

The Litter Artist

Rocking back and forth the tramp pocketed clenched hands, cursing inwardly as ragged nails bit into his palms. He kept his eyes lowered but couldn't help a furtive glance toward the nearby shrubs as the two figures approached. A shadow fell across his bony frame. The tramp turned and shuffled towards his bench trailing small puffs of dirt; the result of a long, hot summer. 'What'd you want now? Can't leave a body alone?' he yelled before hoicking a phlegmy globule onto the ground.

The two police officers exchanged glances.

'Come back here.' The voice was as thick as the owner's girth.

Not surprised it was the testosterone filled cop who spoke, the tramp kept walking. 'Or what, lard arse?'

Moving faster than his size would dictate, Constable Bill Peters took three long strides and clamped the tramp's arm in a meaty fist before dragging him, stumbling, back to the road's verge. 'What'd you say, Henry?' Peters snarled.

'Nothing,' mumbled Henry dancing from foot to foot his eyes level with the straining fabric of the detective's blue, sweat stained shirt, its buttons within a whisper of relenting to the inevitable. Henry averted his gaze, muttering appreciatively as he found shapely legs beneath the knee length skirt of the female cop.

'What's this crap?' Henry's attention was dragged back to Peters who underscored his question by kicking at a pile of sticks, smirking as they toppled into a heap at his feet. 'You call this *art*, Henry?' The words were carried on a sneer.

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Henry's 'art' was a hot topic for the local community. Dubbed, 'The Litter Artist', by the daily newspaper, the debate raged as to whether Henry's fashioning rubbish into his form of art and leaving it on the footpaths for Council collection, was a service or a nuisance.

Henry ignored them all. He couldn't care less what others thought. It was his mission to clean up the streets. The voices told him so.

Henry stared up into disdain filled eyes. 'My art is helpful,' he hiccuped, 'and should be appreciated.' The last word exited thin lips on a spray of spittle.

Peters recoiled. 'Why, I ought a...'

'What?' Henry wiped his stubbled chin with the back of a sinewy hand, refusing to flinch at the other man's balled fist. 'Beat me? Search me? Plant something on me? Police harassment, that's all this is you stinking --'

'Hey! I wouldn't be talking about anyone stinking if I was you Henry and if you don't watch your mouth I'll haul your scrawny ass into the cell for the night.'

Henry licked dry, cracked lips. 'On what charge?' he croaked. 'I've done nothing wrong. I know my rights.'

'Yeah, I bet you do you sorry excuse for a lawyer.'

Never fail to disappoint, do you Peters? Henry held the other man's gaze but didn't answer.

In his lucid moments Henry remembered. He was one once - a lawyer; a good one. Had a wife - a pretty one. Two kids. Probably weren't bad as kids go; didn't

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know them all that well. Too many long hours at the office. Too many demanding clients. Winning cases was all that mattered until . . .

Henry couldn't always remember when he decided to walk. Maybe when the voices of the innocents he'd violated outweighed those of the guilty he'd saved. Money dried up. Wife left, taking the two strangers with her. The house went to the highest bidder and the money to who knows where. Now Henry's family was a long neck bottle and the voices.

'Well come on, get it over with,' Henry spat. 'Or you scared? Don't want people see you harassing a poor bum! Here, let me help you.' he turned, extracting his hands from his pockets and leant on top of the car's open window, hands dangling inside. 'Go on pat me down. I got nothing. Nothing you want anyhow – 'cept maybe a few fleas,' Henry gave a sibilate cackle as air passed through gaps where teeth used to live. 'Come on. Haven't got all day; things to do, places to go.' Another hissing laugh.

'Get your dirty paws out off my car.' Peters grabbed Henry's arm once more, this time hoisting him off the ground. Henry clutched his trousers with his free hand the belt less fabric flapping against his kicking legs, toes fighting for purchase.

'Leave him,' the woman spoke at last. 'Like he said he hasn't done anything wrong.'

The two officers had a staring contest. Testosterone broke first, releasing his captive with a shove. Henry staggered but regained his balance.

'Get off, Henry,' the woman nodded towards the park. 'And watch your manners.'

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Henry didn't need to be told twice.

'Be seeing ya, lard arse.' Henry tossed Peters a small but triumphant grin and scampered out of reach.

'You're too easy you know, Jill,' Peters said, dragging off plastic gloves and tossing them onto the back seat of the car. He eased his bulk into the passenger seat; waddling his ample rear into a comfortable position.

'Yeah maybe, but he's not hurting anybody.'

'Says you.'

