Even the priest from the church down the road, and he never comes in here.'

Wickham rested his arms on the bar, his eyes following the traffic.

‘There’s not much space out back for her to play in,’ he said to the cars and the trucks and the heat, ‘but what there is we turned into a right nice playground. But, typical kid, she likes to fool around in the hall. For the company, more than anything else. It’s nice, she pokes her noggin in just like me when I was a kid. We have a bit of a joke and she rabbits on about her stuff. This day, last November, her ball got away from her. It often does, you know, and she was after it like a ferret. My oath but she can run. Out of the flaming door that was supposed to be locked, onto the footpath then the road in a flash.’

‘Good god!’ Saygin swivelled round and stared bleakly at the road outside, the continuous stream of traffic, the grunt of engines, and the shriek of brakes. Great lumps of steel flashed by in a blur. ‘A kid out there...’

‘I was just coming back, I was on that footpath, just as the car hit her,’ Wickham said. ‘I saw it happen and it’s burned in me memory. I wake up at night in a sweat over it. I saw it happen. A taxi hit her and she flew, she did, like a little bird.’

Wickham turned his back for a moment and fiddled with a bottle behind the bar, and asked, ‘How’s the beer?’

‘Good,’ Saygin said. ‘Real good.’

Wickham turned back, his eyes on the bar.

‘I ran, mate. I ran like nothing in me. In a split second I’d shoved some guy out of the way and was kneeling next to her. She was as pale as death. I’ve never seen anyone as white as that and still breathing a week later. Then she took a breath, but it weren’t right. She sort of shuddered as if she was trying to breathe but something was wrong. I didn’t know what to do, I was just a blank. I looked up and there was already two dozen people starting down at her. I don’t know where they come from so quick.



But they stood around like store dummies, silent like, watching. I tell you Jim, I had a sick feeling in my stomach. With them empty eyes staring at me I knew my little angel was going to die.'

Wickham gazed out the open door. A bus, faded by the sun, drove past pumping heat into the pub. Sunlight reflecting off its windows flashed across the back wall.

'Then Rob Heinlein pushes through,' Wickham said from a long way away. 'Pushed me aside. Not roughly, but gently and firmly. He examined her like a doctor and all the time muttering, *Ribs* and *Fracture* and something about shock. He looks up at me, *She'll be fine* he says and it was like a lump of lead had been taken off me shoulders, but then he says, *As long as we act and the ambulance doesn't take to long, she'll survive*. Next thing he does is start giving out orders like he was a general.'

Wickham smiled a sad little smile.

'“Anyone here got a mobile phone?” he said but they don't work around here. I suppose Telstra will get round to it one day. But that didn't stop him, didn't even slow him. He pointed to this chap. 'Go call the ambulance. And you! You go with him, come back and tell me how long it'll be.' And off they went, quick as anything. Just like soldiers.'

Wickham paused, poured himself a soda water and finished it in one gulp.

'Then he got onto the next pair. 'You and you, there's a chemist down the road, on the other side. Go and tell them what's happened, get the chemist to come back if you can, but come back with as many bandages as you can carry and don't take too long.' Off they went, just like the other two, only running this time. But he wasn't finished, he jabbed his finger at two suits, 'I need your jackets!' They didn't move though, I suppose they was weighing up the cost of dry cleaning. Rob wasn't

going to stand for that, 'Now!' He snapped at them and boy did they move. 'Wrap them up into a pillow', he says and like good little boys they did as they were told.

The ball bounced in the hallway. Wickham turned just as it passed.

'Cheeky monkey,' he whispered.

'Then it was my turn. 'I'll need you down here', he meant at little Ursy's head, so I knelt down and waited, just waited. He knew what he was doing, any fool could see that and, I know you'll laugh but I trusted him, trusted what he said about our little girl, surviving and all that.'

Saygin nodded slowly.

'I don't think it had really hit me, you know, the shock. It was like I was in a dream and it was happening to someone else. Any road, the next thing is he says to this suit, 'I'm going to turn her on her side, it's called the recovery position. He looked me right in the eyes, it'll make it easier for her to breathe', then to the suit, 'Put the jackets under her head when I move her', he put my hands either side of Ursy's little noggin, then ever so gently, like she was a butterfly, he turned her on her side. Right away she breathed easier. I didn't realise it but I'd been holding my breath too. Soon after the men came back with the bandages and Rob, he did a neat job with them. Ursy's breathing sounded just like normal, almost, after that. Ten minutes later the ambo's pull up. It's funny but the guys sent to call them never came back. Anyway, the ambo in charge took one look at what Rob had done and said it was one of the most professional jobs he'd ever seen.'

Wickham was quiet then, quiet for a long time, his face a blank page.

'I didn't know him much before that, didn't know his name. Just a sometimes regular, came in for a quiet beer occasionally. Kept to him self. Scribbled a bit now and then. I wanted to thank him for what he'd done. But he'd gone. Just walked off

into the crowd with all the commotion when the ambulance arrived. I caught a glimpse of him though, from the back, just a glimpse, and you know I'd swear, I'd swear his shoulders were shaking, like he was crying.'

'What's a man gotta do to get a beer around here?' The voice was guttural, hard and halfway drunk and belonged to a broad-shouldered, stooped old man with an unfinished chart for a face and deep-set eyes that stared suspiciously out at the world.

'Right you are then, George,' Wickham said and placed a professional beer in front of him. In turn, he caught the gold and silver coins that came tumbling out of the man's hand.

'I'd better be off,' Saygin said. 'Or it's trouble with the wife.'

'Good to meet you, James,' Wickham said and held out his thick, scarred hand.

'I'll probably be a regular now,' Saygin replied, pausing in the doorway as he left, just as he had when he arrived.

'I knows him,' the man, George, said, giving an odd sideways jerk of his head indicating Heinlein's papers. 'My sister knows him. She went to the same school as him and his sister. His name's not Heinlein and he's no bleedin' writer either. Until his kid got knocked over he was an amb...'

But the old man's words were strangled as the vice-like grip of Wickham's fist locked onto his shirt, pulling the collar tight. Wickham dragged the man's face close to his own, their eyes were only centimetres apart.

'Shut your speak hole!' Wickham snarled. 'His names Heinlein. He's a writer!'

The End.