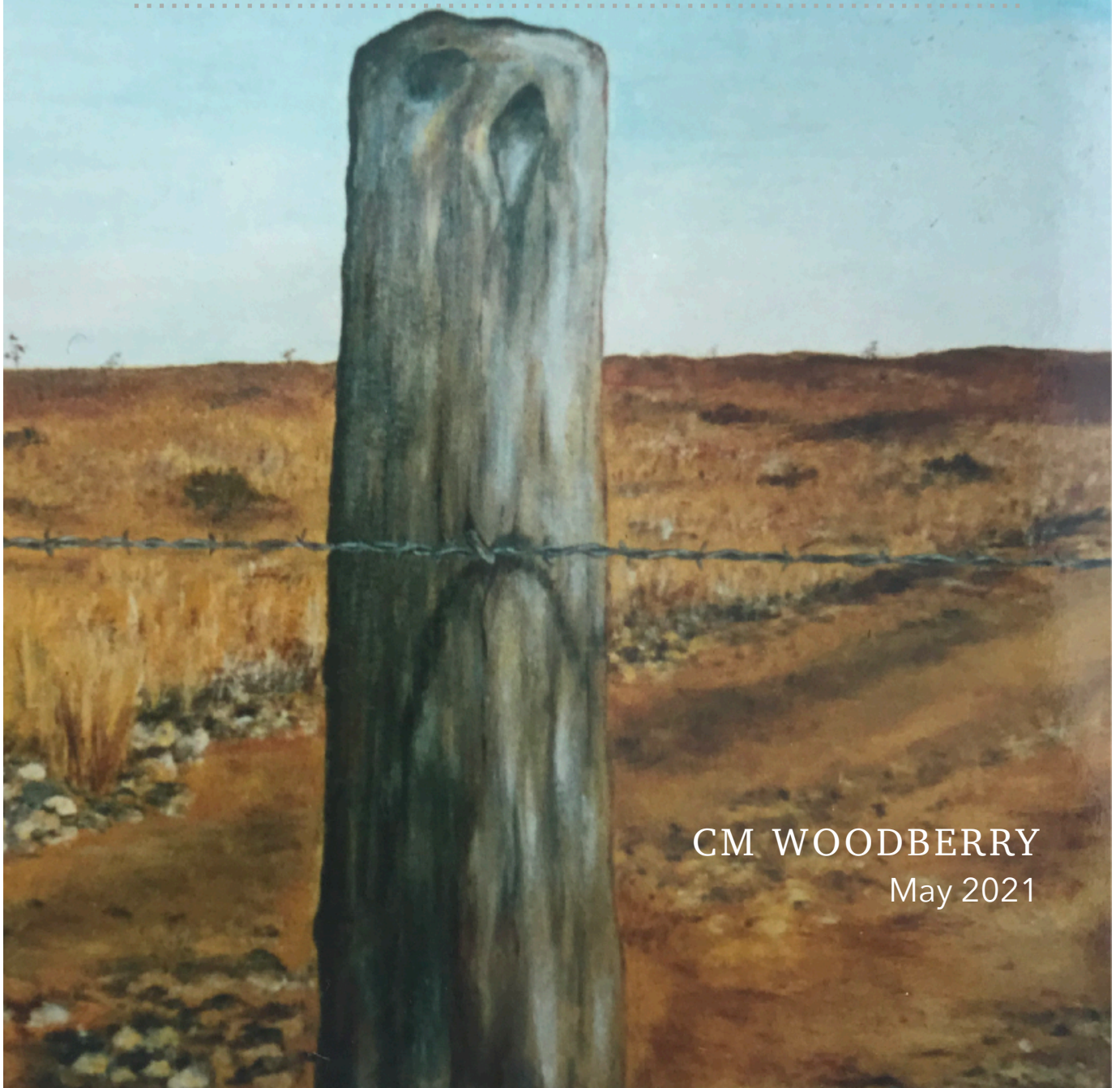


A Story

CRASHING THE PARTY



CM WOODBERRY

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Crashing The Party is a work of fiction, a virtual depiction of people and events. Having made that declaration I will also admit elements of reality, or at least what passes for reality, are scattered throughout.

