

STEPHEN ORR

*The Shack*

It's a small house with big windows: possum eyes staring out across the Murray. An old engine on a tree stump. A box of kitchen utensils, a vacuum with a split hose and a fry-pan the retarded boy (now a man) burnt his arm on in 1969. Inside, Frank Harris, a man who, at seventy-five, has already shrunk to the size he was at fourteen, lies awake on a camp-stretcher. He wears a singlet and shorts covered in fish scales, and blood. Looks at his watch and mutters "Christ!" Wipes sweat from his forehead and starts to cry. Then, just as suddenly, stops. "Christopher," he says, noticing a hole in the wall where his son had once hit it with a hammer.

After four or five hours of sleeplessness (he doesn't count any more) he sits up and tries to breathe. Steadies himself on the stretcher and takes a deep breath. Reaches over and picks a mask off the floor. Checks the tightness of the tube that joins it to an oxygen bottle sitting in a cradle beside his stretcher. Turns a valve and the oxygen flows. Places the mask over his face, tightens the elastic around the back of his head and breathes again.

He can feel the gas in his lungs. Sucks it, again and again. After a few minutes he feels clear-headed; his hands and feet tensing and relaxing; his legs and arms ready to move. He sits up, but then slouches.

He wonders if there's any point.

Switching off the oxygen, he removes the mask. Coughs and spits onto the old lime carpet. He can almost feel the fibres in his lungs. The clumps, the masses that clog his alveoli; each growing, swelling, bursting and releasing more cancer into his bloodstream; cells gliding

through his arteries, capillaries and veins, coming to rest in his brain, liver, spine—any of the eight places they found before they stopped looking.

Frank clears his throat and spits again. This time it hits a wall, and he can see blood mixed with old mucus.

Despite the fact that he no longer cares about dying he reaches for the mask again, holds it over his face and breathes deeply. Looks across the room, and his eyes settle on the couch where his son slept for twenty-nine years.

Until he built the shack on the river at Morphetts Flat.

It's a leather couch that has split open from a series of creases that now sprout white cotton tendrils. There's a chain bolted to the floor and, attached to this, a leather shackle that he purchased at a XXX shop in the city. It's covered with bite marks where Chris, in the middle of one of his turns, would work at it until his gums bled. Over the years he managed to lose three or four teeth.

If he wants to be toothless, let him be toothless, he'd say to himself. If he wants to sit in his own piss, let him.

Once, years before, the government sent someone. Frank covered the chain and shackle with a rug. Although it was hot he made Chris wear a jumper that covered his wrist. When the man asked what had happened to Chris' teeth, Frank replied they had no money for a dentist. So the man made a note of this and arranged for one.

Franks surveys the cough drops, pills and broken clock on his bedside table. He notices his old *New Testament* sitting open to Matthew 25. Picks it up, holds it in one hand and smells the pages. He can hear a soft voice reading, and see the same words underlined in blunt pencil: *Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins...*

He starts to cry again. This turns to a cough and he clears his throat and spits, this time on his own foot. He does nothing about it. He throws the mask onto his bed, but makes no attempt to switch off the oxygen. Frank Harris, former builder and plasterer, places his hands on his knees and stands up. He feels faint, and steadies himself against the wall. "Righto," he says.

As the first suggestion of light warms the horizon beyond his window, he almost smiles.

Righto, he keeps saying to himself as he hobbles across the room, picks up his .22 calibre rifle and slings it over his shoulder. He picks up a box of cartridges and empties them into his pocket. Turns, steps forward and puts on a pair of slippers.

Again, he takes a few deep breaths and feels he's up to it. He lifts his head and his chin juts out. Rubs his four or five days' worth of whiskers and runs his tongue around his mouth.

"Come on then, Frank, get on with it," he mumbles to himself. As he stands at the front door he looks back into the living-room of his house. There are no memories, he guesses—no thoughts, no feelings. That's all unnecessary. Always has been. He steps out of his house. Pulls the door closed and turns to look at the river.

"Righto," he whispers, as he sets off down the dolomite path.

He sees rabbits darting about in the scrub. Chris is a crack-shot with a .22. He can see him now: his still hands, his head dropping over the sight, his breathing slowing... Crack. As the bunny drops. As Chris looks at him, seeking approval, as Frank takes his son's head in his arm and kisses it. "You're a clever boy, Christopher." As Chris' hands start to shake, his body fits, his wordless drone returns as saliva dribbles down his chin.

There's still little light. Frank checks his watch and wonders whether he should leave it until later—but what's the point? There's a gibbous moon but it's smothered by cloud. The milky light settling on his house creates long shadows on the pigeon-grass.

