

## Last Orders Lyn Jacobs

This was her first time away from home. She had been desperate to get away, and it seemed a fantastic opportunity at the time, but now she regretted coming this far north as the station was like a remote island. If she'd got her driver's licence first she could have escaped for week-ends like the other staff but as it was she was stuck. It was months before her work contract allowed for travel-time to see friends in the city.

Initially, she'd found ways to fill in off-duty time: walking the shorter tracks, occasionally taking the scary but spectacular ridge-top ride among some of the world's oldest rocks, or tagging on to observatory tours. The male staff was generally older and more practised at being busy. Despite the heat they seemed to enjoy themselves, like boys at school given an up-hill task. Immersed in the workings of the place, they spent hours under trucks fixing things, plumbing long runs of water pipes, improving the wild-life sanctuary and maintaining the now stock-less property. She felt out of it, disengaged and bored when they talked water-management, stock, fauna or plant-identification, and she got lost when they discussed the station's observatory that mapped distant stars. The two other young women on alternating hospitality shifts were in their twenties and avid readers. They disappeared as soon as the mail-bag arrived with new books, spent long hours on phones or computers (she was still saving for hers) and only surfaced for work. She sometimes passed them in the laundry or bathroom, but between the setting and clearing of tables, cleaning and catering to the needs of the stream of one- or two-night stayers at the Lodge, many of whom were international visitors, interaction was minimal. The overseas guests were often retirees and the occasional young ones were invariably fixated on each other.

She wished she'd come later, when she'd done a few things with her life, or maybe had some language skills to permit engagement with guests. Everyone else seemed to have travelled extensively or, if passing through, had some definite purpose in mind – like studying geology, remote property management, or astronomy with the ageing guru who ran the place. The one person who, like her, seemed here by accident was leaving tomorrow, having straightened out whatever sent him outback in the first place. He didn't give much away but he was a fellow-waiter whose occasional comments had given her something to say in letters home. Tonight was his last duty roster. On this quiet night in a bad season the place looked to her as dusty and tired as she felt.

She'd shown into the dining room one feral family: young, ill-matched and at odds over two aggro children whom she overheard the mother sharply describe as 'dysfunctional' (whatever that was) 'because we don't smack', something the father pointedly ignored; several older couples; one tattooed bikie staying in the caravan park; a Malaysian family; and three middle-aged women who might have once shared jobs, like school-teaching or nursing. It was not yet seven, she had a head-ache, and while ostensibly polishing cutlery she had already used her ever-tightening black apron to wipe away tears.

The view outside offered little relief. The place ached for rain but tonight she didn't care a damn if grass ever grew again, and she could not crank up a skerrick of interest in what the patrons ate, drank, or demanded as their due. Her mind was off-duty, somehow remote, and the only thing that kept her from opening the door and just walking was that this station was at least 100ks from anything. She had nowhere to go, no transport and she could not ask Paul (the

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deserter) for a lift. Behind the bar she felt him watching her avoid the customers' eyes.

The patrons, who'd travelled multiple kilometres that day, were glad of the stop and prospect of a meal. They ordered drinks, checked out the place, sized each other up and hoped that the food this far out was okay. By seven-thirty the vegetarians were fed, one couple watered and other first orders lodged in the kitchen. Stragglers wandered in but both front and back of house were fragile tonight. The cook, sullen, harassed and slightly drunk, was audibly naming the ingredients he did not have for items on the menu, and waiting staff managed trips between table and kitchen, finding innovative ways of telling people that spinach and pine nuts were 'off' while not saying that the cook was losing it and stuffing the chicken with anything that was to hand. The anticipatory atmosphere in the restaurant dimmed to a resigned simmer as Paul kept the drinks coming.

Stirring herself, the girl headed for a couple who reminded her of her grandparents. He was tall and thin and she was small and grey-haired, and they looked like they might have been fit once, before they got old. Scrabbling with her order book, she trotted out the routine enquiry about their day and, as usual, failed to register their response. But astonishingly, they then asked what sort of day she'd had, and as she tried for a reply a thin lament, a short-hand summary of the trickling discontents of the day, the week, and last months, spilled out. Unbidden, in a graceless lurch, the unsatisfactory story of her short life with its pent-up hopes and fears expanded like leaked gas – a sackful of woe arrived right there on the table. She knew she had crossed a line but could not help the alarmed guests as they attempted to steer pathways back to soup, steak or chicken breast (however the cook could manage it). Her speech rate increased, the tone, volume and pitch of her quavering voice rose in a wail, articulating the costs of long-distance phone calls, too many departures and the terrible shortcomings of the world as she knew it. The damned wall, that had been her safe enclosure, ruptured. For an instant she halted, teetering on a very far ledge.

The couple were on their feet as Paul stepped in to hold and herd her away, like a cattle dog cutting out problem sheep. But the deluge saw her rising on the words, no longer lethargic but agile, buoyant, leaning forward with bent knees to sustain her balance as she surfed through the restaurant and out beyond the door, and was borne, with gathering swiftness, towards the station creek-bed, down its mainstream and beyond, heading south for the sea, free in the knowledge that, whatever, tomorrow was going to be different.

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*Dr Lyn Jacobs retired as Associate Professor in English and Australian Studies at Flinders University after teaching for twenty years. She now combines research into Australian poetry and prose, and Australian literary responses to Asia, with grandparent duties.*