

Commended

Under The Silver Tree Writing Competition 2023

## Tied In Knots

By Averil Robertson

Having murdered two people in her late teens, and eighteen years later having been deported back to New Zealand from Australia, Liz now sat on her balcony at her bach in Te Mahia Bay feeling calm. Or at any rate, telling herself she was feeling calm.

That day's edition of the *Marlborough Express* was scattered across the bach's lounge – which was also the kitchen, dining room and bedroom, depending on the time of day – with her late eighties mug shot from the Victoria Police on the front page.

She felt a zing of pride that they hadn't been able to get a more recent snap of her; ever since the teenage boy had gone missing late last week and many of the locals had decided she must be to blame, she had stayed in her bach, grateful she had a well-stocked pantry and fridge/freezer plus her two chooks to deliver fresh eggs.

But tonight she was expected up the hill for the fortnightly get-together of the local craft group she'd joined. Being a joiner of groups of women who do 'activities' had never been on her dance card, but her jail shrink had said social contact was important on the outside. And Steve, her regular water taxi driver, grocery deliverer and source of platonic sleepover comfort, was occupied up near Collingwood on a multi-day trip with some businessy fish-seekers from Wellington, some sort of team-building rubbish.

As she thought about the evening ahead, her attempt at calm breathing started to come out in short huffs of panic. Skipping craft group was the best option, clearly. She wasn't sure she trusted herself to keep it together otherwise, and even worse, if she couldn't keep it together, she had no idea these days how her losing it would manifest in public. The many ways in which her brain and body could betray her when under pressure distressed her at the best of times; this development could represent a new low. Or high, depending on how you looked at it.

The thing was, she *knew* the women knew what she'd done in the past. All the locals did, by now. But it was easy for them to leave that in the abstract, as long as she did nothing to actively demonstrate her 'evil undercurrent' – god that phrase from the prosecutor had stuck with her all this time. *Was* she evil? She supposed two murders put her in that category.

Fuck it, she would *have* to go, to prove she hadn't gone near that boy. And she would take some sort of delicious treat she'd baked, and look them in the eye. Because what other choice did she have, really?

And just like that, her determination fired. Fuck them if they wanted to judge her; they didn't know her, not really.

She angry-baked vanilla cupcakes. Cracking the eggs so hard her floor became sticky – stickier – with flying spouts of egg white; hand-beating the eggs with a vigour that would impress even her grandmother; taking extra care to make beautiful pink rosettes with her makeshift Snaplock-cum-piping bag. Murderers and kidnappers couldn't make beautiful cupcakes, surely.

At the host's house, she approached the door then backed away twice before finally forcing herself to knock. The host – Sheree – opened the door. Her eyebrows shot up when she saw Liz lurking on the doormat.

'Liz! I didn't think...um I mean, we assumed...well, come in!'

Liz clutched her cake container awkwardly in her left hand, balancing it on her hip, and, for reasons not clear to her, started to reach forward to shake Sheree's hand. Her knitting bag, which had been slung over her right shoulder, swung down and forward, clocking Sheree in the crotch.

'Oh I'm so sorry!' Liz exclaimed. She was, in fact, equal parts mortified and gleeful. *You assumed, did you, bitch?*

Sheree waved away her apology. ‘Oh cupcakes!’ she said, reaching for the container.

‘Yep. Learnt to bake in prison, actually.’ *Let’s see what your eyebrows do with that.*

As she spoke, the one person she genuinely despised in the group came to the door.

Fucking Louise.

‘M’I’m sure that’s not all you learnt there,’ Louise said dryly. ‘Eveything okay, Sheree?’

Sheree smiled faux-brightly. ‘Oh absolutely. Aren’t these cupcakes beautiful, Louise? Liz has so many hidden talents.’

‘Yeah, well, Hitler liked dogs,’ Louise said, turning and heading back to the lounge room with a shake of her head.

*Bitch.* But Liz smiled anyway and followed Sheree inside.

The welcome she got in the loungeroom varied from non-existent to a cup of tea left to steep for too long – bitter and cold-to-tepid. Her calming techniques, usually enough these days to keep her facade going with everyone but Steve – who spent a lot of time mopping her pent-up emotions off the floor – were doing nothing for her, and she felt her guts thump, her bowel roil. Her mind flashed wildly with visions of her bursting into tears or a flurry of windmilling fists. Maybe both.

She suddenly became aware that she had frozen in front of them all. Could they see her panicking? Her eyes flitted to Sheree, hoping now for an ally. Sheree nodded her head just ever so slightly, once, then stepped forward. ‘Let’s get crafting everyone!’

*Thank god for Sheree.* Liz shuffled forward to a chair as far in the corner as possible then rifled through her knitting tote for longer than was necessary, hoping no one would sit next to her. But no, here was Louise.

‘What have you been up to lately, Liz?’

Well, that was direct. And fucking annoying.

‘What do *you* think I’ve been up to?’

