

Away to Me

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People called him Half-Arthur even after he'd met Noeleen, but few knew why. Half-Arthur was short and his legs bowed at the knees like a hose clamp. He could fix any engine, use a winch and a forklift, start a fire on a wet night and whistle any five-note song in the world. Before Noeleen, he was as skinny as a candle wick. The time between good meals often stretched from weeks into months, although there was always money for beer.

His genuine talent, his God-given gift, was his effortless communion with animals. He could teach a roo to jump backwards, or call a magpie to perch on his hat and sing harmony with a tune. He could fall asleep on the dirt with a hole dug out for his hip, and when he woke there would be a snake curled up in the small of his back, tickling his spine with its tongue as it snored in its sleep. Given a month, he could train a pack of dingoes to muster sheep, and his sharp whistle and his 'Come-bye! Get back! Away to me!' calls would ring out as he leant on the gate, waiting for the last giddy wether to walk through.

But even the best of men fall on hard times. He'd been on the road for months searching for work and grub but there was none of one and not much of the other. He got so hungry his stomach had stuck to his liver and his belt went twice round his waist. He asked for work at every farm gate but no one was hiring. Some sent him off with words of advice and others with ratshot pellets in his rump as he sprinted on his short curved legs away down the road.

He tightened his belt in the morning and tightened his belt at night, until one morning he pulled it too tight and... *POP!* The top of his body popped right off, docked through the middle like a rubber ring round a lamb's tail. He told the punters at the pub that his arms had to grab at his pants just to stop his legs running off. It was a handy affliction to have, because during a long night at the bar he could sit drinking while his legs wandered off for a piss. That's why they called him Half-Arthur. True story.

Half-Arthur finally found work as a rodeo clown but when the first bull burst out of the gate in furious panic, it bucked and skipped to where Half-Arthur stood in a borrowed yellow satin blouse and gaudy face paint, then nuzzled his pockets gently for treats. Meanwhile the rodeo rider sat tied at the wrist astride the pacified beast, confused and humiliated. The boss shuffled them all out of the ring after ten minutes.

As an alternative he was sent to work in the stables where the horses gave him whiskery kisses as he brushed them down. One day Noeleen walked in with a bucket of bruised apples

from the camp kitchen, and there was Half-Arthur in his satin yellow blouse, with a bold mare huffing horse-breath in his ear. He stood up and saw her, the heat haze rising behind her in a golden shimmer. He fell in love. The grin on his face nearly knocked her over.

She was taller than him, with strong thighs and a bolster-cushion bosom. She cooked with a frown of concentration on her face no matter what she was making.

Noeleen led him back to the mess and fed him lamb stew and crispy potatoes and roasted carrots and steamed lemon curd pudding. His belly and his heart were full to bursting.

They had known each other for three days straight when he borrowed a blunt pocketknife, picked out all the shotgun pellets that were peppered up the backs of his legs, melted it down for a ring and proposed.

That was the first time he saw Noeleen's smile.

The wedding was simple and the feast was epic. Long after their dancing blisters had healed, guests found themselves dreaming of the delicious steak that had been served with garlic butter and the magnificently boozy boiled fruit cake that was eaten up in one night.

Baby Monique arrived the following Easter when they were living on a station in sheep country. She was born in the kitchen of the homestead with the help of the station manager's gritty blonde wife who was twice as tough as a shearer.

Soon after, Half-Arthur was driving his family through the foggy dark to the Dawn Service in town when a tyre blew and the car careened off the gravel into the bush. The baby, just weeks old, was thrown out of the vehicle in the crash. Half-Arthur searched desperately in the dark for the baby before he found her caught safely in the high-tensile web of the most gigantic golden orb-weaver he had ever seen, still wrapped snug in her bunny-print rug.

As he plucked her like a strange fruit from the enormous web, he stroked the orb-weaver's plump velvety abdomen.

'Thanks, friend,' he murmured. The orb-weaver shivered neatly in reply.

