

FULL OF BLACK HUMOUR –
WARM AND DELICIOUSLY
FUNNY

Me, Antman, & Fleabag

GAYLE
KENNEDY



PHOTO BY CHRIS BURKE



GAYLE KENNEDY WAS BORN IN IVANHOE, NSW. SHE IS A MEMBER OF THE WONGAIBON CLAN OF THE NGIYAMPAA SPEAKING NATION OF

SOUTH WEST NSW. SHE HAS HAD STORIES PUBLISHED IN NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES AND BROADCAST ON RADIO, AND WAS THE INDIGENOUS ISSUES WRITER AND RESEARCHER FOR STREETWIZE COMICS FROM 1995–1998. SHE IS IN DEMAND AT LITERARY EVENTS AND WORKSHOPS AND HAS SPOKEN, IN AUSTRALIA AND INTERNATIONALLY, ON THE ISSUE OF DISABILITY AND CULTURE. SHE HAS LIVED AND WORKED IN SYDNEY SINCE 1973.

ME, ANTMAN AND FLEABAG WERE INVENTED FOR A STORY THAT WON THE NSW WRITER'S CENTRE INNER CITY LIFE SHORT STORY COMPETITION IN 2005. SHE LIKED THE CHARACTERS SO MUCH, SHE WROTE A BOOK ABOUT THEM. IN 2006, GAYLE WON THE NATIONAL DAVID UNAIPON LITERARY AWARD WITH HER MANUSCRIPT, *ME, ANTMAN & FLEABAG*.

Me,
Antman,
& Fleabag

GAYLE
KENNEDY

UQP

First published 2007 by University of Queensland Press
PO Box 6042, St Lucia, Queensland 4067 Australia

www.uqp.uq.edu.au

© Gayle Kennedy 2007

This book is copyright. Except for private study, research, criticism or reviews, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Typeset in Adobe Caslon 12/18 PT by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



Sponsored by the Queensland Office
of Arts and Cultural Development



This project has been assisted by the Commonwealth
Government through the Australia Council, its arts
funding and advisory body.



Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

National Library of Australia

Kennedy, Gayle.

Me, Antman and Fleabag.

ISBN 978 07022 3617 4 (pbk.).

ISBN 978 07022 4168 0 (pdf).

1. Aboriginal Australians – Fiction.

I. Title.

A823.4

For my brother Clem 'Buddy' Kennedy
I still miss you

Contents

How ta drink in the park	1
When Ronnie met Myrtle	4
The Grub	13
The counter lunch	17
The funeral goer	20
The golden wedding anniversary	23
Ma and Dad's big trip	35
Shoppin with Aunty Pearlie	38
The water skiers	46
The show comes to town	49
Watchin a video with Aunty Joanie	56
Grandfather's medals	57
Whitefulla dreamin	65
The hundred dollar bill	71
Mothballs	77
The purebred pedigree	82
Me, Antman and Fleabag hook up	92

Livin on the moon	103
The drought breaks	104
Aunty Tibby	106
Court day	114
Bringin the old ones home	119

How ta drink in the park

Me, Antman and our mongrel, Fleabag, like partyin outside. We both come from the bush. Me, I'm a NSW desert girl and Antman's mob are river people. Cos we aint got no river or desert here in the city, we like sittin in the park yarnin, havin a charge, playin country music. We don't cause no harm. Try tellin that to the coppers. Soon as they see us they start growlin. They say, 'No drinkin here', 'No music' and 'Git that dog registered'. Stuff like that. Then ya git sick of it and stay home and party in a yard the size of an old hanky with trains roarin by every time ya favourite song comes on.

We whinged bout it one day to Antman's cuz, Damien. He's a lawyer. Travelled round the world. He reckons we go about things the wrong way. Reckons we give up too easy. Says whitefullas aint the enemy. Says they love drinkin and partyin outside too. He

says they got it worked out so coppers don't bother em. He showed us.

First he shouts Fleabag twelve months rego and a new collar in the Koori colours. Too deadly! Then he says the dog has to have a bath. Gawd Fleabag bunged on. Had to drag him out from under the house. He carried on like we was murderin him. Wouldn't come near us for hours after. His guts got the better of him though and he come in for a feed. He got over it. Smelt good too.

Then we got an esky and a couple of fancy bottles of wine. Damien reckons no casks or flagons. Besides, the bottles got twist tops now, so once ya finished, ya fill em up with cheap stuff for next time. We pack a nice blanket and a picnic. Nothin fancy; bread, cold meat, tomatoes, a big old lamb bone for Fleabag. We pile in Damien's car and head to Balmain. Damien lives there.

We pull up at this deadly park right on the harbour. Antman and me are a bit nervous, but Fleabag's outta the car and beltin cross the grass like there's no tomorrow. There's heaps of other dogs there, but that's okay cos he got his nuts cut out a couple a years ago so he don't go bluin no more.

