

HELEN OF BLACK ROCK BEACH

The three rocks stood proudly in the sun. Red, rippled textures formed misshapen heads where sand had worn the rock down over countless millennia. The sentinels looked as if they belonged in the desert instead of on the beach, and Harry felt a twinge of awe at the vast unseen forces that had sculpted the Earth over billions of years. He turned to look out at the vast expanse of Port Phillip Bay, the sea was supposed to be wild and stormy but that was half a world away. Yorkshire belonged to the past, Melbourne was the future and he grinned broadly as he waved to his family trudging up the beach towards him.

"Merry Christmas one and all," he called out.

Helen managed a tired smile as she reached him and set the baskets down.

"Is this far enough?"

"We can go further if you want," Harry smiled roguishly, "I was reading somewhere you could fit all of England, Scotland and Wales into the state of Victoria and still have room to spare."

Helen looked pained and looked up at the sandstone formation.

"Are you sure this is the place?"

"Well it's not Brighton Beach, but Black Rock is just as good."

"It looks red to me," she touched the sandstone.

They glanced at their two daughters. Kylie and Tracey were trudging through the sand, looking hot and bothered. Kylie was the oldest by three years and had her mother's good looks. The two girls were inseparable, Tracey was singing along to a tune on her iPod, while Kylie talked on her phone. They both pulled up short and Kylie turned her back suddenly.

"Okay, I have to go now, oh nothing, dad has this stupid idea about having Christmas dinner on the beach... okay I'll tell them, I'll see you tonight then."

She flipped the phone shut and turning, shot a wan smile at her father.

"Barry says to watch out for the seagulls."

Harry nodded and squinted at the surf.

"Will you look at that girls, water as far as the eye can see."

"I'm hot," Tracey pulled her earphones out, "can we go get an ice cream?"

"The shops are closed dear," her mother sighed, "Christmas day."

"This is stupid," she collapsed onto the beach and stared balefully at the water.

Helen's mouth twitched in the barest suggestion of a smile as she sank to her knees and pulled a rug from a basket, a moment later she looked up in mild annoyance at her husband.

"Are you going to help me with this?"

"Sorry, love," he moved to her side and helped anchor the rug down with rocks, "I was thinking of a quick dip first."

Helen stared blankly at him and Harry's bottom lip dropped slightly, she sighed and shook her head.

"Well fine then, but if you're going swimming do it now, otherwise you'll cramp up. There's no life guards on duty, and I'm not about to jump in and rescue you either."

"That's because they're all home eating Christmas dinner," Tracey pouted.

"Do you mind?" Helen snapped, "I'm trying to lay out Christmas dinner, why don't you go swimming with your father?"

"Didn't bring my costume," she shot back.

"Fine then," she retorted, "go for a walk."

A few moments later Helen sat back and stared miserably at the spread while her family wandered down to the water. Harry had woken suddenly this morning and decided he wanted to have Christmas dinner on the beach without so much as a by your leave. Four months ago he had come home to their house in York and announced that they were all emigrating to Australia. He was tired of moving from one scheme to the next, watching his wages disappear every week in council tax, not to mention all the other taxes and charges. She had argued the point fiercely. She could go out and get a job, hadn't she worked before? Harry had overridden her objections firmly, she wasn't going back to work.

It wasn't as if she regretted leaving England, it was just that Harry just seemed to decide on a course of action, and when others didn't jump to attention he let his bottom lip fall. Five years ago he had walked out on a job he had held for six years because they didn't appreciate him. She had borrowed money on her sister's store card, bought new clothes and gone to work for a local solicitor, while Harry sat and read the classified section looking for something more to his liking. It had been the sight of his rapidly thinning wife strutting out the door on her way to work that had suddenly woken him from his lethargy. He had virtually ordered her to quit, he would go back to his old job, no wife of his was going to work while he drew breath.

She cursed under her breath as a fly settled on a salad dish and shooed it away, the flies in this country seemed in plague proportions. All manner of creeping, crawling, slithering beasts seemed to find their abode in this country, and of late their house in suburban Wantirna.

Fifteen minutes later she was satisfied that in spite of the hardship and short notice, she had managed to lay out a passable Christmas dinner. She pulled her glasses off, wiped the sweat from her face and blinked to clear her vision. The turkey was cold but Harry had already agreed that was okay, all she had to do was keep the seagulls from their dinner.

She put her glasses on and glanced upwards as she pushed her black shoulder length hair from her eyes. The sky was blue with not a cloud in the sky, not even a seagull broke the brilliant blue dome, in the distance a container ship chugged its way northwards to Melbourne.