Monique's childhood was full of fresh-baked scones and bottle-fed lambs, but her fondest memory was when she was picked to be Mary in the school's nativity play. In all the hectic madness of crooked halos and shepherds struck with stage fright, the baby Jesus doll went missing. Monique had gone straight to her father with the predicament, and he had walked out into the carpark and come back with a chicken under his arm. Amid the backstage bustle, he lay the chicken on its back and hypnotised it.

'The show must go on!' he told her as she stuffed it up under her frock.

At the appropriate moment in the nativity, the fowl was born of Mary, to the surprise and hushed titters of the crowd. Monique felt beautiful, with the stage lights on her and the

shepherds gathered round, as she carefully placed the holy Orpington in the manger and stroked its soft belly feathers while the choir sang.

When Monique left school early to go to secretarial college in the city, Noeleen worried that her daughter might be lost in the hustle and bustle of the big smoke. Half-Arthur told her not to fret. ‘She’s a smart girl, that one,’ he said, as he sat on the verandah playing checkers with the cat. He was right, of course. A rich man fell head over heels for Monique’s steady country nerves and she married him on a tropical island. Noeleen was relieved that Monique was happily settled and looked forward to the arrival of grandchildren.

Despite her frown and her swollen ankles, Noeleen was happiest in the kitchen and found work baking shortbread and pastries for the local shops.

Half-Arthur was always busy mending a fence or shifting sheep from one paddock to another. Noeleen loved to hear his whistle and calls when the dogs were working near the house.

One afternoon, Noeleen was practising filo pastry when the CB on the fridge crackled with Half-Arthur’s distorted voice.

‘Noels, are you on channel? I’m on South Hill. Come out the back and give us a wave.’

She tutted and frowned but her heart did that little jump that comes easily for young lovers and more rarely with age. She wiped the flour off her hands onto a tea towel as she walked through the garden to the back fence. The valley fell away steeply to the creek and the long grassy slope rose just as sharply on the other side.

There was Half-Arthur, a small figure on the faraway hill. Around him was a mob of sheep arranged in the paddock to make the shape of a huge love heart. The tiny figures of the kelpies ran madly about but the sheep stood content in their places. Noeleen laughed out loud.

‘You dag!’ she called to him, though there was no way he could hear her. He waved his hat and bowed to her. She laughed until her sides hurt.

Once a year, Noeleen would catch the bus to spend a week with her daughter in the city. Half-Arthur always seemed to shrink while she was away even though she left him labelled frozen meals. He often found himself standing alone in the kitchen, unable to remember why he was there. When she was due back he would buy some florist roses and wait at the bus stop. She would look out the bus window as it pulled up and when she saw him waiting there her heart would do a little happy skip.

They brought forward their retirement, packed up their house and purchased a motorhome with all the fruit. They christened it *Easy Muster* and set off.

They soon discovered the scheduled chaos of caravan parks was overwhelming. Instead, they would sneak down narrow gravel lanes to lonely bush camp clearings hacked out of prickly scrub in the fervent quiet of outback country. Or they would grind slowly through days of boggy dunes to a perfect lagoon, where tiny yellow crabs tiptoed across crispy sand, and seagull committees noisily discussed the day's agenda.

On the road from one such camp to another, they stopped for a night in a busy roadside rest area on the red banks of a wide river. Other times they had stopped here the river had been dry – this time there were small rivulets winding their way between large pools. Noeleen admired the white trunks of the red river gums from her kitchenette window as Half-Arthur chopped a neat pile of firewood from their stash. They ate herbed zucchini fritters and tomato soup under the annex as a gentle rain fell. Up on the bridge, the road trains sent up rainbow sprays.

Noeleen and Half-Arthur fell asleep listening to the rain on the roof and the trucks rumbling on the highway.

Far off inland, the sky splintered open as bullet-grey clouds unleashed torrents of water in solid blocks of rain. Lightning cracked across the wide horizon. Trickling drips crept round spinifex, following pliant lines that puddled and pooled and spilled into each other, running over the red earth into creek beds. Water ran down from the hills and sluiced through deep rocky gullies, gushing down to streams, all leading to the ancient riverbed that snaked away from the ranges.

