

IN THE RUBBISH TIN

Phillipa's Dad was away. Mum had gone to town and forgotten to lock Phillipa in the house. Phillipa opened the front door and sat on the front step as she talked to Chubby.

'Don't you forget, Chubby, we got to be good 'cause today's my birthday,' said Phillipa, 'and don't you say it's not.'

'Oh, it is so, Chubby. I'm....' She held up her hand and counted her fingers. 'I'm that old. I'm one two three fifty-two. It's my birthday. Mum's getting me a bike.'

'She is so, Chubby. Don't argue. You're just a stupid rag doll.' She leaned over and punched Chubby in the eye. 'There, Chubby. That's what you get. Just like what Dad does.'

Then she gathered yellow flower petals and pulled up bits of chewed chewing-gum off the pavement which she wrapped in old lolly paper. She added some tar, some grass and then, walking up and down the pavement, she searched for and found three shiny stones. All these things she arranged in piles on a plastic plate.

Feeding Chubby was a new thing. Mum did not always feed Phillipa every day and it was not until Phillipa had been in the Home and seen big people feed little people three times a day that she learned to feed Chubby every day.

'One for me. One for you. Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.' She loved this song but did not like the Home where she learnt it.

By buying less food, Ruth managed to get into town at least three times a week. Once off the bus she walked up the street. She did not stop to look in shop windows. She knew where she was going. She was in a hurry. 'Bastard,' she cursed as she waited at the intersection till the lights signalled her to

cross.

Once in the pub, after the third beer, she put fifty cents in the juke-box and selected three songs. When the music started she walked up to the bar and ordered a Southern Comfort. It was early and she was the only person on this side of the bar. She drank quickly and ordered another. Later, not long after Lionel walked in, she went over to him.

'Okay,' he said, 'but remember next time they're five dollars each.' She held out her hand beneath the table and he placed three pills in it.

The pills she swallowed, and the Southern Comforts, eased her into a calm and peaceful world. The music sounded better. Shona and Cheryl walked in the door. She called out to them.

As the day darkened into night people strolled unto the bar alone, or in twos and threes. The girls stood together around a table. Ruth bought two more pills and swallowed one. She put the other in her pocket.

The three of them laughed and smiled as they held each other and danced to the juke-box music. Ruth danced slower than the others and she was out of beat. Outside it began to rain.

The rain was not in a hurry. It came in low over the city. It was not here to stay. Raindrops fell here and there and then the rain got thick and it rained everywhere. A drop splashed off the side of a building and then another and another until street by street the city was soaked in rain.

'Rain,' called Phillipa as she cupped her hand and held it up to the sky. She watched a raindrop fall and splash in her palm.

'Twinkle twinkle baby rain, how I wonder what you are.'

'C'mon Chubby,' she called. 'Let's play in the rain.'
She held Chubby in her arms. She looked up at the sky. She

darted and weaved and tried to dodge each raindrop as it fell.
'Tra la la la,' she sang.

'Who gives a fuck about rain,' laughed Ruth.
Mingled with laughter and slurred talk of the pub crowd, the music from the juke-box floated up and drifted with curls of cigarette smoke that rose up into a blue cloud just above the heads of the drinkers in the bar.

Work had finished. The construction-site workers had been in the pub for an hour. They liked to drink as much as they could and always tried to do as little work as possible. Half the pub was full of these: chippies, steelies and labourers. They'd pulled up five tables around which thirty of them stood drinking. The girls had joined them.

'Rained off,' said Mac. 'About time to ... hey Henry who's that one?'

'Oh, that's Ruth. Stay away from her mate, her husband Rolf is bad news.'

Mac was sure Ruth winked at him. He watched her walk out of the bar and go into the ladies'.

'Who's that bloke sitting opposite me, Cheryl?' asked Ruth.

'Oh, he's new on the job,' came the reply. 'Anyway, you're married. You know what Rolf...'

'Rolf's gone, and bugger him. There's no harm in talking Shit, listen to the rain. It's pissing down.'

