Cup of Kindness
by Luke van Wyk

I

Tom woke abruptly, startled by the screeching of a flock of cockatoos doing their morning flight through the neighbourhood. He lay there thinking about this latest change in his life. He was back home living with his father, and he was waking up alone. She was back at the flat they shared, and resolutely moving on with her life. He was past being upset about it. Life moves on, he tried to remind himself, but really it was moving nowhere fast. Tom was only twenty-four years old, in the prime of his life, yet after his relationship breakdown, he was a little lost.

He spent nearly five years with her, and now realized that their friends, had been her friends, and that he had, in fact, no friends. All the friends of his youth had moved on in life or moved away. Sure, he had work colleagues, but the nature of his job saw him working different shifts, with different people, every day, which did not help building relationships. Of course, having his nose stuck in a book, at any given opportunity, was not the way to make friends.

He wandered into the kitchen, thinking about making a coffee. He had the ten o'clock shift today which gave him plenty of time. Tom's father had readied himself for work and was heading out the door. "Have a good day, mate," he said, as he left. "Bye, Dad," Tom replied, as he filled the kettle.

He started singing along with the radio. His father always listened to the old stuff from the sixties and seventies, and he had to admit there were some good tunes back then. Tom was thankful he could return to the old home base. It made the whole situation a little easier to bear, and it was nice to spend time with his father. A changed relationship now that he was older, and his mother was no longer there.

The song that came on the radio was an old tune about a bloke calling his girl, but the mother won't let him talk to her, telling him she is marrying some other fellow. It was probably not the song he needed right now, but no matter, it is sometimes better to confront the reality.

He had been down the path of calling her and searching for some kind of spark that may re-kindle their romance. She was cool and remote, and he resigned himself to a life without her.

Tom sat in the kitchen sipping his coffee and thinking about his situation. A fresh start was clearly needed, and he realized that meant a change in his job. He had been there for six years, his first job out of school, and now probably everyone knowing about the break-up. The job itself left him under-whelmed, with most days routine and lacking any real challenge. With some apparent decision having been made in his mind, he went and readied himself to face the day.

II

Tom was eating his lunch in the staff room when two of his colleagues walked in and joined him. He had his book open but broke from the text to exchange greetings. They resumed their conversation, and his eyes slid back to the book. He was not following their discussion and became absorbed in the trials of the long-suffering hero of his book.

"Tom, hey Tom," said one of them. "Geez you can zone out," said the other.

“We were just talking about going to that new pub, O'Briens, on the southside after work on Friday. It is near the hospital, and we are hearing there are a lot of nurses, so it could be interesting.” He emphasized slyly. "Wanna come along?"

Yesterday, Tom would have said no and made some excuse. Today, Tom had a different mindset.

"Yeah, ok."

The taxi pulled up outside O'Briens, and the three lads hopped out amid a bustling crowd. "Well, looks like this is the place to be," said Tony, the youngest of the three. Trevor was a couple of years older than Tony, and younger than Tom. They looked at each other, nodded, agreeing with their young friend. Once inside, they lined up at the bar and ordered a round of drinks. O'Briens were offering their own brew, so they went with that, rather than their usual XXXX Bitter. The conversation soon led to sport, and the lads proceeded to analyse Australia's recent successes against India and New Zealand in the World Series Cricket matches that had been played in the previous week.

"At least, there wasn't any underarm deliveries this time, fellas," chimed in a tanned smiley character with an impressive mullet. His mate stood next to him chuckling into his beer, but offered, "Don't worry about him, he's still getting over it."

Trevor responded, shaking his head, "You Kiwis aren't ever going to let us forget about that, are you."

Tom offered, "You did get a win in Adelaide. That Hadlee is a champion. I saw him annihilate us at the Gabba last year."

Tony had been making eyes across the bar, and with opportunity on his mind, left the boys to their cricket.

The Kiwis introduced themselves as Mark, he was the chuckling one, and Darren with the mullet.

Trevor asked, "What are you guys doing here in Brissie?"

Mark said, "Well, Darren is here visiting from Sydney."

"Yeah, I'm an electrician, and living in Sydney with some mates. Earn some cash, before I go overseas." Darren confirmed.

Mark said, "I'm an electrician too. We used to work together in Auckland. My sister lives in Brisbane, so I'm staying with her for now. And yeah, same for me, I want to head overseas once I've saved a bit."

The conversation drifted into all the possible travel destinations, and stories each had about friends who had been there and done that.

