

# A Funeral for Eddie Moon

*by* Mark Welker

'It's perfect,' said Maggie as she lay in the casket.

Harold Barnes offered his hand. 'It's a shame he never got to see it,' Maggie continued as she climbed free of the coffin. Being the second-born of twins, Maggie was the approximate height and weight of her brother, and Barnes had fashioned the casket exactly to her measurements. He indicated a passage inscribed in the underside of the lid: 'Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past.' Maggie placed a dry kiss on Barnes's cheek.

'Joyce was his favourite,' she said, tracing the lettering with her fingers. 'And what a joy it is to see things come to a close,' she added as they settled the remainder of the fee.

They embraced a final time, Maggie's eyes watering as she rushed into the fawn morning light, the metallic ring of the street suddenly upon her. Barnes watched her go and then shuttered the blinds, turned the sign on the door and went to the back room where a shaft of blunt sunlight shot through a small window, illuminating a gurney in the room's middle. There, by way of a small incision below the navel, the remaining earthly fluids drained from the body of Eddie Moon.

'Onwards and upwards!' exclaimed Maggie as she turned towards the hill and climbed the town's high street, headed for the council chambers.

A tram clattered by in the opposite direction, going for the wharf, where Tom Small guided his trawler against the pier. He slipped a noose of rope around a nearby pylon as other boats arrived from the seaway, each bearing a wake of foam gleaming in the maturing daylight. Around him, crew disembarked along the sleepy boardwalks, the end-of-season excitement heightening the gay sounds; seagulls hooting, boom poles clinking in the lazy wind. Tom stepped into the tray of his boat to study a scrub of tangled netting he had set aside on entering the bay. As he considered the possible

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approaches, Harold Barnes reviewed his own work; a set of pipes cycled preservatives through Eddie Moon's veins and Barnes ran his hands over the body's flesh, shedding skin into the air in clouds of silver. From a pail of milky water he produced a sponge and cleaned each limb, working delicately between the fingers and toes.

It was a degree of intimacy that Maggie had not shared with her brother. Never a family for touching, the Moons had been loving in their own way. Close from a distance, Eddie would say. As Maggie crossed the tram tracks, a huddle of women gathered at the opposite side, each bearing a plastic-wrapped garment over their arms. Maggie recognised Mrs Cole, Mrs Mathews, Mrs Doust and precious little Josie Williams, each keen to share their condolences with Maggie as they pressed in close with perfumes overlapping.

Poor woman, the group confided once Maggie had passed on by. Despite her brother, Maggie was widely liked in the town, her reputation such that attendance at the following day's funeral seemed a given. 'Even if it is just to make sure he's dead,' said Mrs Newman, raising coddled laughter from the group, the garments crinkling against their bodies.

'She was pregnant, you know,' interrupted Mrs Mathews. 'Little Annie, I mean.' The group turned towards the horizon where a dozen whaling boats marked its hazy edge. 'I lie awake at night,' Mrs Mathews began, 'and then: her little face'. A cloud passed before the sun, sending cold shadows over the town. The group shivered as the tram hit its leaden marks. Good riddance to Eddie Moon.

Judge Mathews called to Tom in his boat. The remainder of the fleet had docked and fishermen now crowded the wharf; cartons of beer fashioned into makeshift chairs as conversation formed; men heavy in consideration of the dead time ahead.

'Tom!' Judge Mathews shouted as he towed his son forwards, the meagre spoils of their fishing efforts stewing in a shallow bucket the boy carried. Behind them, where the larger trawlers had their loads winched free, a crowd had gathered. 'Tom!' Judge Mathews called again as he crossed the remaining distance between them. He

placed his foot on the gunwale and caught his breath loudly. 'Hells, Tom, didn't you hear me?'

Tom shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand. 'I guess not.'

'Well, you know my boy here, Tom?'

He looked the boy over. 'Nope.'

Further along the pier a roar erupted as a crane retracted noisily from one of the new arrivals. Judge Mathews said to his boy: 'I think they've caught something big. Why don't you take a peek while I talk to Tom here?' He took the boy's rod and stacked it against the pylon with his own.