He walks past his 1978 Commodore, its panels rusted around the edges. Its engine runs with grindstone regularity and its shattered windscreen (Chris with his hammer again) has been replaced with plastic. Frank's been driving it unregistered to Morgan for years, all the time watching for coppers, pumping the brakes to bring it to a stop every few kilometres so he can top up the radiator.

Along the side of the car, from the petrol lid to the front panel, someone has scratched the words: *mosquita fish, gold fish...*

He can still remember the night. He's sitting at the front bar of the Commercial watching the Belmont races. Chris is waiting in the car.

"Who owns the little prick?" a voice calls from the door.

Frank turns to see a brown-faced farmer holding Chris by the ear. “Christ,” he mutters, jumping from his barstool. “What’s he done?”

The old man glares at him. “Come and have a look.”

A small group heads outside to the carpark. The light is dim but the words on the side of seven or eight cars, vans and utes are easy to read: *carp, perch, catfish, smelt, cod...*

Frank steps towards his son. “Is this you?” he asks, indicating.

“Yes.”

“Well?”

Chris holds up a single page of newspaper. “You told me to copy,” he says. “Everything—you said everything.”

He walks on. Follows a path of sun-baked dirt. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes later he sees the shack. It’s a plain, square box sitting in the shade of an old willow that drags its arthritic fingers through the mud. Made from asbestos, cut on-site by hand, nailed onto a wooden frame of salvaged pine. The joints are covered with strips of wood so the whole place has a European appearance.

Asbestos: tough, hard-wearing, solid, dependable. Over the course of his career as a builder in Adelaide he’s built hundreds of homes from asbestos. Lovely stuff. Whack it up, nail it on. A coat of paint and everyone’s happy.

Frank stands thirty metres from the shack. The tip of the sun has split the horizon. The light is bleaching the bush and small things are becoming clear: the nylon line on the rods, the words “Chris’s Place” burned into a piece of wood hung above the door.

After years and years of saying he would, Frank gave his son independence. Also reclaimed the balance of his own life. The building materials were delivered by punt and carried up through the scrub. This was the southern-most limit of his land, or so he believed at the time.

He would build a shack for his son (he did). Hand-mix the concrete for the slab (they did). Build a frame and have it up in a day (it was). They would do all this together—father and son. They would allow the skin on his wrist to heal, once and for all. Share a beer

around a campfire at night (they did) and sleep on the rough slab under the stars. Then they would finish the walls, and roof, and make solid furniture that would outlast them both.

Frank fights to breathe. He forces his ribs to expand, his lungs to open and air to enter. At the end he's exhausted. Walking the final few steps to the door of the shack, he enters, and steps inside to find Chris asleep on the ground. Sheets, rugs and pillows twisted around his body where he's fallen from his own camp-stretcher.

He makes his way through a carpet of mess—a tin can bleeding beetroot juice onto the rug, a pile of lures, plates and bowls and a pile of Lego the forty-seven-year-old man returns to every few days. He sits in a chair beside the camp-stretcher. His foot is only a few inches from his son's cropped hair. He rests his rifle on the floor, clutching the barrel with both hands. "You awake?"

He notices lasagna sitting open but uneaten on the bench beside the sink. A few flies sit on the cheese that's healed like a scab. He goes to stand, to cover it, but sinks back into his chair. Quietly, he clears his throat again, spits the phlegm into his hand and wipes it on his trousers. Struggles for another breath, and another. Then looks at his son's face.

He is a boy still. His face is soft, thin, rounded. He shaves every day (has done for thirty-five years) and there's no hint of the interruption to boyhood that whiskers create. His nose has a scoop that follows the rise and fall of his cheeks; he has a Roddy McDowell forehead that consumes two-fifths of his face, a small mouth (the top lip forward from the bottom) and a chin that's neither prominent nor receding.

To look at him now, Frank thinks, everything is normal. He might almost expect him to spring up, greet him, cook a three-course breakfast, go for a morning jog, dress in a suit and tie and head off for work. But he knows Chris will always be alone in his shack. No roads to wander onto; no cardigan-warmed CWA grandmothers to offend; no chocolate to steal; no cars to drive; no voices to overhear him praying to *Dear God, Jesus, Lord Darth Vader* in the back of two dollar shops.

This had been a hard, but important lesson. He'd gone to town with Cheryl, his wife, and Chris, his nine-year-old son. They'd visited the Children's Hospital. Walked into a specialist's office and there, through the window, Chris saw an enormous adventure

playground. After the specialist had examined him, Chris pointed to the playground, started biting his finger and jumping up and down in his seat.

The specialist nodded and Chris was told by Frank (a clear-lunged, white-eyed Frank) to go left along the hall, straight down the stairs, through the double doors and out into the playground.