Many beers were consumed. Tony was seen across the bar deep in conversation with a friendly girl, and Trevor had left them as well, most likely looking for a similar encounter.

As Mark was explaining the quality of snow in New Zealand compared to Australia, he was tapped on the shoulder by a girl with dark eyes and a cheeky grin.

Tom looked on in wonder as they greeted her. It seemed both Mark and Darren knew her well. They turned to Tom, and introduced her, "This is Evelyn, she has just knocked off work."

Tom replied, "Hi, nice to meet you. Where do you work?"

“I'm a nurse at the hospital just here,” she said, pointing.

Tom remarked with a smile, "Oh, another Kiwi. I am surrounded tonight. What's your connection to these two?"

Mark looked on with a wry smile.

Evelyn laughed and said, "He's my ex-boyfriend, but I think we are still friends. And Darren, well he's always ready to party."

Darren picked her up and twirled her about. Evelyn thumped him on the chest with a grin, and he lowered her down. Darren was a tall lad, over six feet, whereas Evelyn was only at five feet and slight in build.

Mark explained that Evelyn had come to Brisbane with one of her friends, with the plan to work here a while and then head overseas. Evelyn had chosen Brisbane because she was friends with Mark's sister.

Evelyn bought herself a beer and re-joined the group. She chatted and laughed with Mark and Darren, while Tom sipped his beer thoughtfully and watched. She changed her focus to Tom and asked him about himself. He gave her a rosy version of his local upbringing and work but did not touch on the personal side. However, the chat flowed freely and gave rise to plenty of laughter and smiles.

Some more faces joined the group. A fellow slid in next to Evelyn, with his arm quickly around her waist. She leaned toward him and gave him a light kiss. He introduced himself to Tom as Brad. He was Evelyn's boyfriend.

Tom was not really thinking about relationships, and certainly was not ready for that, but he did sink a little to discover she had a partner. Not that he was surprised, as she was a lovely girl.

A couple then exchanged greetings and Tom discovered this was Evelyn's friend, Julie and her boyfriend, James. Evelyn and Julie had come to Australia together, settling in Brisbane, before a trip to England and Europe sometime in the future. Tom asked, "How long will you guys stay in Brisbane?"

They all laughed because they were unsure, but Evelyn piped up with, "When we get enough cash." Then more thoughtfully added, "I don't know, maybe about twelve to eighteen months." Tom glanced at Brad, who did not show a flicker of any concern about that. Then glancing at James, saw that he was looking into his beer, and was, to Tom at least, noticeably sullen.

The group chatted on and as their last drinks were consumed, began plans to head home, and said their good-byes. They were all heading different directions,

with Darren and Mark going to Clayfield, Evelyn and Brad to Annerley, Julie and James to Greenslopes, and Tom going out to Ashgrove. James had his car, so he and Julie gave Evelyn and Brad a lift. The others lined up at the taxi rank, waiting for their ride.

Tom said to Mark, with some surprise at himself, even in his inebriated state, "I wouldn't mind moving out from my father's place, what do you think about sharing a house?"

Mark said, "You know, I was thinking the same thing. I reckon we could find a big place, and the girls might be in on it."

They exchanged numbers and jumped into their respective taxis.

III

An old panel van with New South Wales registration plates pulled up outside Tom's place at Ashgrove. It was Darren's old van, which looked like it had seen better days. He was headed back to Sydney next week but offered to go house-hunting with the pair. Mark jumped out and Tom clambered onto the bench seat.

With that, he got back in, Darren did a U-turn, planting his foot, and screeching his tires on the road. Tom smiled to himself, shaking his head. Tom said to them, "I've been through the paper this morning and called up on three places that might be okay. We've got Annerley, Bulimba, and Morningside. These are all reasonably close to the hospital where the girls are working."

The boys were looking for at least a four-bedroom place, and hopefully somewhere that would not mind a few parties disturbing the peace. The place at Annerley was not big enough. Four bedrooms but two of them were tiny, and the street was full of parked cars. Bulimba was a nice place, quiet street, plenty of room, but the neighbouring houses were really close, like you would be sharing your breakfast with them.

The Morningside house was in Dunbar Street, a dead-end street, with the primary school oval as a neighbour. It had three bedrooms, and a room downstairs that would work as a fourth, together with a party area that led out onto a pool. It was awesome.

