

Short Story Competition 2013: Category C

Place: Third

**Title: Mend a Bend**

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Fredrick and his wife were returning home after a month's holiday in the Northern Territory. "I hope Oscar has watered the plants," said Maggie as the plane taxied on the tarmac. "If not, I'll never forgive him."

"It's not the end of our world if he hasn't," Fredrick said in quick defence of his nephew.

"Do you think Alex would have done a good job on the fence? It's time he keeps his dog away from our backyard."

He reached for the hand baggage in the hatch above his seat. "Why worry when you can see the proof soon enough?"

On the M1, the cab didn't take more than thirty minutes to reach its destination. There was a suburban brick house in the midst of a large garden and picket fencing on three sides distinguished their property from the others down the road.

Alex stopped mowing his garden and came over immediately to give them a hand with the bags. "You two look fine."

"Thank you, Alex," said Fredrick. "What about...?"

"The good news is she is a beauty you just won't recognize her."

Maggie glanced across at Alex with a smile. "Is it then goodbye to your confirmed bachelorhood?"

"You're wrong as usual," he said, laughing good-naturedly. He then turned to Fredrick.

"When I went over to get my windshield fixed, the garage man informed me your car was ready."

"And the bad news is?"

"It's costing you a tidy sum. No theatre for a while, Maggie," Alex said, grinning at her.

She gave him a carton of herbal tea and asked after his mother.

"She hasn't been keeping well these past few days but this brew should revive her. Thanks."

Without a moment to lose, Fredrick engaged the same taxi to take him across to the garage. Alex was right. They had done a good job. It looked almost new. And the bill was nowhere near the estimate they had given him.

“Transport cost was exorbitant,” explained the man-in-charge, handing over the keys to him. “As we warned you beforehand, we needed to make an Internet search to replace some parts.”

The next morning Maggie was under the carport, patting a 1988 model Holden, completely overhauled and newly painted. “Both look twenty years younger.”

“Both?”

“I meant you and the car. You’ve lost a few pounds despite all that seafood.”

“With the kids away,” Fredrick said, giving her a warm smile, “my two loves at the moment are my car and my wife.” On seeing her scowl, he added, “Not in the same order, of course.” He gave her a hurried kiss and started the vehicle. “I’ll be home early to watch the Cup Final,” he said as he deftly reversed the car out of the gate.

Screech! There was a grating noise from the rear as if someone was just learning to play the violin.

“What the hell was that?” Switching off the engine, he rushed behind and was dismayed to see a rear light smashed and mudguard scraped.

Their mailbox lay on the ground, its mouth wide open as though bursting with laughter. “Just a month away and you’ve forgotten your bearings!” she said, examining the damage.

Wiping his face, he got in the car and drove off like the devil. He was upset that this should happen just as when their finances had hit rock bottom. They had won two plane tickets on a raffle, but hadn’t bargained for the attendant expenses. “Well,” he had consoled Maggie, “now that we are here, let’s enjoy the luxury of my accumulated leave.”

That evening, Fredrick returned from work and was vexed to see his wife take a bouquet of orchids to a neighbour two doors next. “You are at it again,” he said, shaking his head.

“I couldn’t find my potted plants and got mad seeing them at No.14.”

“And so?” he said, turning on the TV.

“She was taking the garbage bin out. I just ignored her and retrieved my pots. It was after lunch that I saw Oscar’s note, explaining he was going camping and leaving the pots with her.”

“You didn’t have the grace to thank her for her trouble and it has cost you more than \$75 for the flowers. I’m sorry but no theatre this month.”

“Don’t treat me like a kid, darling,” Maggie whined as she went out.

He was glad to watch the match without interruption. He had missed the first fifteen minutes of play thanks to his accountant. Fredrick would often give him a lift home in the hope of getting free clarifications for his tax problems. But today the man was his problem. The chap wouldn't let him listen to the radio and insisted on giving his own commentary. "If there is a foregone conclusion DEF are the winners, why watch the match at all?"

The man's voice rose above that of the commentator and Fredrick was forced to pull up at a shoulder off the road. *If you don't shut up you'll have to walk the five miles home.* He couldn't bring himself to utter the words but the passenger seemed to sense them, for he was silent for the rest of the ride.

DEF made 1-0 just before the interval when their centre forward waylaid the ball from Shiny and knocked with his head for it to zoom with style into the box beyond the goalie's span.

Immediately after play resumed in the second half, Maggie was back, her face flushed with embarrassment. "She said she was allergic to orchids and offered me a glass of juice. She was so sweet about it that I felt a worm."

He pursed his lips and turned his attention to the screen.

She was arranging the flowers in a tall vase. "Why do you think you crashed into the mail box?" she asked, loud enough to drown the TV volume. "Didn't you see the fence take a deep curve near the gate? A curve in favour of Alex."

"Optical illusion, I guess," he said, without taking his eyes off the screen. He was keyed-up and unable to contain his excitement.

It was now the final ten minutes and DEF needed to make a tremendous effort to retain the Cup, which they had won the last three years in succession. It looked as though the going was tough, because HIG was playing equally well. It was made worse by DEF failing to connect thrice in the second half, thereby bringing the score to 1-1.

"Did you note a part of the fence along the road missing? Somebody seems to have eaten up quite a bit off our land," she said, standing back to admire the arrangement. "And no wonder my husband had to crash into the box."

He dismissed her insinuation with a flick of his hand just as when the match was gaining momentum. As though DEF's prayers were answered along with Fredrick's, two minutes before final whistle they were poised to get a free kick. "Come on, you fools," he yelled like a ten-year-old.

Maggie thrust a gift pack on to his lap. "I would like you to present this bottle of whisky to Alex before he retires to bed."

"So you've confronted good old Alex as well." He was beside himself with rage and turned down the volume. "This is the last straw!" he bellowed.

There was an emphatic denial from his wife and he looked quizzically at the package in his hand.

"I am going to reclaim our bit first thing tomorrow morning. Meanwhile..."

"Meanwhile, you wish to appease his feelings by presenting the bottle in advance. How could you ...?"

The phone rang with extra force.

It was Oscar. "Glad you're back, Uncle Fred. Hope you both had a smashing time."

"Yes," he said, sounding curt. The next instant he made an attempt to cool down. "How is your father? Tell him to join me for a game of tennis on Saturday."

"But he's going away to Canberra." There was a pause before Oscar added, "It's about the fence and the mailbox."

Fredrick felt thoroughly embarrassed his mishap that morning had already done the family rounds.

"Just before going on camp I crashed Dad's truck into your fence."

"Did you?"

"I had to make good the damage out of my pocket."

"Naturally."

"Couldn't find a plank to hold the letter box ..."

"And so?"

"Hurriedly dislodged part of the common fence and brought it forward. Alex chased me off before I made a bigger hash ... said he would mend it as soon as he found picket fencing to match."

Covering the mouthpiece, Fredrick called out, "Darling, get me the bottle. I am going next door."

"Uncle Fred, was it not exciting? They sure deserve the Cup."

"I knew DEF would be champs," he said, increasing the volume with his free hand.

"Are you nuts? DEF went home licking their wounds. They missed the chance of a free kick, leaving Jonathan to intercept the ball with ease and send it across to a near empty field."

Before DEF could converge on that side, HIG's Simon let it sail through to make it 2-1 in the penultimate minute. Oh boy! It was such a thrilling finish."

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