Crashing the Party
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An original short story
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Original artwork by CM Woodberry

"The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. ... there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death"

From *The Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allen Poe

PROLOGUE

In these uncertain times there is one thing for certain. *There is no away.* As we've all recently discovered there is no place on earth exempt from fire, flood, chaos and pestilence. After all, it is we humans who bring these favours to any party we attend - be it in the middle ages or just yesterday.

And so no matter where we may hide, how desperately we seek a refuge, we shouldn't be surprised when the "Red Death" finds us.

In fact, we most probably sent it an invitation.

CRASHING THE PARTY

CM Woodberry

Cheryl's teeth chattered as the WB ute rattled along on the corrugated bush track. Despite her inexpert attempts to find a smooth rut, anything smooth at all, the ute bumped and lurched its way across the desolate landscape. But Cheryl was unfazed, she had become used to the torture that passed for a road out here, and the inescapable dust.

She was thirsty and kept licking her lips, cursing herself that she had left her water bottle and lip balm in the plastic box in the back of the ute, not daring to stop until she got to Williams Creek, there wasn't time.

She knew she was well ahead of the rest of the crew, in pole position, as the lads called it. Leaving early meant less dust and a clear view, the best position irrespective of whatever condition the track might be in this week, especially after the drought.

It was her job to get to the Williams Creek shearing sheds before the others and set up camp - good spots went quickly. Over the years she had seen more than a few fights break out when latecomers disagreed over who should get the last few spaces remaining.

Despite the road and the dust it was a nice feeling to have the time to herself. It had been nine months stuck together with the other roadhouse workers. In the beginning the four Aussies and two Swedish backpackers had formed a family of sorts with Rose, the owner of the roadhouse, a reluctant surrogate mother.

The only customers were the handful of tourists left who had gotten stuck on this side of the border, the occasional local and every now and then, the truckies who were allowed through the Victorian lock down. Of course there was no going anywhere for the six of them. They were well and truly stuck.

At first their isolation had been a novelty, the news footage of the distant pandemic in Italy, the UK and US, seemed like a zombie apocalypse movie playing out in real time. Alarming, but so surreal that it was oddly reassuring.

In the evenings, over a beer at the deserted roadhouse, they had all agreed that they were indeed lucky to live in Australia, exempt from the horrors overseas, that is as long as the authorities kept a handle on the few idiots who had brought it back with them. Here, hundreds of miles from anywhere, things were pretty good.

Rose had a generator and solar and enough gas and petrol to last for quite a while. The well water wasn't too brackish

if you boiled it for tea and the cool room was well stocked with beer and food. With hardly any customers breaking through the seven of them were comfortable during those first weeks.

But the weeks dragged on and turned into months and last December the Swedish backpackers were picked up one morning by immigration and hauled off in the back of a police wagon. You could hear them crying as they drove away, not even allowed to say a proper goodbye.

For a week or so Cheryl often found herself anxiously wondering what would happen to them when they were deported, Sweden was reportedly a mess. However, by the end of the month Cheryl was surprised and alarmed to discover that she could barely remember the two smiling girls she had shared this room with for so long.

Supplies occasionally still came through, the drivers wore masks and only Rose, masked up as well, had anything to do with them. Cheryl's pay had stopped a few months before and it was becoming clear that Rose would not be able to keep feeding them - it cost too much to run the generator for the cool room.

Even when they could get supplies the cost of everything was rising with each delivery. Seemed like everything was in short supply, the hoarders saw to that, and the last time

Cheryl checked they had five bags of quinoa, but no weetbix.

Lately, especially after the recent surge in New Zealand, the news had become more and more graphic and disturbing. There were reports of bodies piled up outside of hospitals, even whole neighbourhoods burned down by the authorities after a rumour circulated claiming the virus had jumped species again and the possums were possible carriers.

The scientists tried to reassure everyone that there was no evidence that the possums were complicit, but that didn't stop the panic.

Rose finally banned the television, the generator was using too much fuel anyway. The mobile phone coverage was patchy at best, and the internet impossible, so they were now restricted to listening to the radio. The news only occasionally interrupted the radio play list of 80 and 90s hits and was easy enough to ignore.

In late March Rose was visibly angry when she came into the back rooms of the road house after an encounter with Dan. Dan was a local character who lived with his dogs in a run down donger about 30 minutes away on the old highway.

Even living the way he did he somehow managed to know everything that was going on in this neck of the woods.