The hoarse noise of the crowd carried into the street where Maggie turned briefly to view the water, too far away to make out the happening. Mr and Mrs Doubleday turned too, their arms interlocked, and catching Maggie as she passed they delivered their condolences and Maggie thanked them and checked to make sure they were attending the following day. They certainly were, Mrs Doubleday told her. And afterwards, as the two joined the crowd on the pier, Mr Doubleday turned to his wife and announced his mother was coming to live with them for a while.

'Father's having a hard time looking after her at home,' he said smiling. 'You'll need to drop a shift or two to help out. I don't suppose that will be a problem,' he said, still smiling.

The Doubledays stayed and watched the commotion unfold upon the wharf. Later that night Mrs Doubleday sat up in bed and retrieved a hammer from a side drawer, hefting it in her hands as her husband dreamed beside her.

Maggie watched the Doubledays join the line for the pier and then faced the hill again, which grew steeper near the apex. She paused before the dressmaker shop, Best Dressed, and eyed a gown displayed in the window as, from within, the single eye belonging to Sharon Best watched the street, a cigarette clamped between her fingers giving off its feeble light, illuminating the shadowed remains of her empty back room, a room Sharon Best had hoped to expand into. And still it lay empty. A few half-empty boxes were pushed to one side; the sound of the tram hitting the lower intersection echoed

through the room's remainder. The light between her fingers died and Sharon Best lit another as Maggie paced the length of the window, considering the garment from each angle, a memory unspooling in her mind.

'And what of her mother?' she asked Eddie.

'The pirate, you mean? Betsie and I are above all that,' he said. 'We'll leave together, soon. She'll not become like her.'

'She'll not become like him,' said Sharon Best, closing the curtain that lead to the front of the shop. She slid against the back wall as Maggie came through the door and lifted the dress from its hanger, the crane on the wharf struggling under the weight of a tiger shark, three metres from tail to jaw, winching it free of the briny boat deck, guiding it to the concrete bed of the wharf.

The crowd clapped and some of them cheered and in their hands beer bottles glinted, and Tom Small realised how ill-equipped his stubby fingers were for the delicate task of unhinging the knot.

'It's a big one,' said Judge Mathews, taking off his hat and wiping his face. 'Do you think they caught it in the bay? Three metres? Four?' Over their voices rushed the sound of the approaching tram, joining the noise of the mob.

Barnes removed the length of tubing from Eddie Moon's artery, stoppered the hole with a wad of cotton and sealed the opening with wax. He circled the body anew, checking for other abrasions, and applied a thin bead of glue to each, pinching them closed. 'Eddie and Betsie,' Barnes said aloud as he worked.

Violently in love, Maggie would say. And what was wrong with that, thought Maggie. To be so inside another that you needed to wring them out, just to experience more. Maggie laid the gown across her figure, feeling the weight of the other woman's stare move over her. 'Where can this go, Eddie?' Maggie asked as she looked for the dressing room.

'Sister, you worry enough for the both of us. What can they do about love?'

As the tram reached the base of the hill, Sergeant Jim Sheppard eyed the disembarking passengers through a second-storey

apartment window. He stood in his underwear, a razor in hand, foam covering his jaw. In the bedroom, Betsie Best, the dressmaker's daughter, lay across the bed with her wrists bound to the rail, moving like a slow puppet. Sheppard examined the nicks signalling themselves along his throat and rubbed the blood away with his thumb. He ran hot water over the blade and touched it to his neck, feeling the heat transfer to his skin. He kept the water on, steaming up the mirror as the passengers dispersed below, a section of the crowd peeling off to the strip of souvenir shops that ran the length of the bay, the rest headed for the pier where the crane wheeled the flailing shark to a wider landing, allowing more room for the burgeoning crowd. Tom Small gave up the unfinished knot and set about stowing the morning's gear, dragging a set of diving weights across the boat's metal tray.

'You know, Tom,' Judge Mathews said, stepping down into the boat as Tom struggled with the weights, trying to spring the latch of a storage locker with his foot. A weight broke free of the rest and fell heavily on the tray, causing both men to wince. 'We really haven't had a chance to talk,' said Judge Mathews as he picked up the abandoned knot. 'You don't mind me talking, do you, Tom?' he asked as Tom collected the remaining weight and threw it into the locker with the others.

Tom moved off to attack a jumble of craypots bundled at the boat's rear, separating them into twin sets and heaving pots from the smaller set onto the wharf to be mended.

