

# Livewire

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STAN SPRUCED HIMSELF up for a night out. He dragged on his cleanest pair of jeans, and thrust his feet into well-worn trainers.

The caravan tilted as he sprang down the steps into the semi-darkness.

He stepped from the driveway of the Half Moon Caravan Park and pulled a pouch of Drum from the top pocket of his flannelette shirt, extracted a Tallyho paper, stuck it to his lip and teased out a stringy ball of tobacco. He rolled his fag, lit it and headed away from the noisy intersection. He was looking forward to hearing some live music.

The footpath ended and Stan stepped onto the strip of gravel, rutted by truck tyres, at the edge of the bitumen. Plastic shopping bags caught in the cyclone fencing popped and buzzed in the stiff breeze blowing from the bay.

He stopped outside a windowless, corrugated iron shed jammed onto the front lot of an abandoned flourmill. Fairy lights dangled across it. Emblazoned in red script across its frontage was the word 'Livewire'. The long keyboard intro to *Light My Fire* jangled through the air. He shivered with anticipation, crushed the butt under his sole, hitched his jeans up and strode through the doorway.

Stan's damp palms left handprints on the curved plywood bar when he ordered a rum and coke. It was one big room with low bench seats against the unpainted walls, and a scattering of scarred tables and chairs. People dribbled in. Smoke haze spread and thickened.

The band was setting up so he dawdled over to the stage to check them out. On his way across the room, he caught a glimpse of his old friend and lover, Myrtle, charging through the crowd toward him. An electric buzz zinged through his body. She disappeared and when he turned his head to find her, she wrapped her arms around him from behind and swung him in a circle. His drink sloshed down his front and the glass shattered on the floor.

'Whoah!' He banged into someone, before all those in the line of fire jumped out of the way.

She slowed down and let go of him. 'Oh, excu-u-use me,' she yelled at the glaring punters.

Stan righted himself and wiped his face on his shirt. 'Bloody hell, Myrt. That was a surprise I didn't need.' The bouncer appeared nearby. Stan twirled his hand in Myrtle's direction with an exaggerated grin on his face and mouthed 'Sorry, mate,' to him. The guy gave them a menacing stare and stalked off.

She grimaced. 'Pushed it a bit far, didn't I?' She shoved the shards into a pile on the floor with her platform boots. A lackey appeared to sweep up the mess. Myrtle thanked him.

Stan shook his hair from his face. 'Not to worry, gorgeous one.' She'd always been wild; he loved that about her. 'Great to see ya.'

'You too, Stan man.' Her lips stretched tight across her small chalky teeth and the corners of her eyes crinkled into a smile.

They hugged but their bodies did not touch.

Stan inhaled her peppery scent and flashed to long-ago memories of hung-over mornings in bed smoking bongos together. 'Wow!' He stepped back to take her measure. 'You look unreal.'

Myrtle's honey coloured skin and hazel eyes were luminous. Her sandy curls were scattered with screaming red streaks and her dress was too tight round her belly. He tore his eyes from her delicious cleavage. She never used to have that.

'Thanks. I've stacked on a bit of weight though.'

She patted her backside, which drew Stan's eyes and thoughts to that part of her anatomy. Warmth crept through him.

'Suits you.' He remembered how sick and pitiful looking she was the last time he saw her. 'Shit, how long's it been?'

'A few years.' Dark shadows entered her eyes and she leaned in close. 'I've been off the junk for ages, now.'

'Yeah, I can tell ... Can't say I'm off the booze, but I try not to get plastered too often.'

She scrutinised his face. 'You know, you remind me of Kurt Cobain with your hair long, but tomorrow you'll look like Iggy Pop, for sure.'

'You cow! Iggy's more than twice *our* age.' He scratched his stubbled chin.

Myrtle cackled and pulled him back for a hard kiss on the mouth.

'Let's get a drink. Seeing as I don't have one anymore.'

'Gotya.' She pinched him on the arse.

Stan and Myrtle squeezed themselves into the throng at the bar. It was too loud to talk, but he couldn't care less. She was soft and familiar against him and he enjoyed the moment. He thought about how they'd joined forces at school to fend off mono-browed Jack Chaffey, or one of his halfwit siblings, not always with success. But they would lick each other's wounds down at the creek after school. That was the brightest spot in their lives, back then.

Stan bought himself a beer and a lemon squash for Myrtle. Another surprise. Spirits were always her thing.

They went outside so they could hear each other. A sliver of waxing moon hung high in the sky. They huddled around a corner protected from the wind.

Stan bumped her hip with his. 'Anyone in your life?'

'Not now.' Myrtle's face contorted and she crossed her hands over her chest. 'Got me a freshly broken heart,' she said, in a mock country twang.

'I'll give it a rub for you. Get it up and running again.' He waggled his huge hands at her.

She shrieked and pulled her glass up in front of herself like a shield. They laughed and clinked drinks.

Myrtle told Stan about her waitressing job and about living in Bendigo.

'You've really got your shit together, girl.'

