

3rd place (2023): Jeff Taylor, King of the Road

There's a knocking at the door. The sound echoes down to my bedroom, and penetrates my brain, which still has last night's bourbon sloshing around in it. The sound's not loud, but it's rapid and urgent, and continues for a few moments. Then it stops and I return gratefully to my dreams of a better life. But it starts again, and this time the hammering's enough to disturb the neurones of any dead man walking.

'Yeah, coming!' I manage as I stumble along the worn lino of a thousand wears and tears. The Chungs from next door wanting my wheelbarrow again? Or the Singhs from the other side needing something? Somebody actually returning something they've borrowed?

I glimpse myself in the hall mirror. Sixty years. Sun-nuked scalp shining through sparse hair, days of chin stubble, beer-barrel gut, eyes too embarrassed to look at themselves. I see I'm still in last night's clobber from watching the game down at the pub. Warriors jersey and track pants. They won and surely I'm allowed to celebrate? I make a mental note to see about upgrading the jersey which is several years old.

As I open the door I have to dodge a bottle that is being swung vigorously at it.

'Maya! What's wrong?' It's the little Somali girl from three down. Seven years old, angel face framed in a hijab, her huge, anxious brown eyes fixed on me. She's been using an empty Jimmie Beam from my recycle bin to get my attention. I peer at the time. It's nine o'clock, and by now her mother should have dropped her at school.

'Mama not come back, Mista King.' Her voice is so little it seems a distant echo.

There are tears in her eyes, and I gently usher her inside. 'Come in, love.'

Resolution Road has been turned into a cul-de-sac with the new motorway, but should have been renamed United Nations Close. It's mostly social welfare housing, like mine.

'She went to shop. We run out of Weet-Bix.'

'How long ago was this, Maya?' I take the bottle from her and examine it hopefully for signs of maybe a mouthful or two of liquid sunshine left in the bottom. No such luck.

'Is now one hour.'

'She got her mobile?'

'Mama left it with me.' Pulling a phone from the pocket of the long black gown-thingy they wear, she hands it to me. 'I phone you. You not answer.'

This is our standard arrangement, but my phone's on the kitchen bench, a long stagger from my bedroom, and there's no way I would have heard it in my state.

'Sit down here. I'm sure everything's okay.' She sits obediently on one of my plastic bargain chairs while I find a glass that looks reasonably clean and pour her some water. I need to try and think clearly through the bad haze that won't go away. 'Right. I'll go find her. I'll take you home, and you can wait there in case she turns up. Okay?'

She's chewing on her bottom lip.

'The dairy on the corner?'

She nods.

'Come on then.' I put an arm around her shoulders and coax her gently outside. I can feel her little heart racing. Then I lock my door, and leave the key under the mat. Some of my neighbours know they can come in and borrow whatever they want. I trust them because there are no agendas behind the torn and faded curtains of Resolution Road. No, siree.

I have become, by default, the unofficial head honcho of our road. Support person, trusted go-to guy. I once had a house maintenance business in a better part of town until my chainsaw slipped and attacked my left leg just above the knee. The loss of my appendage

eventually led to the departure of my wife. It probably seems heartless, but you can blame an amber liquid mostly for that disaster. Something I needed firstly for the pain, then afterwards to drown my stupid, ongoing sorrows. My two kids are overseas with sparse online contact.

So I've got all the tools and the knowhow. I can't do much myself, but they come to me to borrow stuff, and get advice about all sorts—gardening, health, Government paperwork. It's an effort, but I somehow manage to navigate this through my storms of insobriety.

There's not much sign of life out in the street, but it's mid-morning and most of my neighbours are either working, or sleeping off a night shift.

We get to Maya's house, and I use a key I've been entrusted with. Selahi, Maya's mother, is a solo parent. The child's father was killed in some sort of terrorist raid in their home country. They came as refugees so the sweet little girl is an only child in an alien country.

They were one of the lucky families that made it here. I look out for them and have gone out of my way to make them welcome and help them. I've even minded Maya a few times lately, while her mother went out seeking part-time work that would fit in with school hours.

I consider it a privilege to earn such trust.

The inside is basic, but clean, with those spicy, lingering odours from foreign cuisines. I tell Maya to sit tight with her door locked, and only open it for me or her mother. I have my own phone, and will call her as soon as I know anything.

The store's not far and I limp there as quickly as I can. The owner flashes his smiling teeth as I enter. 'Hello, Mister King.'

'Hey, Ashad, has Mrs Ansoli been in this morning? She went out shopping and hasn't returned.'

'Yes, she came in. But we are out of Weet-Bix so I said to try the Four Square.'

'Thanks mate. Let me know if you see her.' I give him my phone number and lope off again towards the main-road corner, dragging my unwilling prosthesis.

It's five minutes away but the guy on the counter is no help to me. 'I don't know any Mrs Ansoli. Don't think she's a regular here. Sorry but no lady like that in this morning, mate. Up the Wahs, eh!'

I give him my number and wander up and down the streets for half an hour, asking everybody I come across and knocking on doors of people I know. Everybody's concerned, and there are offers to help search. I decide it's time to contact the police, but before I can dial them my mobile rings. It's the owner of the Four Square.

'Thought I better contact you, Mr King. A customer was in and said there was a Muslim lady knocked down by a truck on the crossing earlier. She's alive, but it looked really bad apparently. They rushed her off in an ambulance to the hospital ED.'

'Thank you,' I manage to get out. Now my heart's like I've pounded up the Sky Tower staircase with a backpack of cold ones. A call to the local hospital confirms my worst fears.

Selahi Ansoli admitted. Severe injuries. Critical.

I limp home, dreading having to deliver that message to such a small child. Maya shrinks and shivers from me as I explain to her. Her eyes are wide and her lips are quivering, but she does not say anything as I take her small hands in mine and say softly. 'Maya, you must be brave.'

She gives a little cry which turns to a sob, and throws her arms around my neck. I hold her tight as she nuzzles my neck. She smells of some sort of florally perfumed soap and I wonder if my own boozy odour is noticeable and objectionable to her.

The Matenga family have spare beds and I know Aroha and Tana will step up. Maya can walk to school and back with their kids. I can borrow Taimati Filipi's van to take her and myself to the hospital for visits. I will set up rosters of my people to help keep the Ansoli house and property maintained.

I'll also deal with Child Welfare and every other agency in the book to get the best for Maya and Selahi. I will track down the truck driver and make him rue the day he ever got behind a wheel.

Maya will be safe, because she has me,
And I have my road.