'It's important that we keep communicating,' said Judge Mathews, successfully unthreading a first length of the knot. He held it up as Tom passed. 'You and Sheppard. Me. Sharon Best even. We've got to keep talking,' he said, looking at Tom's back.

Jim Sheppard's gun sat in its holster on a chair in the bedroom, where Betsie's eyes rolled over it on their way around the room, the drugs begging in her veins.

On the street below, the tram driver snapped shut the doors and stepped onto the road and looked up at the steamy second-floor window. 'Leaving this town tomorrow,' the driver said aloud to no-

one. He beat his station hat against his leg, enjoying the sound it made as a knot of return passengers lined the curb, watching the driver making his sound, waiting for him to begin the retreat. 'Hear that?' asked the driver, not looking at any of them in particular. 'Town's good for nothing but turning on its own,' he said as Mrs Mathews passed, drawing the other women in her wake.

The waiting passengers busied themselves with conversation as a roar erupted from the end of the pier, breaking the attempted spell of the driver and his hat, the crowd on the pier forming a makeshift fighting ring around the shark.

Sheppard whipped the blade across a leather belt fastened between the two taps, the sound like a dressing-room curtain being pulled across, and Maggie kicked off her heels as Tom threw another craypot onto the pier, the hard buoy cracking on the concrete.

'We do what we think is right,' Judge Mathews explained. 'That's all anybody can ask of us,' he said, shedding free another portion of the knot as Barnes inserted a final line of stitching, piecing together a revision of Eddie Moon's smile. 'Difficult decisions,' said Judge Mathews as Tom pumped water onto the tray via a hose, washing the browning waste over the edge. 'Someone has to make them.'

Eddie Moon had floated across the bay for three days before boatmen from the town fished him out. On the first day, a group of boys reported him floating in the river mouth. On the second day, the current nudged Eddie along the main fishing channel, where he proved himself a nuisance to the end-of-season traffic. By the time Jim Sheppard arranged for the body to be retrieved, Eddie Moon had visited each shore of the surrounding bays, his final resting place the lonely rocks of the town's back beach. By then, part of him had joined the food chain of the bay, with two fingers from his right hand missing, his genitals badly mutilated. There were lacerations around his ankles, and Judge Mathews had ruled his death a tragic accident, Eddie having swum at night through nets discarded in a quiet part of the bay. There were no known witnesses. No reason for Eddie to swim at night in just his underwear, thought Maggie.

Betsie Best groaned as she found the restraints binding her arms to the bedrail. 'Eddie?' she called to the empty room. A pale cloud of steam moved through the bathroom doorway.

'A terrible thing,' said Judge Mathews gravely. 'Now what was Annie again? Twelve?'

'Thirteen,' said Tom suddenly. 'She would have been thirteen.'

Judge Mathews paused with the knot in his hands. 'What kind of animal ...?' he wondered aloud.

Further along the pier implements appeared in the hands of the men in the front row as women in the back egged those closer to touch the shark, and so began a game where men darted forwards to lay their hands on the sea creature's stomach and punch lightly at its nose, only to return swiftly to the safety and jubilation of the crowd. Judge Mathews searched for his son and saw him bobbing at the outer ring. And while it's all over for them, he reflected, gesturing to the town at large, it keeps eating at us. Doubt, he concluded.

Barnes retrieved a set of powders and dusted Eddie Moon's blue skin, steadily restoring his earthly palette. From a bale of wire he fashioned a set of new fingers and finished the hollow shape with a glove slipped over the hand. 'And pregnant too?' asked Judge Mathews as the dress caught on Maggie's thighs, the material tearing along the seam. Tom nodded gravely. 'And if it weren't Moon this time,' said Mrs Mathews corralling her fellow women, 'it would have been the next.'

'The way he was with Betsie,' said Judge Mathews, watching Tom closely as Maggie removed the dress, pulled on her clothes and placed the ruined garment back on the hanger. 'You can't cage an animal like that,' said Judge Mathews as Maggie paused by the shop door, watching a curl of cigarette smoke appear at the top of the curtain.