The first fat thumbs of the flood poked down the river, hoarding leaves and twigs, rolling through sandy channels. Fed by rain still falling in the hills, the flood built into an irrepressibly ruthless force. The dirty torrent grew ever more powerful, sucking cattle carcases out of cracked mud, pulling thick roots from craggy dirt cliffs, filling the riverbank and frothing up the sides as it washed through narrow valleys.

Just after dawn, Half-Arthur started packing up. The river was running now, slowly, but he guessed there had been an inch of rain overnight.

‘Pick which side you want to be on,’ he told Noeleen. ‘Once this rain comes through, the road could be out for a week.’

Noeleen puffed up the hill to the bridge and took a photo of the *Easy Muster* while Half-Arthur zipped the camp chairs into their cloth bags.

Standing on the high bitumen, Noeleen heard a low rumble. Curious, she crossed the road to see upstream. She watched with growing horror as the flood appeared from around the

bend and surged towards them in a low wave of frothy brown water, ever growing, relentless and invincible.

‘Arthur!’ gasped Noeleen, but in the time it took to turn and reach the top of the track, the leading edge of the flood had reached the bridge. The river was a wild wash of foam, with logs and debris swirling out of the water like pick-up sticks in a willy willy.

Noeleen watched as Half-Arthur looked up and saw the disaster approaching. She saw him look up for her and smile knowing she was safe on the hill. Then he turned and darted to the driver’s door of the *Easy Muster*. Even as he started the engine, the river overran the banks and engulfed the rest area. Even as the wheels started to turn, the churning water boiled up under the chassis and shifted it sideways in the roiling foam. Even as he shrewdly slipped it into four-wheel drive and the tyres suddenly dug in, a ferocious eddy turned roughly around itself and viciously wrenched the stand of river gums from the red earth. The chaotic tumble of timber fell sideways into the water and swept the *Easy Muster* along with it, twisting and bobbing away downriver in the cruel flood.

People thought that without Half-Arthur, Noeleen might fade away. They were two stars in a constellation, spinning across the night sky. They were the buckle and the belt, worn into each other’s creases from years of fitting together.

But Noeleen did not retreat from life. She moved to a small town on the windswept coast. She joined the lady golfers on Tuesday mornings, played bridge on Thursdays, and got up before dawn on Saturdays to bake cream pastries for the bowling club. She crocheted otters and possums that she gave to anyone who admired them.

In the evenings, she took a bait esky and her long rod down to the beach. She would stand with her feet sinking into the warm sand, catching tailor and seaweed and crabs with equanimity while melancholic waves of memory muddled gently through her mind.

Late one night, long after all the other fishers had packed up their lights and empty buckets, when she was still casting out into the low swell and the full moon was looking down over the smooth ocean like an open eye, she saw a vessel coming over the water. It was running slow and steady like a river barge. Noeleen’s heart did a joyous little jump.

Surfing the low swell was the *Easy Muster*, riding buoyant on a thick cushion of bulbous jellyfish being held in neat formation by a pack of well-trained sea turtles that whirled and heeled at the captain’s call and whistle.

And the captain, riding triumphant on the roof like a bushranger on a coach, was a short man, as skinny as a stingray’s tail, with bowed legs like a hose clamp.

‘Come-bye,’ called Half-Arthur, and the turtles turned the jelly flock towards the shallows. He jumped down onto the broad shell of a turtle and rode smoothly into the shore.

Half-Arthur walked up the wet sand and took Noeleen’s beach rod in his hand. He stood on his tiptoes and kissed her gently on her lips.

‘You left me,’ she whispered, looking down at his craggy face.

‘I came back for you,’ said Half-Arthur. ‘You’re the glue that holds me together, Noels.’

He led her towards the silvery water and they walked to the boat on the shells of turtles, who heeded his gentle command and lined up like patterned stepping-stones in the moonlight.

Half-Arthur helped her up and they sat together on camp chairs lashed on the roof.

‘Away to me!’ called Half-Arthur with a whistle, and the turtles wheeled the jellyfish smack about, and the *Easy Muster* majestically turned and headed out to sea.