

2nd Place (2021): Anna Mahoney, String of Pearls

Everything that happened after that day — when Chris stumbled through their back door, instead of crashing it open — would be forever branded on Angela's brain. When she went to kiss him he raised his arm to ward her off. She flinched, thinking it must have been the world's worst round of golf.

Then he lurched, grabbed a chair back and croaked, "Too much sun. Feel a bit crook."

She wished he wouldn't play the fool with her. It used to wind her up but now she just said, "Wash your hands so we can eat."

"Not hungry." She saw the sweat dripping off him and felt mean. *Lord, he must be really sick.*

Angela ate alone, watching a rerun of *On the Beach*.

He wandered in, folded onto the couch like a collapsed parachute and laughed mirthlessly. "Don't know what you see in that morbid old muck."

At least he was talking. "You're just green over Gregory Peck. Feeling better?"

"Dunno. Maybe get the base doctor to check me out, eh?"

Next evening Chris seemed brighter. Then he had to go and spoil it. "The quack sucked out pints of blood. Wants to see us both."

"How's your 'flu any of my business?"

"Maybe he wants to tell you off for not looking after me properly."

He danced away from her wet tea towel's sting. Their tussle gave birth to a lingering kiss. She tasted the salt on his lips, inhaled his Old Spice sweat, led him to their bed. Next morning she waved him onto the base bus with a chirpy "See you later alligator", then skipped down the hill to work.

Midday ripped her tissue of bliss to bits. The surgery's silence was solid enough to slice, the doctor's cautious optimism no match for Angela's clammy terror. She never could remember whose hair she permed that afternoon, or what they gossiped about. She supposed the doctor had meant well, telling them all that awful stuff, but she'd freaked out.

Later, she would reflect on how she hadn't known the half of it. The drugs made Chris a puking wreck, needing her so much she simply did whatever it took to get them both through the endless weeks of blood clinic torture and bodily invasion.

Then came the gift of remission. Chris went back on light duties while Angela dived into the comfort of comb-ups and blue rinses. Spring bulbs spilled from window boxes. When she got pregnant it seemed like a sign.

Three months later fatigue pounced, like a spider on an insect, sending Chris back for another round of chemo. This time there were mates on the ward, he said. "Bob's got leukaemia too. Both of us from one ship. What are the odds?"

Bob died. Chris came home from the funeral, eyes on stalks. "There was a guy from another ship there. Swore it's the bombs making us sick."

She'd seen something about it on the box a while back. How men from the 1950s Pacific Island tests were starting to make a fuss. Angela's spine tingled. She thought of her mother-in-law's well-thumbed photos and how queasy it had made her feel to see Chris, exposed on the deck in his shirt sleeves, under the mushrooming cloud.

The drugs stopped working. Chris's doctors prescribed radiotherapy. She baulked. "Radiation is what made you sick in the first place. How can it help to give you even more?"

"Come on, love, what have I got to lose? My hair's gone, I'm a skeleton and it's been a long time since I took a decent dump."

The bone marrow transplant that came next was the worst, he said. "Everything hurts. I'd almost rather be dead."

"Don't ever say that." She mined the innards of their chicken dinner to find the forked bone, crooked her finger around one fragile end and begged, "Come on, love, make a wish."

He hung on for six more years. Donna was eight by then, wee Dougie just two. The surviving vets were big news. Angela couldn't care less. Dry-eyed, she buried him, cleared out the home they were no longer entitled to, turned away from it all.

Then her mother-in-law called. "Have you got those photos of Chris? On the ship, under the cloud?"

Angela's jaw clenched. *Why would I? You never let them out of your sight.*

June hardly paused for breath. "I know exactly where I put them, but now they're gone. Something stinks." They used to mock June's paranoia, but what if she was right?

Angela worried away at it for weeks. She recalled the day she'd come home to raided drawers, scattered papers, their lives turned upside down but nothing missing. Attempted robbery, the official letter had said. They'd accepted it then. Now, she wondered, and if there was something sinister at work she owed it to Chris and the kids to root it out.

Her first contact, a Christmas Island survivor, was useless. "No Kiwis there after we left. Try his naval records." All she got there was bureaucratic nonsense about them being sealed.