'Yeah! And those who appreciate his efforts to clean up other people's rubbish,' Senior Constable Jill Harris stared pointedly at the litter strewn passenger floor.

'Whatever.' Peters' replied.

As she pulled onto the road Harris glanced back through the side mirror. A mother snatched up her toddler giving Henry a wide berth as they hurried past a man who had just stepped onto the footpath, a dog at his heels.

'That Henry's getting loopier by the minute.'

'What?' Harris snapped her attention back to the road.

'Henry. First he flags us down then starts on about police harassment.' He shook his head. 'He needs to be certified.'

Harris tried to concentrate on the traffic.

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Henry wasn't drunk nor completely sober. He fell onto the bench and with a shaking hand took a deep swig from the bottle inside the paper bag he'd retrieved from the bushes the moment the cops had left.

Head bowed Henry watched the silver sedan which had parked moments after the police car had pulled to the kerb. He had a fair idea as to the occupant - the perceptiveness, which had helped make him the best lawyer in the country, occasionally penetrated the fog but, thanks to the drink, the incidents were becoming increasingly less.

A stocky youth exited the car and lopped across the road.

'Outta the way mutt.' A dog yelped and ran past Henry.

'Hey, old man!'

The voice was unmistakeable. A pair of brown scuffed boots toed up to Henry's 'duct taped' sandals.

'I'm talking to you,' the voice got louder, meaner.

Henry swayed, belching loudly.

'You hearing me?' The kid dropped to his haunches, his face centimetres from Henry's. 'Sleeping in the open's not good for your health, old man.'

Henry ignored him. He had nothing left to lose, apart from his life, and that wasn't worth much. Besides he knew the kid wouldn't harm him. Not yet.

'You know what I want, Henry. And, you know what I want, I get, eventually.'

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The feet disappeared and not until Henry heard the roar of the engine did he reach for the paper bag. He hadn't been sure what he'd have done if that thug had made a move on his bottle but brains never did figure largely in Farron's make-up.

'What's this?' Back at headquarters Harris dropped a folder; a post it note stuck to the cover, in front of Peters who, with coffee in hand, had settled at his desk with an old magazine.

Peters took one look at the scrawled message - *Farron Walks. Evidence Inconclusive* - and exploded. 'Fucking Henry!' The file flew from his hand skittering to a stop in front of Harris, but not before most of its pages dislodged across the stained wooden surface.

'What! How's a harmless old street man like Henry fit into this?' Recently arrived in the city on a two year secondment, Harris was still playing catching up.

'Henry ain't harmless,' Peters snapped. 'And he sure ain't old. Year, maybe two, older 'en me.'

'You're kidding, right?'

'He was in my older brother's class at school. And he was a smart mouthed little bastard, even back then.'

Ah! *Lard arse*. Harris hid a smile. 'And Henry was a lawyer?' She remembered Peters' earlier jibes.

'Yeah. And a good one - more's the pity,' Peters' voice conveyed his distaste. 'Every case thoroughly researched. Made damn sure there was nothing to catch him

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out. And nothing ever did. And that little shit,' a nail bitten finger jabbed towards the folder, 'should've been locked up so he couldn't hurt anyone else, and if it wasn't for Henry he would've been.'

'From the beginning. Please,' Harris added perching on the edge of Peters' desk.

Peters sighed, staring into his cup as though looking into a crystal ball.

'Farron was always bad news. Not long after he arrived in town he's hauled in for possession. Creep walked free with nothing more than a slap on the wrist.'

'Henry?'

'Yeah. Then the punk tortured and shot a seventeen year old boy. Henry got him off again. Kid's father and most of the polities around town were Henry's mates. They were all still high fiveing their victory when that girl was attacked,' Peters nodded to the report. 'She managed to escape but was in pretty bad shape. Couldn't identify her attacker. All she could remember was a silver car. Farron drives a silver car.'

Peters tossed his empty coffee cup towards the bin. It bounced off the rim, landing on the floor. He made no attempt to pick it up.

Harris was silent. Why did she have the feeling there was still more to this story?

Peters wiped his brow with a less than clean handkerchief. He stood, shoved his chair back - managed to grab it before it toppled to the floor - and walked over to stare accusingly at the over worked air-conditioner.

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‘The boy Farron murdered - Georgie Bastion - was the son of the cop who’d arrested him for possession. The cop was my partner.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said understanding his animosity towards Henry. ‘So what happened? With Henry,’ she clarified.

‘Nobody knows. One day he just up and decides to live on the street. Maybe his conscience got the better of him; if he ever had one. Anyhow, it’s lunch time and my stomach doesn’t cope well with neglect,’ Peters shut the conversation down.