Jim Sheppard cocked his ear to the sound coming off the pier, his face steadily disappearing as the mirror fogged. He wiped a space clear, seeing a fraction of his jaw and lips, and then waited as the steam reclaimed its share. He struck the mirror with his hand, over

and over, each time revealing his face in different ways, different faces. 'Eddie?' Betsie called from the next room, 'Eddie?' her moan cut short by the shrill bell of the tram below; the driver watching as his return passengers dissolved towards the pier.

'There he goes again,' said Carly Simpson, hearing the bell over the rushing crowd; this being her first return to the wharf since her husband's boat the Homecoming Queen had been lost at sea. How easy it was to return among many, she thought; happily a victim as much as any other to the spell of the creature's slow swinging death; no thoughts of the lines on her wrists fit for a practised blade; none of the despair of other days now; the bell shattering her grief and loneliness as the driver, impatient to begin the return ascent, struck again; the sound eddying up and down the street, tolling through Maggie as she came at last to the council chambers; the noise of the crowd filling the void between each stroke; a boy jostling at the edge as a man circled with a knife, tossing it from hand to hand like a scene from a movie. And that horrible business with little Annie Small, thought Carly Simpson as she recognised the boy as Judge Mathew's son. Had she heard the girl was pregnant? And Eddie Moon, gone and drowned himself in the bay, out of guilt perhaps.

Tom Small sank against the side of his boat, the locker of weights beneath him. 'That poor girl,' said Judge Mathews, thinking to sink Tom finally with grief. And Carly Simpson turned a final time to see the tram start its movement, retreating towards the hill, bleating its bell as it went.

Maggie talked through the following day's schedule with the man in charge of the council chamber's upkeep. Did they need to rehearse? he asked finally, showing no interest in the offer. No, she didn't think so. 'Eddie is getting ready right now,' she found herself saying. 'Mr Barnes is taking care of him,' she corrected as Eddie Moon's clothes were laid out. Barnes called his assistant and they fitted Eddie Moon into his suit. It was the perfect choice, Maggie thought as the man showed her into the chambers. 'There's plenty of gas?' she asked, looking up at the vaulted ceiling. 'I just want everyone to be comfortable,' she added quickly, as Sharon Best



emerged from her shop and stubbed the end of a cigarette against the bricked wall, leaving a black scar.

A cheer rose from the wharf as a man darted back, the knife bloody; a new ragged gill cut under the rest; a spout of blood bubbling forth. Tom stood in the bowels of his boat watching Judge Mathews unpick the knot. 'A fortress!' Maggie exclaimed, her voice echoing through the chamber as another man stepped forward, slashing off the shark's dorsal fin.

'And now it's almost over,' Judge Mathews said. 'The funeral tomorrow. Sheppard is going to be there. And Mrs Best.' He pulled another length free of the knot, the final combination nearing. 'It may seem a lot to ask, but Maggie Moon is likely to have the whole town there,' he said. Further up the pier his son stepped forward, knife in hand. 'No point getting people talking,' said Judge Mathews, handing Tom back the knot, now just a loose spool of line. A cheer erupted from the crowd as the boy darted back, a strip of flesh taken from across the shark's belly, the force of its death pushing free a belt of intestines, showering those closest with watery blood. Judge Mathews gathered up the two rods resting by the pylon and watched his son be lifted into the air by the crowd. 'Can I count on you to be there?' Tom nodded slowly, his eyes retreating from the completed knot to the empty tray of his boat.

With their prize now transferred from the dead creature to the boy, the crowd moved off the pier and into the street, bearing the youth on their shoulders. Jim Sheppard crossed to the bedroom, where Betsie rolled against her harness. 'Not much longer now,' said Sheppard, taking her foot and prying apart her toes, a needle between his fingers. The Doubledays watched the crowd go, Mr Doubleday holding his wife's shoulders firmly, a lasting edge of the crowd's violence wedged between them. As the tram reached the top of the hill its bell rang twice more, once to break the spell cast over Carly Simpson and then a final time as the widow turned to the empty pier, the chime echoing off the distant headland like the toll of a ship lost in fog.