You always knew when he had arrived from the barking. His three dogs spent their time jostling for position in the rolled down back seat windows of his old Toyota Hilux, their commotion so loud Dan was prematurely deaf.

The ute also had its own way of announcing Dan's arrival as it coughed and spluttered up the road. It was held together with high speed tape, fencing wire and hope. Last summer the lads had taken bets on how long it would last but had given up lately - it seems both Dan and the ute were indestructible.

Dan was unmasked when he got out of the ute, of course, and although he called out no one was game enough to go out to the pump and help him. He waited a few minutes, shushed the barking dogs in vain, then filled his ute with the last of the diesel. Hanging up the hose he called out to Rose to put it on his account.

Exasperated Rose went out to protest but was too late, he was already seated in the ute and pulling away from the pump. Just before he drove off he tossed a bit of paper through the drivers window.

"Looks like they are going ahead with the B&S Ball after all." He shouted over the din of the dogs and sped off.

Rose, hands on hips, watched him go then swore under her breath as she bent down to retrieve the piece of paper. It was a flyer for the Annual Bachelors and Spinsters Weekend at Williams Creek.

Rose pinned the flyer on the bulletin board near the old fax/phone machine.

"It's up to you if you go." Rose said with a shrug. "I guess since everyone out here has been pretty much isolated since the pandemic began there is hardly any chance of anyone getting sick. Might as well have a good time and who knows when the next shipment of beer and UHLs will get here again after this latest kerfuffle in Melbourne."

There had been rumours that the breweries might have to shut down, but that disaster was averted when the Prime Minister ordered all essential services to remain open.

The four of them rushed over to read the flyer, glancing furtively at each other, trying to read each other's reactions and to see if anyone was going to object to going. It would have to be all of them or none. After a brief silence it was clear they were all in and the lads grabbed a beer each and

retired to the picnic table outside to start planning the weekend.

After a brief discussion the two young women went back to their rooms to anxiously ponder what they could wear given the slim contents of their wardrobes.

That night Cheryl lay in her bunk, the nighttime noises of her roommate Heather only slightly muffled by the flowered curtain that separated the room. The snores and dream murmurs amplified as they spilt across the room and through the open window into the vast dark silence outside.

I guess it will be okay, Cheryl reassured herself more than once.

After all, she rationalised, twelve months in this hellhole was too much, they needed some fun, needed to be normal again and maybe even find a bit of romance, even if it was just clumsy sex on a sweat stained swag.

But she also felt a vague dread. She would have to deal with other people again and be forced back into the game of banter and flirting. She found this especially difficult when surrounded by the alcoholic shapeshifting that was the inevitable result of 200 lonely and largely socially dysfunctional twenty somethings meeting up in a place

with no rules, save the ones they chose to accept at any particular moment. And of course there was the virus, always the virus.

The week before the ball went quickly. They didn't say much to each other about the risks, but they all did listen intently when James shared the news report about another quarantine breach in Sydney and later when Heather announced another in Adelaide.

The Prime Minister had once again declared that all cases were safely contained and reminded them, "How lucky are we to live in a country so well protected by my government?"

They turned off the radio, not wanting to hear any more just in case the doubts they were all now silently feeling, made them call off the trip.

They wanted to go to the ball, that was for certain, especially since the weather was turning, and the worst of the heat of the summer had passed. That last night they sat up late drinking beers at the picnic table as they stared down the deserted road that led to Williams Creek Station, not saying much, their thoughts floating above them caught in the haze of their cigarette smoke

Just that afternoon Cheryl found a presentable dress in the pile of clothes Roses' previous employees had left behind and everyone else seemed to be reasonably satisfied with their own preparations.

They drew straws to see who got to head out first. Cheryl was more than pleased it was her and James ropable that he and Steve would be the last to leave and would no doubt get caught up in the traffic of the other revellers who would be coming from down south.

After a two hour drive Cheryl finally arrived at the old Williams Creek shearing shed. She scanned the creek bank for the place Steve had very specifically described.

Steve had attended this particular B & S every year for the past fifteen and had very fixed ideas about where to camp. Fifteen years going to B & S balls seemed pretty odd to Cheryl, although she had never said so out loud. But it did make her wonder once again, if Steve, despite his youthful posturing, was exactly what he seemed, a guy who couldn't or wouldn't grow up.