We git the stuff outta the car, spread the blanket with the tucker, glasses and wine on the grass and sit

How ta drink in the park

down, still nervous. Then we see all these whitefullas. They're all sittin round with wine, beer and tucker too! They're havin a laugh. Kids and dogs are runnin round. There's no trains, the harbour's shinin, boats everywhere. We pour drinks; make sandwiches. People smile at us. They pat old Flea and fuss over his fancy collar. He laps it up.

And there's no coppers in sight!

Antman grins. 'Makes ya wanna sing, aye tidda?'

'Sure does,' I say, and whack old Slim in the CD player.

We know the drill and go every week now. Flea's used to havin a tub too. Knows he's goin to the park afterwards. Anyway, when we git sick of city life we go out bush, sometimes to visit my mob or sometimes Antman's. Ant's a builder so he goes whenever one job finishes. I do bar work or waitressin so I aint tied down either. Fleabag just comes along for the ride.

When Ronnie met Myrtle

Uncle Ronnie Harris and his dog, Flash, are big meat eaters. Their favourite is mutton. Uncle Ronnie likes to go out and get his own sheep from one of the local properties and kill it and hang it himself. He don't like meat from butcher shops. Reckons it's got a real 'chemically' smell and taste.

He cooks mutton every which way ya can, but his favourite way to do it is in a camp oven, in the coals, with camp oven vegetables and great heap of damper cooked in the ashes with lots of butter drippin off it. Whenever anyone comes back home from other places they been livin, he uses that as an excuse to bung on a camp oven do and invites everyone around. Reckons ya aint home till ya had a decent feed a slow cooked mutton and beer, nice and chilled in an esky and a few hours of listenin to ya own mob tellin tall tales and singin along to Slim Dusty. Slim Dusty's real big out

our way. All the blackfullas love Slim. We love stories and all Slim's songs tell a story. Besides, him and his family used ta bring their travellin country show out to the back country all the time. We all got memories of him and his family singin in our old hall, signin auto-graphs, posin for photos.

Anyway, one time after me, Antman and Fleabag come home to chill out and mingle with the mob, Uncle Ronnie, happy as a pig in shit, comes round and tells us ta drop by on the weekend with a coupla slabs and he'll do us up a feed. Reckons him and Flash, and Fleabag if he wants, will drive out ta Moonkoo Station the next day and git a fresh sheep. We know Flea's up for it. He gits on well with Unc and Flash cos they let him sit up front in the car with em and when they get to wherever it is they're going he gits to run round and chase rabbits, swim in dams, roll in dead stuff and act like a proper dog. Trouble is, that night it rains and rains. Just pisses down, turnin the red dust into red clay and cos all the roads leadin in and out of our town are dirt, no cars are goin anywhere.

Uncle Ronnie comes round in the mornin to bring us the bad news. Reckons it'll be a few days before he can git out to Moonkoo, but says he'll bite the bullet and go and buy a sheep off that robbin bastard of a

butcher, Old Billy Sullivan, on account me, Ant and Fleabag have gotta leave on Monday to git back to the city for work and shit.

So we all pile into his ute, Flash and Flea sittin on our laps, and head down to the butcher shop.

Me and Ant and the dogs wait on the nature strip on the other side of the road while Unc goes in to buy the meat.

Next thing we hear Unc yellin. 'Listen you robbin mongrel. If I'm payin that much for a sheep, the fuckin thing better have golden fleece and platinum balls.'

He comes stormin outta the shop. 'Stick ya fuckin sheep up ya arse. You're nothin but a legalised bandit.'

'C'mon you fullas,' Unc reckons. 'Git in the car.'

We see Billy Sullivan standin in the doorway of the shop with his legs crossed at the ankles and suckin on a long neck a beer.

'Well Ronnie Harris,' he yells out ta Unc. 'If you don't like the prices, you can always go to the other butcher shop.' He waves his free hand down the empty street with a big, smartarse grin on his face.

Unc turns round 'You better git your fat arse back inside before I come over and knock your fuckin head clean off ya fuckin shoulders.'

Before you can say 'tucker's on', Flash and Flea are

at Unc's side, ready to back im up if a blue happens. But Billy Sullivan's back inside his filthy old shop before ya know it. Everyone round these parts knows ya don't pick on Ronnie Harris. He's a wiry old tent boxer, tough as nails and he's flogged heaps a young blokes twice his size and half his age. Besides, ya not just fightin Unc, ya gotta take on Flash as well. And he don't take too kindly to fullas pickin on his mate.

Anyway, next thing we hear this voice yellin, 'Hey, Ronnie Harris. Whatcha bungin on with Billy Sullivan for? Come over and have a drink with me.'