Mark and Tom decided this was it, and with no hesitation signed up for it. The only problem now was to convince the girls this was a good idea.

Later that day, Darren and Mark were back at his sister's place where Mark had been staying, and Darren visiting. Evelyn was coming over to see Michelle, Mark's sister. Michelle was briefed on the situation and would help as much as possible. She was keen for her brother to find his own place and let her life get back to normal, and it would be nice if they could convince Evelyn too.

Evelyn arrived with greetings all around, but it became apparent that something was going on. "Okay, guys, what's happening?" She asked them, scanning the room, looking at their faces. "Darren?"

Darren reacted, "No, leave me out of this. I'm off to Sydney on Sunday."

Mark solemnly announced, "We have an offer too good to refuse."

Once Evelyn realised there was a room for Julie as well, she was keen, and the

pool would be great in this weather. "Just one thing though," she asked, "What do you know about Tom? He seems like a nice bloke."

"Well, you've met him, you've talked with him. We've had a good talk about things. He's come out of a long relationship, back living at home with his father, and keen to get his life going again. I reckon we can help him with that," said Mark with a grin.

Evelyn remained thoughtful. She was only renting a granny flat in someone's backyard and did not need to give much notice.

"Ok, Mark, let's talk to Julie."

When they caught up with Julie, she was keen but would need to find someone to swap out of her flat that she shared with another nurse. They didn't know each other well anyway, so if they could find someone on the roster who was interested, it shouldn't take long.

Darren's panel van was useful over the next few days in helping them move their things, and Tom borrowed his father's trailer for the bigger pieces.

The change for Tom was abrupt, but welcome. He had not ever experienced this kind of cheerful camaraderie and thought it must have been a unique holiday-type mentality that he found in his new kiwi friends. They were certainly living life to the fullest with something always happening, places to go, and things to do.

Evelyn pushed them all into signing up for a short-course triathlon, which meant lots of pre-event training in readiness for the event. They would run around the local streets, then jump on their bikes and ride to the local council pool for a quick thirty laps, and ride home again. Sometimes they would just run and collapse back in the pool at home.

Depending on the different shifts they worked, Tom would sometimes run with Mark, or Evelyn or Julie, sometimes James. It depended on who was there at the time. Tom liked running with Evelyn. They seemed to match pace and Tom liked chatting with her. One time she laughed at him saying how she did not know how he managed to talk incessantly and run at the same time.

IV

A party at the house was in keeping with the theme of their lifestyles. They had been there for three months now. A little overdue in terms of housewarming but still had that flavour to it. The house had a constant stream of visitors with relatives, friends, and friends of friends, coming over for barbeques, and poolside revelry. It was inevitable they would hold a party and have everyone there at the same time. Signs advertising the party were posted at everyone's place of work. They were expecting a houseful of people. Tom and Mark organised Eskys and ice. Tom put his stereo and speakers in the party room and a selection of records and cassette tapes to keep the music pounding through the night. They pooled their musical interests to provide quite a range of talent, including Genesis, Dire Straits, INXS, Talking Heads, Fine Young Cannibals and Lloyd Cole and the Commotions (Evelyn loved that 'Rattlesnakes' song).

Julie and James did the shopping and came home with plenty of party food, including some lime juice. This was for the Tequila Laybacks, a planned party

starter for the guests. Head back in the chair, and a shot of tequila poured from the left, combined with a shot of lime juice from the right. One of the first to arrive was Brad, with a carton of VB over his shoulder. It seemed like he was committed to a big night, with or without some help from the tequila. The guests started arriving, the music was blaring and soon the party was in full swing.

At some time in the evening, Tom went upstairs to the kitchen in search of more food to take downstairs. Everyone was downstairs, or so he thought. Evelyn had her head in the fridge, as Tom entered the room. "Hey there, party girl," Tom said. Evelyn laughed, "You look like you're having a good time." Tom smiled at her, "Yeah, I sure am. You guys have been great."

Evelyn went to say something, but the way he looked at that moment. The genuine smile. It made everything stop. She could almost feel the air humming. Tom hesitated too, not sure what was happening. Their eyes locked together. He reached and touched her face. She moved into his arms, and they held each other in a tight embrace. They kissed, but only briefly. They held each other for a moment longer, when up the stairs came Julie. As she entered the kitchen, they moved apart and Tom headed back to the party.

