

Wednesday's Child

Natasha Joyce

Nature strips littered with damp mattresses and broken chairs announced the return of an annual ritual. As always, April brought with her soft rain and hard rubbish. Every morning Bill watched from his crowded tram as neighbours walked where they went, inspecting one another's rejection collections as they did so. With eyes wide open for anything that could be good for something, Bill watched for days as the piles were raided and replenished and raided and replenished. It seemed that the neighbourhood's rubbish cycled endlessly through journeys of fixing-up and dressing-down. Bill was distracted for just a moment, bemused by his sliding reflection staring back dolefully from shop-front windows, so he almost missed it – a flash of red nestled on a corner. Jerking down hard on the cord, he pushed through jumpy business men and sleepy junkies to leap out into the traffic, barely missing being knocked over by a speeding cyclist. He didn't hear the apology yelled behind him as he bee-lined to the little red tricycle. It peeked out from behind a cardboard box of wooden off-cuts and was battered, broken and a little bit bruised. Bill knew though, that with his special knack, he would have it fixed up in no time. He tugged it free from its bed of rejects – somehow a keyboard had been wedged through the spokes of a back wheel and it took no small amount of jiggery-pokery to separate them.

Ten minutes later Bill was home and the little red tricycle took pride of place in the shed he called a workshop, that was really just a shack. It sat up high atop a workbench, someone's junk waiting to be transformed into his very own treasure. The shack opened out through a broken gate that was draped in vine and spilled into a cobblestone lane-way. The old rear access route for a long gone night-man, it was still frequented by stray cats, drunken lovers and transients looking for a short-cut from here to there. For the following two weeks he spent the mild autumn evenings working on the little red tricycle in his tiny shack. The trike's frame was in good nick – a few dents gave it character but not enough to make it dodgy. It was the extremities that needed all the work. Bill straightened or replaced the bent and broken spokes, cannibalising them from old wheels he'd found at the tip shop. He removed the three little worn tyres and carefully fitted new white-walled ones which were heavy with tread. That small trio had cost him almost an entire day's pay and meant a skipped pack of baccy. The white leather on the original seat was faded and the stuffing oozed out in pudgy wedges. It had had to go too, replaced with an online five dollar score.

On the third Wednesday since the rescue of the little red tricycle, Bill decided there was nothing more to be done but give it a final coat and a bell. Keenly anticipating the smell, he took a screwdriver and cracked open the sampler tin he'd been saving for three years. He inhaled deeply as the fumes wafted past his face and into the lane, where they were overpowered by the sweet milky-way of tiny white clematis stars spilling over the back fence. The paint was Hot Pop Red and it was Janey's favourite colour. After mixing the paint properly, he dipped in his brush and lost himself for the last few hours of

daylight. Working now in almost darkness with an el-cheapo LED lamp to light his way, Bill tightened a glittering new silver bell onto the handle bars. He flicked it with a hardened thumb nail and it chimed a sweet ring-a-ding-ding through the unusually warm air. Finally, slowly, he stood up straight and stretched his arms into the darkening sky above. He dropped his arms and curled his fists to knead the small of his back, and ran a paint splattered hand through his sparse hair. He stepped away to admire his work. The dents in the frame were now barely noticeable. The paint was hot and it popped and the little red tricycle was shiny, pretty and ready to be paraded. Janey would be over in the morning and he quietly congratulated himself with having finished the job in time for her first visit. 'Nice one, mate,' Bill whispered to himself, feeling a rare small bubble of pride inflating his chest. He slowly became aware of a racket at the front door. Judging by the hullabaloo, the regular crew from the corner local had arrived to share stories of winnings or woe.

Hours later, when his mates had left him with a slab of empty bottles, an overflowing ashtray and a vague sense of regret, Bill remembered the little red tricycle – and the back gate swinging open through the clematis and into the laneway. It was dark now and the tiny clematis stars had shut their bright eyes for the night. From his back step he looked down the length of the overgrown yard and could see the little red tricycle still holding court, outlined against the hole in the night left by the open gate. His shoulders slumped in relief as he fetched his torch to head down the path. As Bill stepped into the shack, his guts clenched and his fists tightened around the torch shaft. The new tyres were slashed. The second-hand seat was torn and wrenched askew. The wheels were twisted and the spokes had been snapped. Long viscous scratches ripped down the frame. The silver bell was flattened into the dirt and would never ring-a-ding-ding again. Kids? Junkies? That crazy old fucker down the road? Who knew... who really gave a fuck? They were gone and the little red tricycle was gone and his mates were gone too. He was left only with a sudden pain in his chest where the fragile bubble of pride that he had nursed so gently had now violently burst.

Bill bent down unsteadily, one hand rubbing his chest and the other reaching out to take back the now dull silver bell. He pushed it around in the palm of his hand and tried to control his breathing -- in through his nose, out through his mouth -- like the woman at the clinic had shown him. But his throat was tight and he was having trouble seeing. Is this how she felt? Is this how Janey's chest felt every time he'd forgotten? Like something small and soft had been ruptured. As Bill's hand closed around the bell he closed his eyes against the constant blinking and thought about what she had said the last time they had spoken. Janey told him that she remembered every single instance, more times than he knew. How? How could she still remember? It was so long ago, all those times he hadn't shown up. Wasn't there. Went somewhere else instead. Because he forgot. He simply forgot.

Bill had thought to give her the little red tricycle for her baby yet to come – his first grandchild. Janey would be expecting a surprise now. He had told her on the phone last night that he had something ready for her. He had so wanted to show Janey that he remembered. That he was sorry he hadn't been there. That this time he would really try and the little red tricycle would show her that he meant it; in the same way he could never say so himself. But here he was again – a distraction was all it took for him to forget, and all his work, all his love was broken. Not gone, still there, but broken and battered and a little bit bruised. Bill shook his head, trying to dislodge the walnut lump in his throat. Snot flicked from his nose across his cheek. He gently placed the flattened silver bell onto the bench. 'Fuckit,' he muttered. 'When'll I learn? Shouldnevahsednuthininthafirsplace. Nice one, dickhead.' And he turned back to the house, a tin of Hot Pop Red left open to the night.

About the author

Having left behind my former life as a trade unionist in Melbourne, I've come home to Bendigo to be closer to my family and go back to university – so that I can study all the things. I've taken up an English Literature and History double major, in the misguided belief that my rampant bibliophilia will be better justified if I can say it's for research.