We look over. It's Old Mother Howard. She's sittin on her verandah drinkin port out of a flagon and smokin rollies. She's as ugly as sin, is Old Mother Howard. Skinniest woman ya ever saw. She's got hair that's flat and greasy and the same colour as that grey shit ya git outta blocked up drains. She's got beady, little blue eyes that are always waterin up, teeth all crooked and stained from tobacco and port wine, and flaky, grey skin she's always pickin at.

She's married to Old Mick Howard. He's big and fat, with red hair, red face, piggy blue eyes and an extra finger and toe on each hand and foot. They got six bony, ugly kids, all with red hair, and all of em have got the extra fingers and toes. The fullas down at the

Rotary Club wanted to raise money to git the extra toes and fingers taken off, but Old Mick reckons it's what God give him and his kids and they aint got no problem with it.

Dad reckons if Old Mick had half a brain it'd be lonely. He also reckons God gives ya boils on ya arse, but ya do ya best ta git rid of em.

But Ma reckons ya gotta hand it to Old Mick, cos he loves and looks after those kids. If they didn't have their father, Ma reckons the welfare would've taken those poor kids away years ago on account of their drunken, useless mother.

The Howards are whitefullas and not related to our mob, but all the blackfullas look out for the kids cos they feel sorry for the little buggers. Ma and Dad give em biscuits and cordial to take with em to play and Auntie Pearlle's always givin Old Mick big jars of vitamin E cream to rub on their scaly skin. She says it might stop em from itching so much. Uncle Ronnie gives em meat too. Reckon it'd only go ta waste otherwise.

Anyway me, Antman, Unc and the dogs walk over the road to talk to Mother Howard. She's been pickin at her skin and the flakes are layin all around her. It looks just like ashes after a bush fire. Me and Ant look

at one another and back down the stairs but Unc walks right up to her.

She looks up at im from her old couch and passes im the flagon. 'Have a little drink, Ronnie. It'll calm ya down. Seems like you got your black balls in a knot over somethin.'

'No thanks, Jeannie' reckons Uncle Ronnie. 'I'm drivin and I got me niece and her fulla with me. Maybe next time.'

'Ya weak as piss, Ronnie Harris. Anyway, what's goin on?'

'I wanted to git a sheep from out Moonkoo and put on a camp oven do but the roads are too muddy. Won't git a motor car through for a coupla days. So I tried to buy a sheep at the butcher's but that robbin bastard saw me comin. He wants a fortune for his ratty old meat so I told im to stick it up his arse. Dunno what I'm gunna do now.'

'Well,' says Mother Howard. 'I gotta sheep out the back ya can have. I'll let it go for two flagons and packet a tobacco.'

'I'll wanna have a look at it first,' reckons Unc.

'Help yaself,' she says, draggin on her rollie and peelin off another piece of dead skin.

Me and Antman shiver.

So Unc and Flash go and check out the sheep. Unc reckons it'll have to do and gits Antman to go and buy the grog and smoko.

Unc reckons he'll put the sheep in the ute and take it home, but Old Mother Howard reckons she'll send the kids round with it later, on account of she don't know where the rope is. Unc reckons okay. But he says, 'Don't fuck me up, Jeannie. I want that sheep today and there'll be no grog and tobacco till I git it.'

Old Mother Howard promises she won't fuck with im and says he'll have it in half an hour.

So we git back to Unc's camp and he sends me over to git Dad and tell him to fetch his meat bag and hooks and bring back his sharp killin knife.

So I go back over with Dad, and then him, Antman and Unc start gittin things ready to kill the sheep.

Next thing, two of the Howard kids turn up with the sheep on a rope. It's one of the little girls, about eight and a boy around ten. Cos they all look alike, no one knows who's who so they just git called the Howard Kids.

Unc gives em the tobacco and grog and tells em thanks. But the little girl's cryin. 'Ya better give us back the rope, Mr Harris. Mum's gunna kill us if we don't bring back the rope.'

When Ronnie met Myrtle

Unc takes the rope off and hands it to the little girl. She and her brother go over and throw their arms around the sheep and then they both start cryin. The little girl's goin, 'Bye, bye Myrtle. We'll see ya in heaven one day.'

Dad and Unc look at one other. 'Whut are you little fullas cryin for?' Dad asks. 'It's only a sheep.'

The little boy looks at em. 'She aint just a sheep, Mr Harris. She's Myrtle and she's our pet sheep. Dad give her to us a coupla years ago.'

The little girl chips in. 'We love her, Mr Harris. Dad's gunna git real cranky with Ma when he finds out she got Myrtle kilt.'

And they both start wailin again.

Dad and Unc look at one other. 'Poor little buggers,' Dad says.

Unc gits down on his knees and tells them two Howard kids to stop cryin cos he's gotta plan.

Dad gives em his clean hanky to wipe their eyes. When they try to give it back to im he reckons no, they can keep it. Anyway, when they stop cryin they look at Unc and ask im about his plan.

'Well, I'll tell youse what. Myrtle can live here with me and Flash. And all you kids can come by everyday or whenever you want to visit her. I'll build her a little