Harry was still playing in the surf and Helen shook her head in disgust.

"You are something else, Harry," she muttered and then sighing, she straightened up and looked skywards as she composed herself, "patience," she sighed, "patience."

"Dinner is served," she called out a moment later.

Harry turned and motioned for her to join him.

She half rose and waved him towards the spread.

"Dinner!"

Kylie half started towards her but was called back by her father who waved back.

"Come in for a quick dip, the water's beautiful!"

Helen hesitated but as she looked around one last time she couldn't see any hint of a seagull. A moment later she sighed and rose unsteadily. Like Tracey, she had forgotten her swimming costume, but she could at least wade in the shallows, maybe then her husband would summon the family to their Christmas meal. With a last lingering look at her spread, she shuffled off down the beach, smoothing out the white top and knee length skirt.

Harry met her with a grin and kicked water at her.

"Don't you dare," she warned him, "dinner's ready."

"In a minute, darling."

He plunged back into the shallow surf and started swimming out. A wave upset him and he disappeared for a moment before reappearing. He then flopped onto his back and did his famous whale impersonation, a little more realistic now that middle aged spread had taken firm control of his stomach.

"Dad's crackers," Kylie shook her head, "look at him."

"I know," she murmured, "he actually looks like a whale now."

Tracey splashed in the shallows and squealed.

She glanced over her shoulder at their spread, it was still deserted and she shrugged and pushed her glasses further up her face, so far so good.

But when Helen turned around a few minutes later she saw movement by the rocks. A dog was sniffing at their spread.

Suddenly her calm manner evaporated as she turned and started running up the beach, splashing salt water as she ran. But when she reached dry sand her speed slowed dramatically. The dog was pulling at something and Helen had a sudden foreboding that the turkey she had spent so long basting and cooking last night, was about to disappear forever.

"Get away," she screamed, "get away!"

The dog looked up and seeing danger approaching, grabbed the turkey and darted off down the

beach. Helen stopped and screamed.

“No!”

The dog set the turkey down and tore a chunk from the bird and Helen saw red. She had always considered herself an animal lover, but the sight of a stray dog eating the bird she had laboured over last night was too much. The dog would die a slow and miserable death. She took off after the dog and sensing his own demise was imminent, he grabbed the bird and took off.

Had she been twenty years younger she might have caught the dog, but the weight she had gained again, combined with the dry sand was working against her, she eventually gave up the chase and stared miserably after the fleeing carnivore. Curse all dogs, curse the beach, curse this damn country with its hairy spiders and easy going natives, who went through life without a care and curse her husband, who had decided on a whim to drag them to a beach of all places in spite of her protests and appeals to sanity.

Helen turned around a moment later and stared at the flock of seagulls gathered on the rug. Kylie and Tracey were already running towards them, even Harry had managed to extricate himself from the water and was floundering up the beach, hollering at the top of his voice.

Helen stood back and suddenly burst out laughing at the sight. Harry looked ridiculous, his wobbling belly looked absolutely revolting and in a moment of time she saw him as a young man, lean and finely muscled, chasing after a group of pigeons that had stolen his chips after he had left them to kick a ball for some kids. He had fallen on his face and wound up in the water at St James’s Park, much to her amusement.

Harry reached the rug and fell to his knees and grabbing his hair, looked up at the sky and cursed the malevolent god of seagulls. A moment later he rose unsteadily and turning around, spied his wife staring at him.

She straightened up as Harry shot what must have been an anguished look in her direction. Harry the Hero, the indomitable Mister Fixit who always seemed to have an answer, now staring at her his arms outstretched and then falling in defeat, had become Harry the Tosser.

“Well my love,” she murmured, “now we’re even.”

She felt her hips as she trudged back across the beach. She had lost fifteen pounds in a matter of weeks when she had been working. She recalled the advertisement in their local paper for a legal secretary at nearby Knox City, Harry had seen her looking at it and called her attention to the dinner that was starting to burn. She had written the details down when he had fallen asleep in front of the tv, along with the number of a local gym, perhaps one day.

She stopped in front of Harry and eyed him smilingly.

“Had your fun?”

“Sorry love.”

He was truly sorry, she could see that but Helen said nothing for a full minute as she contemplated the sorry mess left by the seagulls.

“Well girls, it looks like your father is cooking Christmas dinner today, seeing as he ruined this one for us,” she raised her chin defiantly.

“I’m quitting, I’ll meet you at the car.”

Helen walked back down the beach feeling the years falling way with every step.

Written by Alastair Rosie June 2006 ©