There were a lot of sore heads the next day, and the clean-up dragged on into the afternoon. Tom was just washing out the mop in the laundry when Julie came in and looked at him quizzically. "When I came into the kitchen last night," she said, "the air, it was like it was charged. You could almost feel it buzzing. What was going on?"

Tom stopped what he was doing, "I don't know, Jules, I'm just glad you guys are here. You're the best."

Julie laughed, "Ok, Tom." She remained thoughtful.

V

Evelyn and Brad were enjoying their time together, often heading to the coast even as the weather was getting colder. They seemed to have an easy-going relationship framed by the inevitable reality of her departure for overseas.

Evelyn and Tom never discussed that night at the party. It seemed they both avoided being alone together. Perhaps that was for the best for both.

Meanwhile Julie and James were in a similar situation with travel destined to separate them, but the difference here was that James was increasingly smitten with Julie, and clearly in denial that their time together was limited.

In recent weeks, Mark, Evelyn, and Julie had been looking at maps of England and Europe and scouring through Lonely Planet guides. Tom looked on, remembering some of the good times he had when he travelled with his former partner a couple of years before. He was not jealous of their upcoming adventures, as he had plans of his own.

He decided he would be going back to university, get a business degree, and build himself a career. Certainly not as exciting as travelling the world, but something solid for his future.

The three intended travellers each had their own plans and were not leaving

together. Mark had distant relatives in Austria, and was going to them, and looking to spend lots of time skiing, maybe even working there if he could find something.

Evelyn had family in Scotland, and wanted to base herself there, get a job at one of the local hospitals, and travel to other places from there. Julie had similar plans but wanted to be based in London, and apart from Europe, was keen to visit Africa.

Time did pass, as it does, and there continued a stream of visitors to their place, and many an afternoon or evening of laughter, music, and conversations.

Christmas was an unusual time because the travellers had no family around, apart from Mark's sister. They did Secret Santa gifts including both Brad and James in the present pool. When they drew names out of a hat, Tom was quietly pleased to see Evelyn's name but was challenged with finding something that would be perfect for her.

Tom would be relying on Brad for a gift, and likely, it was going to be a six-pack. On Christmas morning, they gathered in their lounge room with fans blowing the already warm air. Mark and Tom had been in for a swim. Julie and James were handing out glasses and pouring champagne to start the day.

Tom was handed his gift, which was heavy and obvious as to what it was. A six-pack of beer, and it was VB. They all laughed and looked at Brad. "What, what?" he said with complete innocence.

When Evelyn opened her gift, she let out a little scream. "Oh, these are beautiful. Thanks, Santa." It was a pair of earrings shaped as Scottish thistles with amethyst gems giving it a lovely purple colour.

Tom was delighted to see her enjoy them, carefully wiping a little tear that spilled as he watched her put them on. They were outside the budget limit for Santa, which raised a few eyebrows. Julie glanced at Tom, who steadfastly avoided any eye contact. However, they continued with the gifts, sipped on their champagne, and no more was said.

Later in the day, Tom was washing the dishes in the kitchen after lunch. Julie and Evelyn had tea-towels in hand, working through the pile. Evelyn twirled her towel and carefully flicked it at Tom, striking a snap on his rear end. He jumped with its sting and quickly hurled a handful of water in her direction. Shrieks and laughter followed.

Julie watched them and smiled. Maybe one day she thought to herself. When the job was done, and Tom drained the sink, Evelyn came to him quietly, with her hand on his shoulder, leaned in and whispered, "Thanks, Tom." He knew what she meant and smiled quietly to himself.

The Story Bridge Hotel featured a Cockroach Racing event on Australia Day, so the gang, complete with carefully selected cockroaches, took to the event with their usual enthusiasm. The disgust of them evaporated as the afternoon wore on. A previous race winner, christened 'Jack,' was given some freedom and spent time on Mark's shirt, running down his arm, and captured again in readiness for his next race.

The girls were not too enthused about the whole affair but certainly had a laugh.

Things took a more serious turn when Julie announced to the group that she decided to book her ticket for England. James already knew of course, and this explained why he had been downcast most of the day.

The days and weeks slipped quickly by, and like some sort of fast-forward blur, they were all standing at the departure gate hugging Julie and wishing her well for her trip. Tom was sad to see her go, sad for the first break in their household in what had been a great year. He wondered if he would ever see her again.

James and Julie stood together holding each other. It was time to go. A last embrace and Julie disappeared through the entry. James sobbed loudly, covering his eyes with his hand. Evelyn took him to a nearby chair, and they sat together while he let loose his pain.