Cheryl spotted the coveted spot at the bend in the creek, it was in between the two surviving river gums, just out of sight of the shearing shed. She carefully backed in at an angle, another directive from Steve, and roped off an area precisely four ute widths wide and set up the tent that

would double as a change room and provisions storage. It didn't look like rain so they'd sleep in their swags.

Checking the clock on the dash she realised she had enough time to give the WB a wash and a shammy before the rest of them got there. After collecting a bucket of water from the creek she methodically removed the red dust as best she could.

The ute was her pride and joy, a bloke magnet the lads called it, and indeed its classic style, metallic deep blue paint and bull bar, never failed to attract attention, at least from a certain kind of bloke.

Just as well I got here early, she mused as more and more utes and four wheel drives bounced across the cattle guard through the double gates leading into the shearing yards.

It had been a long time since any sheep had been shorn at Williams Creek. It was mostly cattle or nothing now and even if there were a few sheep about it was easier to ship them south on a semi than it was to get a shearing crew up this far, especially since the borders closed.

She had just finished cleaning the tires when she saw the first of the roadhouse crew pull in and park next to her.

"Perfect Cheryl." Heather said glancing over the camp site.

"I'll unpack later, I want to say hello to some friends."

Heather disappeared amongst the rapidly arriving crowds, some of them jumping from the backs of utes that were still moving, their faces covered in dust, already wobbly from the beers on the way.

Others, emerged from their air conditioned 4 WD cabs, disconcerted at first as the heat hit them, then they nonchalantly stretched as they searched out familiar faces and smiled as Heather ran over to them to deliver the obligatory hugs and kisses.

Cheryl watched with a mixture of irritation and envy as well as resignation as Heather made her way from one vehicle to the next. Cheryl was well aware that Heather would never actually offer to do anything more than the minimum, and therefore managed to get out of work a fair bit of the time, but somehow Rose didn't see it. Just another thing Cheryl had learned, if you want to survive living with Heather - let it go.

James and Steve were the last to arrive. Cheryl went to greet them noticing at once that James had something on his mind. Steve ignored her hello as he stalked around her ute and inspected the camp site.

"A crap trip," he announced, "took ages. You could have moved the tent over a few more meters so we could all park here but I guess this will do."

"You're welcome!" Cheryl replied sarcastically.

Ignoring Steve she turned to James, "What is it, should I have parked the ute cross eyed or something?" she asked.

"Nah, just something we heard on the radio coming over. No big deal - just another scare."

Cheryl started to say something but was interrupted by the arrival of the lads from Rhine Station as their ute came crashing across the paddock. The guys in the back were barely hanging on, their arms and legs flailing, whooping child men hanging onto roll bars and draped over the cab.

Steve, deserted them as quickly as Heather leaving Cheryl and James to set up camp. They collected a stack of firewood ready for breakfast in the morning and stored the food and booze in the tent then rolled out the swags in the back of the utes. Satisfied James flipped open his first can of beer (glass bottles had been banned a few years before after one reveller had bleed to death after falling on a pile of empties) and handed one to Cheryl.

“Let the fun begin.”

The early autumn heat hung on until dusk when the temperature plummeted. No one noticed the cold much as the drinking got heavier and the music louder. Steve led the crowd in a drinking game that ended in a brief scuffle and Heather showed more and more skin in line with the level of her alcohol consumption.

Always sensible though, she had kept her Driza-bone handy, anticipating the very real possibility that she would end up in only her knickers and bra, the heavy cumbersome coat smacked the other gyrating dancers as she twirled.

No one spoke of the pandemic, that is no one spoke of it as if it was real. It was, as if it was only a nuisance that had shifted their lives slightly out of kilter, brought vague worries and woes to their properties and limited their access to alcohol.

Any other opinion that suggested otherwise was greeted with disdain. After all the pandemic was something from somewhere else and they were here, surrounded by the safety of the Aussie landscape, the border safely closed.

As the night progressed and the darkness became more and more impenetrable, all talk of the pandemic faded and

was replaced with a determined drunkenness. No need to fear all that crap from out there, they were safe in the security and familiarity of the shearing yards. They revelled in that certainty as, with each drink, they shed their inhibitions, secure in the knowledge that all that bad shit happened out there somewhere, but not here.

The bonfire was about to be lit, a tradition at midnight. The crowd had collected old chairs and fence palings from their properties, some even stopped on their way to collect whole tree limbs, dragging them behind the utes and 4WDs. The pile of timber and wood along with the excitement grew as the night went on.