At the National Library, the woman at the desk barely looked up. "Pacific tests? Operation Grapple?"

"Later than that. US tests in the early 60s."

The librarian gestured vaguely. "Microfiche," she mumbled and went back to her filing.

Angela found nothing there. She went further, dug deeper, hit more dead ends. It was as if Chris's ship, and everyone on it, had sailed into some southern version of the Bermuda Triangle. She wept into her pillow one more night before calling time on the search for answers to questions that only seemed to multiply, like the killer cells that had destroyed their lives.

She told the kids, "Sorry, there's not going to be any bomb bonanza. I can't do it anymore."

Her son was inclined to persist. Donna got it, though. "Mum, look at you—skinnier even than Dad. Time you got a life."

Angela moved to Wellington, set up her own salon, made new friends. All she wished for now was contentment. Then a phone call smashed one sunny afternoon's serenity to bits.

The voice was American, from one of the southern states. "Ma'am, this is Lieutenant Chuck Warrington, Naval Attaché to the United States Embassy in Wellington. Your late husband was New Zealand Navy? In the 1960s?"

It's a prank call. I should probably hang up.

As if he could read her mind, his tone softened. "Sorry to call without warning, but it's important that we meet."

Blurry with fear, she couldn't say no.

Next day, she drove anxiously through the security gates to park under the grey, bunker-like building. In her time of need they'd turned her away. Why the five-star treatment now?

He was waiting at reception. "Good morning, ma'am. Please come this way."

She tagged his spit-and-polish heels down a gleaming corridor, into an office of glowing wood and star-spangled flags. He offered coffee. She declined. It would choke her.

"Nixon was vice-president at the time," said the lieutenant. "Seems he covered up records of your boys' involvement." He wiped a weary hand across his brow. "After the test

ban treaty in sixty-three, no one wanted to know anymore. Then the Cold War ended. I guess you Kiwis were fallout, excuse the pun."

Unshed tears pricked. The lieutenant offered tissues. "I can only imagine how shattered you must feel," he said, reaching out a consoling hand. "Hang in, almost there."

He made the rest of it so easy Angela barely registered the flurry of formal meetings and paperwork that followed. As she turned over the last page and laid down her pen the lieutenant let loose a rebel yell. "Front page news, coming up."

Even prepared as she was, the headline smacked her with the force of a Scud missile. US NUKED KIWI VETS. Angela's forgotten latte congealed as she considered the cost. *Oh, Chris, we've won. If only you were here to enjoy it.*

Her phone rang. It was Donna, squeaky with glee. "Have you seen it?"

"Just trying to take it in."

"Woohoo. Those warmongering bastards finally getting their deserts."

"They're not all bad. Chuck's been a rock."

"Ooooh. Angela and Chuck, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

Grinning like a fool, Angela rang off, ordered a fresh coffee, allowed suppressed emotions to roll through. The pain still gnawed, the endless cycle of hope and disappointment rankled, but now she sensed delicate shoots of joy unfurling.

Months later, while tidying a cupboard, Angela found the gift box, its card still attached, the message scrawled in a familiar hand, "I wish you all the love you deserve". *Thank you*, she breathed, lifting the string of Pacific pearls from their satin bed, turning them in the light, and blushing like a girl as she imagined how it would be tonight. How each perfect orb would glow against her new black dress. What she'd see in the lieutenant's eyes as he reached to unclasp them from her eager throat.

About Anna



Anna Mahoney is a former journalist and communicator who wrote her first short story, featuring an adventurous silver coin, when she was nine. It won an Auckland Savings Bank Thrift Prize.

Anna loves people-watching. This obsession prompted her to join a Kāpiti-based writing group in 2016 and start turning her observations into characters on a page. Apart from a memoir in third draft she has an eclectic portfolio of short stories and several novels in various states of disarray. She especially enjoys using dialogue to add character in her writing.

In 2020 she moved from Ōtaki to Upper Hutt, to finalise subdivision of a piece of land and build a new house. Writing preserved her sanity as Covid and other acts of God extended the timeline beyond tolerance. Two tiny dogs needing lots of cuddles provided another welcome respite.

Now settled in, she divides her time between writing, developing a garden from scratch and walking the valley's river and hills.