So, the specialist kept talking and ten minutes later Frank noticed that Chris still hadn't emerged through the double doors. He stood, studied the playground and said, "Where's he got to?"

Cheryl and the specialist stood up and moved to the window. "I wouldn't think he's lost," the specialist said.

"Can you see him?" Cheryl asked.

Frank ran down to the playground. Searched the rubber-floored space—the foam-ball pit, the safety swings—even crawled through the Aladdin's Cave maze. Then stood, looked up at his wife and the specialist, still looking concerned behind a double-glazed window, raised his hands in the air and shrugged.

At eleven pm that evening he was searching the back streets of North Adelaide with a pair of police cadets; at midnight he was walking across the ovals, and around the classrooms and playgrounds of Lindisfarne College; at four-thirty he was walking along the Torrens, saying to Cheryl, "I didn't want to let him go."

"Hospitals are meant to be safe."

"I didn't want to let him go."

"We'll find him."

Later, a police car took them back to the hospital, to their son, wrapped in a blanket, sipping cocoa in the locked-up cafeteria with its blinking fluoros and cauterised floors. Frank sat beside him, stroked his cheek and said, "You okay?"

"Can I sleep now?"

Back in the shack, Frank is still staring at the boy. He's glad to be here, in the warm, with him. He's always glad to be with him. Although he can't imagine living with him he's unable to imagine life without him. And he knows the boy is really only a function of

himself—a fifth limb, a toe, an incomplete breath of air. They are a pair of well-mannered parasites, taking and giving as the mood, the times and the weather dictates. Where one sings the other smiles; food is cooked, removed from the can and shared in separate places.

Frank coughs. He reaches into his pocket for his handkerchief. Opens it, spits and replaces it. Feels a letter in his pocket. He retrieves it, and unfolds it.

Dear Mr Harris

Staff at the Titles Office have repeated the search on the titles Folio 9/379 (1946) and 9/74A (1952). There is no doubt that the land in question is Crown Land. There were some adjacent transfers of land in the late 1940s but none of these coincide with the land on which you presently reside.

As stated previously we have agreed to let you remain on the land for now. There can be no guarantee of this beyond the next 12-18 months. We accept the present circumstances of your illness and your son's disability...

Frank studies the map that has been stapled to the letter. Notices the lines that run around, across and through their land. He can see how someone has highlighted them.

The letter is many years old. The folds have nearly broken, leaving him with six odd-shaped squares that have ruined his life. He rereads it to make sense of it, although he never has. This is why the letter has been the subject of endless phone calls, return letters, front bar rants, but mostly just dejection, disappointment and despair.

For thirty years he believed it was his land. Was told so. By an old friend called Reg. As young men they'd pooled their savings, all seven hundred pounds, and Reg went to see his mate the real estate wizard: "No office, no lawyers, no nothin', mate, just dirt cheap property." They'd looked at several country blocks before settling on Morphetts Flat, south of Morgan.

This will be my half, and this yours, Reg had declared, and Cheryl and Frank had agreed.

But what he meant was (Frank now realised) this bit here, this bit we bought, will be mine, and this, the Crown Land, will be yours.

Frank felt stupid. For not checking the title, the map, the description. He felt like this has been the course of his life—one fuck up after another. But he felt glad, sort of, that Reg had ended up dead with liver cancer (not before selling the land).

Still, Frank had saved some money and decided to find someone to take care of Chris when he was gone.

He found a place in Renmark called Waratah Village. Worked out that with what the government puts in there'd be enough money to keep Chris comfortable, fed, and perhaps even happy. The manager of the home did the sums and reassured him everything would be okay. But then this same man, who was tall and always had a smile on his face, took him on a tour of the home.

Frank saw rows of old people lined up in a sunroom; he saw nice enough young men and women feeding them, wiping food from their chin, and talking to them (despite the fact that they never replied); he smelt the piss and shit and porridge in the air; he was told by the smiling man that they'd had plenty of people like Chris over the years, and that they'd all fit in, found friends, gone on day trips.

Frank fumbles in his pocket for a single bullet. He loosens the bolt, loads the bullet and rests the butt of the rifle on the ground.

The room is almost light, but Chris is still fast asleep. Frank looks at his son's face again—he notices a red flush in his cheeks, and shadows where his oval-shaped face catches the little bit of sunlight.

Now they are landing their boat at Morphetts Flat. Retrieving an esky full of food, and bait, and carrying it, one handle each, towards the shack. Chris is quiet. There is something on his mind, Frank can tell. He looks at his son and asks, "You okay?" and the boy replies, "I have redfin, in case we don't catch any."

Frank just smiles. "Of course we will. We always do."

Chris grins. "Always?"

"Always."