He wrapped his arms around her waist, and she pulled him in tight.

He exhaled a long breath and she reached up and tickled him under the arms.

'Did you come looking for me?' said Stan.

'Took a punt. A friend told me she'd seen you here a while back.'

He kissed the back of her hand. 'I'm flattered.'

The lights dimmed as they went back inside, so they hurried over to the stage. The band launched straight into some instrumental material. Stan and Myrtle smiled and nodded at each other in approval of the music, and then Myrtle pushed through the crowd and flung herself about with a bunch of girls dancing up the front. Stan craned his neck and worked his way forward in the crowd to watch her. She'd always danced the same way: the fluid movement of her limbs and torso punctuated by a cute little backwards kick of her right foot; its repetition determined by the beat of the music. It was going crazy tonight.

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Stan fumbled with the key at his caravan door. He stood back to let Myrtle in first and then shut the door. The stench from the Brooklyn tannery followed them in.

She checked the contents of the bar fridge. 'Dying for a cup of tea ... no milk.' She sighed.

Here we go. Now he remembered how she drove him nuts bossing him round. 'I've got some powdered stuff somewhere.' He opened and closed cupboard doors; turned the ancient jug on, found a container to shake the powder and water up in.

Myrtle wandered about the tiny decrepit van, gravitated to the only personal mementoes on view.

'Really made yourself at home here, Stan.' Sarcasm tinged her voice.

She shuffled through the small pile of snapshots on his bedside table: one of his mum; another of her holding him as a baby; one of Myrtle with masses of hair at the first share-house they lived in. And a couple of others.

'Remember that day?' she waved the picture of herself in the air above her head.

'Yep.' He moved closer to her.

She chuckled. 'Amber came round and sprung us having a root in the afternoon.'

Stan embraced her from behind, rubbed against her and nuzzled her neck. 'I remember.' Her silken skin against his face made him swoon.

Myrtle stiffened and mumbled so fast he barely caught her words. 'Got something to tell you.'

He backed away in a snap, his desire replaced by dread. Unpredictability had always been a feature of their relationship. He crossed the room and placed a vivid red mug and a can of rum and coke on the laminex table. 'Here's your cuppa.'

They squeezed into the booth seats opposite each other.

Her face was milk white. She took a few sips and then her eyes locked onto the cup—a shock of colour against the beige interior.

He drew zigzags through the frost on the can with his fingertip and waited, glancing up at her every once in a while.

She choked it out. 'I'm pregnant.'

Shit. His head jerked up and he stared at her. It all made sense. 'You gonna keep it?'

Myrtle shrugged her shoulders and blinked hard several times.

He finished his drink in one long slug, stepped over to the fridge, grabbed another can and sat back down.

Her voice shook, but she focused on him now with liquid eyes. 'What do you reckon I should do?'

'It's your life, Myrtle.'

'Don't want to be part of it?'

'Barely keep my own shit together.' He looked away, sniffed and rubbed the back of his hand across his nose.

She straightened her back. 'I could work and you could look after the kid.'

'Yeah?' He drawled.

'Lots of people do that nowadays. I've been doing computer courses so I can get a proper job – in an office.'

'What a nightmare.' He squirmed and stretched his legs out as far as he could in the confined space.

She stood at the end of the table. Her hands pressed at its edge. She leaned over him, stabbed him with her words. 'For you, Stan ... not for me.' She wheeled around, arms up. 'You've given up on everything, haven't you?'

He stuck his chin out. 'It's not my kid.'

'Don't know why I even bothered thinking of you.' She slammed her mug down on the sink. The caravan vibrated.

Anger crept into his voice. 'So much for a fuck.'

Myrtle slumped down on the edge of the bed. She sobbed and dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled tissue for a couple of minutes.

Then they sat in silence. He rolled a cigarette, stuck it behind his ear. She picked at her nail polish.

'I'd like to leave but I think I might keel over. I need something to eat.'

'Got some bread.' He staggered to the cupboard, tossed a plastic bag onto the table and grabbed another can for himself.

She opened it and sniffed. 'It's mouldy.'

'Whatsa time? Kebab van's still open.' He jiggled his jeans pockets. 'Got no cash left.'

She pulled a fiver out of a tiny purse on her belt and slapped it onto the table. 'Make sure you come back.'

He couldn't get out of there fast enough. He stormed through the caravan park and crossed the road while the lights were red, dodged a lone car. The vendor tried to chat but Stan was monosyllabic, sucked his fag to death.

When he returned, she'd crashed out on the bed, his sleeping bag twisted around her. Relief flooded through him. He dropped the kebab on the table and drank his last can of grog. When he was younger he'd longed for a life with her, but now he was happier on his own. People wanted too much from you.

He lay down on the bed with his back to her and draped a coat over himself, with his shoes still on. Fell fast asleep with her breath, hot and heavy at his neck.

When Stan woke the next morning, Myrtle was gone and the empty kebab wrapper lay on the sink like the shed skin of a reptile.