

A Free Rinse

by Matt Potter

“What are you doing?” Daniel said. It was New Year's Day. And eyes unfocussed, mouth tinder dry and unable to string three words together, I was filling a bucket with water.

The answer lay outside in the next-door neighbour's front yard, too many decibels too loud for 9.00am, creating newly-mown strips in the lawn.

“That fucker's gonna wake the kids,” I said, completely sober.

Daniel knew not to stand in my way. He didn't say *Think about what you're doing*, or *What about neighbourhood relations?* or even *Do you want any help?* He just held the back gate open as in my brief, new pink-and-white bathers (swimsuit or trunks or togs or swimmers to others), bucket of water slapping at my side, I charged down the driveway.

The fucker had woken me up, and I did not want him waking up Daniel's grandchildren (two and three years old) either.

And I knew the garden hose wouldn't reach.

I sped along the footpath in the sun, head fuzzy but anger mounting as, his eyes downward, the next door neighbour — grey and tall and in his own world — marched up and down the lawn, pushing that fucking lawnmower.

I stepped towards the waist-high fence. Where to throw it? At him, in his blue polo shirt with the iced coffee logo above the left breast and fawn cotton trousers? Or at the black metal-and-plastic lawnmower?

Which would have greater impact?

And which would have greater legal repercussions?

I grabbed the bucket lip with my spare hand, my head still woolly and my mouth sleepy-dry — he still had not seen me — and lifting it up, hurled the water at him.

This was the culmination of twelve years of neighbourly aggro. Of thoughtless lawn-mowing on early weekend mornings. Of snapping

over-hanging apricot tree branches at the fence line (when he could have kept the apricots); of needless whines about water seepage and letters left in our letterbox about winter gutters and getting his cement wet (and threatening to tell ...someone); of watching him during a lightning storm (yes!) brushing other neighbour's leaves from his roof (not the gutters, the roof!); of his obsessive house-pride because he had little to do beyond piss everyone else off with his petty demands and stupid behaviour. We were his only neighbours who had not raised our fence.

And now, he was stamping his mean spirit on the new year before anyone else had the chance to draw breath, lassoing the new decade with his spite and telling the world it was his to do with as he pleased.

So, the gesture was small, but my meaning was epic.

The empty bucket swung at my side as he gasped and stepped back. Water drenched his chest and trousers and soaked the lawnmower, though still it roared.

"Turn the fucking thing off!" I yelled above the noise. "It's fucking New Year's morning!"

He replied — with what I don't know and cared about even less — and so, bald-headed and hairy-chested, I spat the words out again. "It's too early in the morning! Turn the fucking thing OFF or I'll do it again!"

His wife — smoke-wrinkled and flossy-haired, her mouth skewed in anger — stepped onto their front porch.

"Turn the fucking thing off!" I yelled at her too.

The lawnmower still drowned out all noise, but I kept on.

"You're a pensioner. You can mow your lawn any time!"

And I waved the bucket at them and set my jaw and glowered.

But I had made my point, and shaking in my thongs (flip-flops or jandals to others), I turned and walked back up the driveway, lawnmower still choking the atmosphere.

Closing the front door behind me, Daniel half-smiled. "They'll probably call the cops."

“What for?” I said. “Assault with a wet weapon? Drowning personal property?”
And they did.

