



Lockdown

A short story by Graham Price

Kate looked at the upside down river cruising its muddy waters to the sea and thought that the world's most livable city, as it was said of recent times, wasn't so. What nut thought of that, she considered? Oh well, compared to other cities the old Yarra of Melbourne wasn't polluted all that much, but on a dull winter's day it sort of merged with the state of one's mind — insipid, pea soupish, thick as . . . the cloth mask on her face was irritating, but necessary because of Covid health restrictions.

She alighted from the train with three others at Flinders Street. Restrictions had kept the numbers down to near zero. The station was deserted with only a cleaner, two station staff, and oh God . . . two police officers over there wearing sky blue face masks. The short, stubby female constable came toward her, pistol holster rocking crazily and hanging so low on her right leg that Kate thought looked rather comical . . . any further down the leg and a kid in a pram could snatch the 40 calibre pistol, or an AFL footballer could swiftly punt kick it right out of its holster . . . Keystone Cops were they? The taller senior constable male stood back, hands behind his bum.

Shorty stared at her. "Good morning. What is your reason for being here?"

Kate shivered a little. "I can't get toner supplies within my own suburb, so have to go to Officeworks at Queen Vic for a pick-up."

"Some identification, please . . . a drivers licence?"

Kate froze. Oh, the bitch would have to ask that! She took the licence out of her wallet and handed it over.

Shorty looked at the piece of plastic. "You live in Glen Iris! You're well outside the required five kilometre restricted zone."

Kate glanced at the male cop for some sign of sympathy, but he was looking at a young couple who were entering the station. "I live in Prahran. Been there just over a year."

Shorty screwed up her nose and unconsciously tapped her fingers along the butt of the 40 calibre pistol with her free hand. "That's an offence, you know — not changing the address on your licence!"

Oh sugar, thought Kate. I've had it now. "Sorry. I forgot about it. Meant to do it the other week, but got busy."

Kate thought that the cop seemed to be chewing her cud like a Jersey cow and was a little red in the face. She could lose a bit of weight, too, or was it all that heavy gear hanging around her gut? Shorty seemed to firm her feet on the concrete, as if getting ready to make a move. "What other identification have you got?"

Kate swallowed and rooted through her wallet. Several plastic cards fell onto the floor. She bent to pick them up and realised that even in the cold station she was perspiring. Bloody bitch! Why is she so aggressive? She pulled out a folded piece of paper from her wallet. "Here's a prescription from my doctor made out to my Prahran address. Will that bloody-well do?"

Shorty seemed to be running out of patience. "No need to be rude. Just doing my job." Kate stared at the shiny handcuffs at the side of the thick black belt around the officer's waist. They looked enormous and bloody dangerous, too. This was fast getting out of hand. The bitch wanted to arrest her . . . wanted to slam her into the back of a paddy wagon and chuck her into a police station for a grilling! That's what they seemed to be doing these days under this crazy government lock-down. Kate fumbled in her wallet again for some more identification, but she didn't think she had anything else. The cards fell onto the concrete again. She was flustered . . . didn't know what to do. Shorty took a menacing step toward her. She's bloody-well going to arrest me! Kate stepped back, holding her hands up in protest.

The male senior constable also stepped forward. They're both coming for me . . . hell . . . I've got to get out of here! But the senior constable stooped down and picked up the cards. He handed them to Kate whose hands were shaking.

"There you are, ma'am. The doctor's prescription is quite adequate. Now, don't forget to have your address changed as soon as possible. Enjoy your day."

He turned away and Shorty followed him. Kate stared at them as they walked toward the exit. Shorty looked back at her once and Kate was certain that if Shorty came across her again, it would be curtains.

Trams were running up Swanston Street, but she thought she'd walk — get a take-a-way coffee, though she could do with a swift shot or two of brandy. She could already feel it tingling down her throat. She turned the collar of her coat up and pulled her beret firmly onto her head. The face mask was irritating her.



Queen Vic was all but deserted. She walked through blurred shadows down to Officeworks to collect the printer toner she'd ordered online, and received it with a minimum of fuss. No Keystone Cops around, thank God. The confrontation had shaken her up somewhat. What was this country coming to? Bloody dictators.

Stepping out of the gloom of Queen Vic's closed shop fronts, she saw the footpaths empty of humans. The city looked like that old nuclear film *On the Beach*, when Melbourne was the last city, almost barren of movement . . . a cold grey swat of lifeless buildings with no illumination. Normally, the footpaths of Swanston Street would be flooded with university students, Chinese mostly, some Indians, some Indonesians and Malaysians, all humming about their business, laughing and enjoying their time in Melbourne. Now, almost everything was dead. Would it ever come back to normal again? Hmm, might be better to pop over to Melbourne Central Station to catch her train home. Didn't wish to run into Shorty ever again.

There were only three people on the platform. Damn, she thought, she'd forgotten that she'd have to change trains at Flinders Street. Oh well, just have to hurry and hope that Shorty and her boss were elsewhere. She found that she was shivering again.

She had to wait more than twenty minutes for a train. There was some disruption on the track. She was getting more annoyed. But changing at Flinders Street was no problem and she scurried down the steps onto the platform, hoping against all hope that Shorty wasn't about. There were two Protective Service Officers on the platform, but they ignored her. She was standing in the cold with the wind whipping at her coat and snapping the sides of her slacks. Damn winter . . . damn Covid business . . . damn nosey police officers. She felt exhausted and she definitely would have a shot or two of brandy when she arrived home. Her train swung into view within minutes and she stepped aboard, trying to avoid touching anything, but there was no one in the carriage and she didn't think there were many others within the train. People were obeying the law and staying home. But there were more police officers at Prahran as the train pulled in. She was shaking. Not again!

A police sergeant waved her on; it seemed they were only interested in people traveling further out of the five kilometre restriction zone. She expelled a good strong breath of air through her mask and headed for home.

She struggled with the key into her front door lock. She was becoming more annoyed than ever and savagely shook the door handle. The lock eventually clicked and she entered the flat. At last, all that bloody strain simply for some toner for her printer! This working from home business was getting to her. She slammed the door behind her, dragged the mask off and threw it to the floor. Shouldn't do that, she thought, but what the hell. Pick it up later. She needed that brandy.

She was pouring a good serve into a glass when Dougall, the Scottish terrier, came rushing into the kitchen. He ran around her, tongue lolling, eyes sparkling, huffing somewhat. Short tail vibrating.

"Oh, you're such a dear. Love you!" She picked him up and headed for the living room, completely forgetting about the brandy. She settled him beside her on the leather couch and flicked on the remote. The TV screen bloomed white, then colour and a news presenter appeared, talking about the Covid crisis. Suddenly, she remembered the brandy, but the iPhone in her slacks pocket began to buzz. She took it out. Oh, her son, Stephen!

"How's it going, Steve!"

"Just come off duty. Had to arrest a woman who wasn't wearing a mask and wouldn't give any details. She even went to slap my colleague Alice, but I grabbed her hand. How was your day?"

"Oh, fine. Nothing going on down here as usual. When are you coming over?"

"Can't, mum. You know the regs."

"Yes, I forgot."

They talked for a while until Stephen said he had to go. Kate put the phone down on the occasional table and thought. You silly git. Shorty was only doing what she was required to do by law. You bloody-well over-reacted. Get a grip on yourself. The dog looked up at her and gave a small woof. She laughed. "I think I've become a bit stir crazy. Wanna go for a walk, Dougall?" •

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