Harris eyed her partner’s paunch doubting it had ever been neglected.

‘Seems strange he flagged *you* down?’ Harris persisted. ‘Unless --. You think he wanted to tell you something?’

‘Well if he did,’ Peters hovered at the door hitching up his trousers, ‘why didn’t he say something?’

‘Maybe, because you didn’t give him a chance,’ Harris tried to keep the exasperation from her voice. ‘There had to be a reason.’

‘Henry’s a nutter. He don’t need no reason - for anything. No sane reason anyway.’ Peters’ contributions were always helpful.

‘I think we need to pay Henry another visit.’ Harris stood up.

‘Talking to that bum twice in one day ain’t my idea of fun,’ Peters groaned but snatched up the keys. ‘I drive. And we’re stopping at that pie place on the way.’

Shit! Harris hated his driving and he knew it.

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Yanking the car door open Harris fell into the passenger seat. 'Damn,' she jerked the seat lever pulling the seat, which was back at its extremities to fit Peters' bulk, forward. 'I'll do my back one of these days.'

'Yeah. Yeah. And I'll smash a knee,' Peters rejoined, shoving the driver's seat back.

'Damn it! Maybe we could donate this to Henry's art.' Harris toed aside the drink cans and paper wrappings littering the passenger side floor more than fed up with Peters' slovenly habits. '

Peters bristled. 'Yeah! Well it aint all mine!'

'It certainly isn't mine,' she shot back, her mood on a downward spiral.

'What about that?' Peters jabbed a finger at a folded newspaper page, its bright pink colour a beacon among the largely mundane debris.

Harris knew she was being petty but couldn't help herself. She snatched up the paper, unfolding it as if expecting something to escape, and gave a derisive laugh.

'What?'

'Supermarket specials page. From the articles ringed it definitely looks like yours.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Peters's indignation was rising.

'Coke, chips, chocolate, milk, beer.'

'That proves it. I don't drink milk and, before you ask, no I don't have a cat.'

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Thank God. Harris shuddered grateful no innocent creatures were dependant on Peters.

With a tyre squeal Peters swung into the traffic swerving just in time to miss a jay walking pedestrian.

Harris clung, white knuckled, to the door handle. Needing a distraction, she closed her eyes and replayed the morning's events, fingering the paper, trying to harness her thoughts and pinpoint something which had begun to niggle.

Still deep in thought Harris was barely aware they'd stopped until the door slammed and she saw Peters' back disappear into the pie shop. Her gaze found a newsagency.

She jumped from the car and by the time she returned, brandishing a copy of the daily paper, Peters was half way through his second pie.

. 'I think Henry threw this in here.' The image of a snatch of pink against grey baggy trousers flashed in Harris' mind.

'Look. This is from today's paper,' she pulled the pink centre spread from the paper and held it against the one she'd found in the car. 'And I'm pretty sure there was a newspaper on Henry's bench.'

Nonplussed Peters wiped the last of his lunch from his lips. 'So? I guess he can still read but I think Henry's way past making shopping lists. Besides all bums have newspapers on their bench. It's just a coincidence. Although Henry would think it a great joke tossing junk into a police car, especially after we had a go at him about his rubbish art,' Peters sneered.

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‘You!’ Harris reminded him. ‘You had a go at him. And there are no co-incidences. This time I talk to Henry. He may be more open with me.’ Harris added noticing Peters’ neck suffuse red.

‘Whatever.’

Reaching the park Peters slammed his foot on the brake but still managed to jump the curb. Harris leapt from the car on a gust of curses, rubbing her shoulder where the seat belt had bit.

The newspaper lay on the bench but Henry, and his folded cardboard bedding, were missing.

‘Looks like he’s shifted camp,’ Harris said as Peters lumbered up beside her.

‘Good. I hope it’s to another planet.’

‘Just take a look around. I’ll see if I can find him.’ After fifteen minutes Harris returned shrugging her shoulders. ‘God damn it,’ she dragged a handkerchief from her pocket, wiped the sweat from her neck and tried to ignore the omnipresent flies. She took a long swallow from her water bottle, almost choking. It was bordering the wrong side of tepid.

Making her way to Henry’s bench, Harris perched on the edge; all too aware of the state of its previous occupant, and resting her elbows on her knees massaged the bridge of her nose with her thumbs, trying to think.

When she rallied she was mindful of her shirt sticking to places she would rather it didn’t. *What she wouldn’t give for a long cold shower.*

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Peters had waited in the car but made no attempt to fire up the air-con. The air was heavy with sweat laden odour. Harris searched the sky hoping for some sign of rain but the only storm clouds were those swirling in front of her.