As the mob drew up the hill, parts of it dispersed as fishermen headed for the bars that were just now opening with the onset of noon. The boy was taken from the shoulders of those in the front and walked alongside men he did not recognise. He searched for the image of his father, who laboured further down the hill, trying now to catch the crowd as it bore his son away. Judge Mathews passed his wife, and pointed further up the hill, his breath evading him. The crowd drained to a trickle as they passed Sharon Best leaning against the window of her shop and the boy noticed that he held the hand of a stranger. He shrugged free and the crowd moved on without him, feeding into other bars nestled in the town's side streets. The boy called for his dad, who limped up the hill's remainder, his breath catching in his chest. Judge Mathews reached his son in front of the council chambers and knelt down, the ascent now truly upon him. He tasted blood in his mouth, and spat into the bitumen. From the chamber doorway Maggie watched without expression as the judge leaned against his son, an evil pain closing like a fist around his heart.

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The following day the people of the town returned from where they had spent the night, in homes, in bars, in dark caves beside the wharf where white bones lay unscattered, and people like Jim Sheppard were cleanly shaved and Sharon Best was wearing a new dress, a cigarette primed between her fingers. Maggie met them at the council entrance and ushered each inside, allowing only Tom Small to be spared her eyes as he passed, Judge Mathews close behind, his son reminiscing loudly about the previous day's gorgeous violence. And once they were in, Maggie thanked Harold Barnes for the work he had done, kissing him on both cheeks, and sealed the doors. She walked along the pews, checking to see that all were comfortable and ready for the service, spotting a man she hadn't recognised in the rear row next to precious little Josie Williams.

'How come I haven't seen you before?' asked Josie Williams of the man as Maggie walked on through the crowd, checking again that the gas was flowing.

'I'm from the next town over,' he said. 'I'm a newspaper man.' He pulled a notebook from his pocket. 'Do you read the newspaper?'

'I'm too young to read the newspaper.'

'Oh I don't know about that,' said the writer, closing the gap between them. 'What's your name?'

Josie Williams leant in as if to whisper in the writer's ear and instead popped a bubble of chewing gum.

'Say, that's no way to treat a friend,' he said and put his arm around her shoulders.

'Did you say you were a writer?' she asked, shrugging free. The man nodded. 'Well,' began Josie Williams, 'I have a few stories to tell.'

'You do?' The writer put away his notebook and placed his hand on the girl's leg. 'Why don't you tell me one,' he said, putting a biscuit between his teeth.

'But you haven't got your notebook out.'

'I'll remember it,' the man said. 'That's what writers do. We remember everything. Like Eddie Moon there.' He pointed to the open coffin at the head of the chamber. 'Fixed up like a button by Sergeant Sheppard and the rest of your folks.' The writer edged his hand slowly inside the hem of Josie Williams' skirt. 'But that's not important now,' he said. His hand tightened against her skin. 'I want to hear your story.' The soft down of her thigh passed under his fingers. 'And maybe I'll write about it. If it's good,' he added. 'But it's awfully noisy here, why don't we go outside and talk some more?'

'Well,' began Josie as she popped another bubble of gum and plucked the pinkish fallout from around her lips. 'I've just been sitting here thinking.'

'Yes?' the writer asked as he dug inside his trouser pocket with his other hand.

'Well, you know what I would do if I were her?'

'Who?'

'Her,' said Josie Williams, pointing at Maggie, who stood at the rear of the chambers, wringing her hands. The writer's hand

stiffened beneath her skirt. 'I mean if it were my brother they had done that to.'

'Yes?'

'Well, just imagine, say, if all that time we thought we were going to his funeral.'

'Whose?'

'Eddie Moon's.'

Behind them Maggie opened the small rear door of the chamber and stood in the gap, looking over the people amassed within.

'Keep going,' the writer said impatiently, a strange concentration falling into his voice.

'Well, if all that time we thought we were going to his funeral, we were really going to our own.'

'Our own what?'

'Our own funeral,' said Josie Williams, slapping the man's hand free of her leg. 'And that she meant to do us all in. Right here,' she said, jumping out of her seat in excitement.

Behind them Maggie marvelled anew at the fine oaken fortress they had made the old council house into. How grand and heavy the doors were. How the people of the town seemed to fit so neatly into the space—like it was built just for the purpose. Each of them—Tom Small, Jim Sheppard, Judge Mathews, Sharon Best, the Doubledays—sitting dreamily upon the courthouse pews in perfect rows, like kindling awaiting a fire.

'Now wouldn't that be a story?' said Josie Williams to the writer, who had stopped chewing. A single murderous line of cigarette smoke rose up from the throng. 'Wouldn't that be a scream?'