Scott, from Acuna Station, was in charge of starting the bonfire. His flair with a lit torch and petrol legendary.

The young men and women, arms draped around each other, surrounded the wood pile, some of the more experienced warning others that they were too close.

Scott stood high above everyone else on the edge of the cut out, where trucks had once loaded and unloaded the sheep, giving him a prime position, visible to the crowd.

His face illuminated as he held the torch aloft, accentuated by the deep shadows around and behind him - pausing for effect, his enjoyment of the moment evident in the almost

maniacal look on his face, he threw the torch into the petrol soaked pile. A mighty whoosh exploded, the darkness a light as the pile of wood burst into flames, sparks and embers erupting into the air before floating upwards to join the star filled sky.

Cheryl tripped and fell backward as the heat hit her. Annoyance became alarm as the rest of those around her just stood, drinks in hand, mesmerised by the fire, lost in the moment, not even aware she had fallen at their feet.

Hurriedly righting herself, her eyes adjusting to the firelight she noticed some people at the north end of the shearing yard disturbed out of their reverie by an expensive new Land Cruiser driving slowly through the crowd.

Cheryl watched as the driver, a woman with raven hair, her arm resting on the front drivers door, smiled through the rolled down window, but did not turn her head as she drove through the crowd

The windows were tinted to a point where Cheryl could only just make out the other passenger's profiles as the 4WD drove past, their windows still rolled up, a gesture of bad manners that irrationally raised her hackles. As people unconsciously moved out of the way to let the black Land Cruiser pass Cheryl became more and more baffled.

Scott also noticed the advancing vehicle and he too looked puzzled. Strangers were rare at these balls, most people knew each other from other parties or from work and if they didn't know someone, they were only once removed from knowing someone who did. Vehicles were as familiar as faces and it was clear these people, and their clearly brand new land cruiser, were not known.

As the Land Cruiser rolled to a stop directly in front of Scott the woman looked up at him, her striking beauty raising a grin on his face as she announced rather than asked, her accent faint but discernible, "Mind if we join you? We've come a long way."

"Why certainly," He replied as he bowed in mock chivalry. "In fact, I have been waiting for you all my life!"

"I just bet you have," she laughed, "and here I am."

She turned off the Land Cruiser, opened the door and slid out of the cab, her long legs and short shirt raising a wow from some of the lads. She took Scott's hand as he pulled her up beside him.

Then, arm linked in hers, he turned and winked at the crowd, raising another cheer. Someone cranked up the music and, those still capable, resumed dancing with each other in a frenzy.

Meanwhile attention shifted to the other occupants of the Land Cruiser as they quietly got out of the back doors. There were seven in all Cheryl guessed.

Some of the local lads surrounded the new girls. Jostling for position they offered them drinks, each young man hopeful that, although these exotic creatures would usually be considered way out of their league, maybe tonight they had a chance.

The women, eyes on the strange men, were a bit more circumspect, watching but keeping their distance until Heather grabbed one and pulled him into the dancing crowd, her previous plans for Scott forgotten as she turned her attention to the oddly expressionless but handsome newcomer. The rest of the strangers were surrounded, then lost in the crowd.

Cheryl found herself standing next to James. Unwittingly they had separated themselves from the crowd and had moved into the shadows under the gum trees near their camp.

"Seems funny doesn't it? Where did they come from? It's not like you would drive up this far from just anywhere."

"I think they must have come from up north..." Cheryl started to say as she turned to look in the direction the Land Cruiser had emerged from.

"Hey, wait a minute, isn't that gate locked, and the cattle guards ... hell the cattle guards collapsed years ago. There's no way anyone could get through that way!"

The coughing started the next morning, some didn't make it back to their homesteads, their vehicles blocking roads, ignitions still on, their bodies slumped over the steering wheels.



Others made it home, at first feeling only vaguely unwell but taking to their beds by tea time. By the end of the week their parents were dead and they, too weak to bury them.

At the Roadhouse the radio droned on, the music playlist long abandoned. The weeping of the newsreader could be heard as he announced the latest death toll.

A black Land Cruiser pulled into the bowsers. A woman emerged from the cab and helped herself to petrol. She slammed the driver's door as she prepared to leave and said to no one in particular. "Put it on my account."

A short story by CM Woodberry