'C'mon Ruth, let's not spend all day in the loo. Let's get back to the bar.'

The wind slammed the door shut so hard it locked and Phillipa could not get back into the flat. She pressed herself up against the door and tried to take cover beneath the eaves but

the wind swept the rain into her face.

'Mr Chubby, what are we going to do? Yes that's a good idea, Chubby. We'll get in our hidey-place. It never rains in there.'

Once inside the empty rubbish tin she pulled the lid down and sat in the darkness. Inside the tin was dry. She listened to the thrum of raindrops on the lid.

'Ha ha, Chubby. Nobody knows we're here. All the world's a castle. I'm a fairy princess and you're a magic bear.'

A lady in the Home read her a story about a magic princess and magic bear and now she and Chubby chased the magic ball of gold which, when caught, turned into a flying horse upon which they flew away to a city made of diamonds.

'Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are. What are you little star? Little star?' She sang. 'Little star. Up above the world so high. What are you?'

The rubbish tin, though emptied the day before, stank of rotten spaghetti and cat shit but Phillipa and Chubby landed atop the tower of the castle of roses whose bricks were made of cinnamon bread.

She did not know what cinnamon bread was, but she was sure it was nice. All shiny like the new painted Home which she did not like because Mum and Dad had not been there.

'It's the brat's birthday,' said Ruth. A few moments later she added, 'I never got her a present. We can't afford them.' She swallowed the last pill.

'You're selfish,' said Shona. 'I shouted double rums and you get us singles.'

First one eyelid, then the other, slipped down Ruth's eyes. It was a struggle to push them up. The booze and pills slowed the working of her brain. It took a long time for

Shona's words to filter through the particles of pill dust swirling about in the ocean of liquor that circled and washed over the island of Ruth's brain. Then the words had to sink down to the seabed before reaching a part of her mind that still worked properly.

As the words sank, the pills and the booze ate away at them so that by the time she received them, though she heard the words clearly, their meaning had almost completely dissolved in her. When the pills and booze had eaten the words, they returned to nibble away at her brain. She only just understood what was said. Yet she was not sure what Shona referred to.

A minute passed before she raised her head and placed her hand on Shona's shoulder. She tried to speak but no words came out of her. 'Your shout,' said Shona.

There was always an aching power burning in Rolf's fists. There were moments when he was gentle, but viciousness in him was so powerful that it exploded out of him and he could not control it.

In the back of the taxi he sat and from smouldering sullen eyes looked out on the world in the way he almost always did. He kept his head down and looked up. The taxi driver waited for the lights to turn green and then he eased his foot on to the accelerator and drove across the intersection.

In the pub Ruth was slumped over the table with her face in a puddle of spilt beer. She raised her head and moved her mouth and then her head dropped back down on to the table.

In the cold, stinking rubbish tin Phillipa awoke. The flying

horse was gone. 'It stinks in here, Chubby,' she said. 'I want to go home but the doors are locked and it's still raining.'

'It's my birthday. Mum's got me a bike. Dad will come home 'cause it's my birthday and when they're both home we'll have fish and chips like we always do.'

'My Dad is good. He is so, Chubby. Don't argue.' She leaned across and punched Chubby. 'You know what Chubby, when we grow up you and me will be like Mum and Dad.'

It was near closing time. Cheryl and Shona leaned on the table to stop themselves from falling over. Ruth was half slumped on the table and half curled around Mac who was the first in the bar to meet Rolf that night. For one moment Mac was seated and the next he lay on the floor and blood spurted from his head.

Then Rolf grabbed the hair at the back of Ruth's neck. He wrenched it and held it in more than a vice-like grip. He dragged her out of the bar and around to the back of the pub.

'No,' said Cheryl as she reached across and grabbed Shona. 'Leave them. As it is he'll just kick her around a bit, but if you interfere he'll kill her.'

Phillipa was stuck in the rubbish tin. The rain was still falling. She pushed up on the lid. It would not move. 'Help,' she called. But no one could hear her. Because of the rain.