‘Well, someone’s got to ask, don’t they? I heard the Havelock police were at your door yesterday.’ Louise tsk-tsked, shaking her head.

‘Oh no, that was a social visit.’ Louise’s eyes widened, her mouth opening slightly, and, relishing the response, Liz couldn’t help herself. ‘They provide a service to us, so I provide a service to them. Helps keep them off my back...so to speak.’

Louise looked like she’d swallowed an already defecated cupcake.

‘There’s no need to be icky.’

Liz said nothing; she was the queen of holding out through awkward silences.

Finally Louise cracked, clearing her throat. ‘Maybe we can talk about what you’re working on,’ she said, gesturing to Liz’s knitting tote.

Liz barely contained a sigh. ‘Have you heard of temperature blankets?’

Louise shook her head.

‘Well, you select a colour palette that represents temperature brackets, and you choose a time period to work through, then you knit a row in the colour that represents the temperature bracket that the high or low was in each day.’

‘Why?’ Louise asked, her tone now curious.

‘Interest? Or some people choose historic periods to represent, so if you did a few, over time you can see, like, climate change.’

‘So, what time period are you working on?’

Liz felt some residual irritation still lurking but squashed it, instead opting for honesty.

‘I’m making an emotion blanket. For now.’

‘Oh?’

‘My shrink’ – she watched Louise’s eyes light up at that nugget of information – ‘said it could be a good way to assess how each day’s gone. You know, like’ – she put on a self-help hippy-dippy voice – ‘what colour am I feeling today?’

Louise nodded. ‘I didn’t know we have a, ah, a *shrink* around here.’

‘Oh I meant my prison shrink.’ There. She’d said it like it was a normal thing to say.

Louise looked down at her lap then away. ‘Sheree!’ she called, gesturing her to come to them. ‘Liz is knitting a prison psychology blanket! Come look!’

Liz felt the shock of betrayal – one in a line of so many – then a torrent of uncontrollable fury slam through her as Sheree came over, followed closely by the rest of the women. She forced her head up, looked at them and their thirsty anticipation of some sort of incident.

She reached into her bag and pulled out her master colour stash, arranged neatly in a see-through plastic underwear bag from Farmers that she'd recycled.

'Here,' she said punchily, 'is the palette. White is perfectly happy. Black is... murderous.'

Finella, an absolute twit of a lady who insisted on attending even though she couldn't do any craft at all but 'liked to watch', gasped. It made Liz feel good to shock them.

She pulled out the larger pouch from her tote. 'I knit a square a month.' She pulled out the whole stash of knitted squares, spread them out on the floor in front of her. Looked up, scanning the women's faces.

Sheree was the only one who looked back at her properly. 'They're all black.'

Liz shrugged. 'Pretty much.'

'Wait!' Louise said, holding up a hand. 'There's quite a few here with a random inky blue line in them!' Liz felt sick at how joyous Louise sounded at being able to see her insides like this.

But her set-up with Steve, those rich, full days that felt like the deepest indigo, were absolutely not up for discussion here; her privacy was shot, but his business relied on his reputation.

‘Ooh and look here!’ Marie pointed at the current, partially knitted square on her needles. ‘Is that...?’

Liz found her voice, surprised to hear it sound strong, challenging. ‘Red and yellow twisted together. Anger and fear.’

They all knew what day that was; the day the boy had been reported missing.

‘Right. Well, I’m going to get knitting,’ she said, gathering up the squares from in front of her with hands she could see as well as feel were shaking.

Louise got up and headed out onto the balcony with several of the others. Liz rolled her eyes – so obviously going to gossip about her, the weird murdering deportee. But – no, wait – things were much worse now: Finella had sat down beside her.

‘Don’t mind me, I just want to watch you work.’

*Creepy.* Liz got out a red ball and a black ball and started her row.

‘Angry and murderous,’ Finella whispered.

‘For goodness sake, Finella,’ Liz snapped. ‘Black is sad.’

Finella’s mouth popped into a silent ‘Oh’.

‘And you can tell that bitch Louise that the police were doing a welfare check, because of what the media were starting to say about me.’



Finella nodded.

‘Any questions?’ Liz was feeling punchy.

‘No!’ Liz looked up at the abrupt reply, caught the blush on Finella’s cheeks. She shrugged, not sure what was going on.

But Finella put a hand on her forearm. ‘Tell me about Steve.’ For the first time since they’d met, Liz saw a spark in Finella’s eyes.

‘I’m not sure I, um...’

‘I watch you. Your place. I know you don’t have that boy hidden away. But you have Steve. Every week. Sometimes twice a week.’

Liz felt bile rise up, burn her throat. She swallowed it down, coughing.

‘He’s your dark blue line,’ Finella continued. ‘Isn’t he.’

And there went all her fight, her murky, monstrous underneath just flowing out of her and leaving her sad, lonely self here on a lumpy chair, in front of Finella.

‘He’s my dark blue line,’ she agreed.