



**Darebin
Arts**

Hold Your Ground

By Catherine Reidy (*Highly Commended*)

'Honestly, I don't get it', she'd said as we walked down Rucker's Hill, keeping half an eye on the city skyline, the shiny tops of the buildings poking holes in the heavy grey sky. 'You're cute. You're a relatively sane and functional human, and you write in full sentences. Why aren't you getting anywhere?'

'Get stuffed', I'd said, grumpily. We'd had various iterations of this conversation a hundred times. I was cold, should've-taken-a-jacket-cold, and I was keen to get inside the theatre.

'You don't know what it's like looking femme, people always assume I'm straight. You're the ultimate cliché. You've never gone more than six months without a girlfriend and when we're together, everyone flirts with you and ignores me. You're like a reverse wingman.'

'It's harder to flag now that the heteros have taken over our aesthetic, I concede that', she'd said, nodding in mock seriousness. 'But maybe take it up a notch, and you'll get there. Get an asymmetrical haircut and an undercut. Start wearing a Penny Wong for PM lapel pin. Really lean in to it'. She cracked up at her own hilarity, and I pushed her into the traffic light pole.

By the end of that night, she was gone.

We met at uni, when she knocked on the door of 210B, just as I'd unpacked several boxes of books and started plugging in my computer. I didn't realise I was supposed to be sharing the tiny office with another PhD student. 'Well, this is... intimate', Mim had said, taking in the dimensions, lack of window and singular power point. 'This is what happens when Arts gets lumped into the funding pool as Engineering, you see. I know we don't bring in any money, but won't somebody think of us poor suckers trying to make a career in humanities?'. I wanted to be annoyed, but I couldn't help smiling.

Our friendship grew out of the proximity, and the shared experiences of wrangling students through various undergrad subjects each semester while trying to remain enthused about

our research. Whenever students emailed to ask questions or spin a story for an extension, she'd make them come in person. 'Welcome to our glorious hovel!', she'd exclaim, sweeping them in. 'One day, if you work hard, you too could become a valued cog in the modern university machine!'. They were terrified of her, and in love with her. We all were.

The last text I have from her, a Spotify link to a Missy Higgins song:

Have you heard this? I thought my Missy days were long over but this is actually very good!

I'll be the one with my heart on fire, screaming from the highest stage...

Everybody's gonna know my name, cos I'm the girl that's gonna be everything that's ever made you afraid

We're on the edge of something but we gotta jump now

We're on the edge of something, possibly beautiful

(Missy Higgins 'Edge of Something', Eleven/ EMI Music Australia)

Her research was on women in public space. Every year, she'd issue a challenge to her gender studies undergrads. 'Walk down High St, on the left obviously, and force yourself not to yield to any man walking on the wrong side. Count how many of them bump straight into you. Any street, actually. Feminist action research, friends. Don't let them make you small. Hold your ground'.

In 2015, when a teenage girl was killed while walking through her local park, in broad daylight at 4pm in the afternoon, much was made of the fact that she was wearing headphones. The top homicide cop said that women should be careful and not walk alone. Mim was ropable. She organised a protest and thousands of us marched down Bourke St, silent, with our headphones in. The police commissioner made a blundering apology, 'What he meant was...it's not that women shouldn't be able to...it's just the world we live in'. What burned most was the infuriating passivity of it, and the onus being placed on us, yet again, to just give in and get out of sight because that's *just the way things are*.

It was early in 2021, we'd been pulled back into lockdown and far more people were dying of COVID, especially overseas. A friend in the UK, who we'd met at a conference years ago,

had just posted a tribute to her 25-year-old sister on Facebook. It turned from an abstract thing, numbers on the news, to something tangible. We messaged each other.

Did you see that post, Charlie's sister?

Yeah, how awful.

Made me think. Do you have a will? Or power of attorney or whatever?

No, of course not, those are for real adults. Do you?

Nup. I hereby bequeath you my total assets, aka about 20 grand in super and a crappy laptop.

Goodness, I'm honoured.

Seriously though. If it happens. No churches, priests, or hymns at my funeral, OK?

Agreed. And no black.

Ha, that might be difficult for our crew. Cremation or burial?

Cremation, I guess. Is that the more eco friendly option?

Who knows? I want to be scattered into the ocean FYI.

Ok, noted. Don't let them use any pics of me from my pink hair phase please.

How about you don't die and then the photos can stay hidden.

Yeah, seems reasonable. What a time.

On the night, a phone call from an unknown number, a brisk tone, words spoken but not absorbed, more questions than answers. Yes, I am her emergency contact. We're friends. Close friends. Are you sure? Can I see her?

In the news the next day, the story was of a death of a young woman in the inner-northern suburb of Northcote, as she walked home from the local cinema, and a police appeal for any dashcam or CCTV footage that would help them to locate the driver.

In court, she became the deceased, the victim of a crime neatly laid out in an agreed statement of facts. It did not tell story of who she was, only of what had been done to her, by yet another man who refused to share space. What I urge the deceased woman's friends and family to understand, the judge said during the sentence, is that this is not a justice process, but a legal one, and those are often very different things.

In the weeks and months since, she has become a character in the telling and retelling of a story, compressed more each time for my own sanity, one that always starts with, *she was just trying to get across the road.*

We honoured Mim's wishes. The messages that had previously seemed morbid proved to be useful. No churches, priests, or hymns, I said to the others. Instead, on a weekend in late spring, four carloads of us drove to Blanket Bay and camped, sharing stories and wine around the fire. On the Sunday, we walked along the cliffs and dropped her ashes into the waves.

At the place where she died, a small clay statue sits by the traffic lights, glazed in a deep crimson. A woman in profile, mid-stride, with her fist in the air.

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