VI

There had been a lot of discussion over the preceding weeks. The tenancy was coming to an end, and with Julie leaving, there was a vacancy. Mark, however, called it, and said, "Look guys, I've managed to pick up a ticket to Europe flying out of Sydney next month. I'd like to go visit Darren for a few weeks, so I reckon I'm on my way."

Tom said, "Yeah, I figured you were ready to go. Look with university happening for me now, and I've cut back my work hours, I think I should move back home again."

Evelyn nodded, "I'm not far behind, I want to save a bit more before I go. I think I can stay with Brad for a couple of months."

A quiet consensus and nodding of heads resolved the matter.

Tom asked, "Hey Mark, when are you planning on leaving?"

Mark replied, "If I go next week, that will give me three weeks in Sydney. I'm going to hire a car and drive, check out the coast on the way."

Tom offered, "What do you think about a co-driver? I wouldn't mind catching up with Darren and seeing a bit of Sydney."

It was decided that Tom would share the drive with him, and stay for a week in Sydney, then catch the train back to Brisbane.

The next week was packing boxes, and loading furniture, with Mark's sister and Tom inheriting assorted items that the departing travellers no longer needed. Soon enough it was again time to say good-bye. Mark and Tom went to Brad's place and Evelyn gave them both a hug, wishing them well. There was talk of Evelyn meeting up with Mark in Austria, and they would try and arrange it. Evelyn knew she would see Tom again when he got back from Sydney.

They enjoyed the drive down the Coast. The road was not great, and they were forever going through little towns on the way, but they did leave the highway at Byron Bay and ate hamburgers looking at the sea. Further along they diverted again and briefly visited Southwest Rocks, but time was getting away from them.

They focused on the highway for several hours before diverting again and entering the Sydney area by Wisemans Ferry, which added a picturesque element to their journey. The hire car was returned to a depot in North Sydney,

and the boys sat in a nearby pub having a beer, while they waited for Darren to come pick them up.

Mark and Tom spent the week checking out the sights of Sydney, and Darren took them to a few choice pubs in the evenings for beers and entertainment. Time came to go, with hearty farewells to all. Promises to keep in contact and visit one another sometime in the future. Tom was on the train back to Brisbane.

It was a strange feeling for Tom to head back home with his father again. He felt in a far better frame of mind than he did the first time he moved back home. After he settled in, he thought to go and see Evelyn, and catch her up on the trip and his week in Sydney.

He realised he did not have Brad's number, if Brad even had a number. He decided to drive there after work tomorrow, and hopefully they would be home. Tom wanted to make sure that he kept in contact with Evelyn, thinking that maybe one day they could spend some time together, just the two of them. When he knocked on Brad's door, there was no answer. The lights were out, and no one was home. He wrote a note and put it in the letterbox. It was not far from James's place, so he headed there. James answered the door and broke the news to Tom that Evelyn had gone back to New Zealand. James said, "She got word that her dad was taken to hospital. Heart attack they think. She got the first flight she could. That was two days ago." Tom was concerned for her, her family. There was nothing he could do. Brad called him later that night and said, "She said she would let us know what's happening and would keep in touch."

VII

Tom was sitting outside the lecture theatre waiting for the session to start. He was six weeks into the semester now, loaded with weekly tutorials and two assignments. He had been in touch with Brad who spoke with Evelyn. Apparently, her dad was recovering, but likely to need surgery. She was going to stay in Auckland for a few months, probably get a job. Then head overseas later in the year. Tom had written to her and was waiting on her response.

He had his head down reading a book while he was waiting. One of the young guys in his course – most of the students were younger than him – came over to him and said, "Hi there, good book?" Tom was a little surprised, especially with how this fellow looked. He had brown hair, but for some reason the front of his hair was a light orange colour.

Tom smiled and said, "Yes, pretty good." He chuckled a little and said, "Geez what happened here," motioning to his hair. The young man laughed, "Oh, I've got crazy friends, come and meet them."

Tom placed his bookmark, which was a photograph. It was a picture of the four of them, Mark, Evelyn, Julie, and himself standing astride canoes with paddles in hand, taken on their trip down the Nymboida River last year. Handwritten on the back of the photo were the words,

"We'll take a cup o' kindness yet"

"For auld lang syne"

Evelyn had given Tom the photo on New Year's Eve.

He put the book away and went together with the crazy-haired boy to meet his friends.