Trying to ignore the fetid smell she retrieved the specials page. 'Henry threw this into the car, I know it. But why?'

'I told you. He's a nutter.'

'Oh come on! He flags us down then throws this into the car! There's something here I know it.' She didn't need to see Peters raised eyebrows to know he was thinking she'd make Henry a good companion.

Harris rested her head against the car door and stared out the side mirror.

'We gonna sit here all day?'

Harris watched mesmerized as the cans from one of Henry's creations glinted in the sun.

'This is crap.' Peters started the car. Cool air rushed from the open window. Absently Harris hit the up button, still staring at the glinting cans. 'Holy Shit!' Harris grabbed the shopping list again.

One item – coke - was ringed over and over, the pencil mark darkening with each circumference.

Harris squinted back into the side mirror. 'Back in a minute.' She jumped from the car, too excited to mind the slap of heat, and strode down the street, paper flapping at her side. She stopped in front of the flashing cans.

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Dead branches, adorned with coke cans, chip packets and chocolate wrappers shinning like Christmas tinsel, were stacked tepee like, over milk cartons and beer cans which nestled at its interior. Harris mentally ticked each item off the 'special's page'. All present.

Pulling plastic gloves from her back pocket she pushed aside the flimsy structure.

'Mind telling me what you're doing?' Peters stood behind her.

Harris' fingers scratched the ground. The earth was hard. Nothing! Damn! What did she expect anyhow? She rested back on her haunches, thinking.

'Henry won't be pleased; you destroying his *art* an all,' Peters snickered.

Shit! She'd be a laughing stock by the time Peters had finished embellishing this little episode. Cursing she began pulling the rubbish back into a pile. She paused. A particularly large milk carton was sealed with duct tape? The image of Henry's sandals floated before her.

There are no coincidences.

Harris prodded the carton. Something solid shifted inside. Her heart started pounding. Peeling back the tape she recoiled, dropping the carton as the smell of sour milk hit her. 'Holy shit!' A hand gun, inside a plastic bag, had disgorged onto the ground.

'How the hell . . . ?'

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“My art is helpful and should be appreciated”,’ Harris mimicked, smiling at her scowling partner. ‘I knew he was trying to tell us something.’ Somewhere near, she knew, Henry was watching.

A week later, Harris and Henry were seated on the park bench. Harris watched the children playing in the park, ignoring the passing, tooting cars. She took a deep breath; she was upwind. ‘Thought you’d like to know Henry, Farron’s been charged with murder. We found the gun that shot young Georgie Bastion - Farron’s prints all over it. But I guess you know that, hey Henry?’

Henry scuffed the dirt. The duct tape was coming loose. He’d have to do another repair job soon.

‘I’m told you were very meticulous with your cases, Henry. Never took a chance on something cropping up that could jeopardise the outcome.’

Henry said nothing.

‘And the only way you could be sure Farron’s gun would not turn up at his trial, was if you had it.’ Harris felt herself nodding, still working out the facts. ‘Farron told you where it was, didn’t he? Because you wouldn’t take his case without it; Farron had no choice.’

Henry licked dry lips his gaze wavering towards the shrubs.

‘I’m also guessing Farron’s been in touch.’ She recalled the man she’d seen heading to the park, who looked very much like Farron, ‘trying to get his hands on

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that gun.' She thought she felt Henry flinch. 'But he didn't know if you were still smart enough to put something in place if anything - untoward happened to you.'

Harris dangled her hands between her knees, feeling her way, not expecting a reply.

Henry continued to scuff the dirt.

'You couldn't just hand us the gun or we may have arrested you as an accomplice; hiding a known murder weapon.'

Henry stopped scuffing.

'We can't prove you put the gun in the carton, Henry, or even that you knew it was there. Too circumstantial. But if anyone would know that . . .' They sat for a while in silence. Harris rose from the bench and stared down at the greasy strings of grey hair curtaining the sallow face.

'Thanks, Henry.'

Henry's head nodded imperceptibly.

The car's horn sounded; Peters was an impatient man.

Henry looked up, his eyes unreadable.

'See you round. And Henry,' Harris nodded towards his latest creation, 'keep up the good work.' She thought she caught the ghost of a smile.

Harris fell into the car.

Peters was not pleased about Henry remaining on the streets but Farron behind bars was some consolation.

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‘Pleased with yourselves are you?’ Peters grumbled, stepping on the gas.

‘Well, as a matter of fact . . . ,’ Harris smiled clinging onto the door handle with both hands.