

'When he was sixty-two, my father suffered an accident in the kitchen of his house, to the back of his head, which caused a subdural haematoma to the brain, after which he was maintained on life support for six days in hospital, before he was taken off the machine and died. His death was thought to be accidental, but mysterious and unexpected, so it was followed by a coronial inquest, which had an inconclusive finding.'

The Rooster Man

Jennifer Trezise

Short Story

I rarely slept in my own bed. At night, if my father was out, I sat with my mother in the lounge room with the door key in my lap, or around my neck. When we heard my father's car approach, after closing time at the pub or club, we judged whether it was safe for me to stay, or better for me to go. Often the decision was made if we heard a crashing of gears or the angry revving of the engine in his car, or even if he successfully negotiated the brick gate posts without hitting them. Sometimes my father would fall up the steps or against the front door, cursing and swearing at neighbours, my mother, or some imaginary foe, and to the day he died, I was amazed that the large glass panel in the door, etched with a sailing ship, failed to smash. There are many references to the 'rooster' or 'rooster man' in my poetry. The rooster was real, but is also a metaphor for my father. I believe that my mother would tell my father that I was asleep once he was inside, while the whole time I was running across the back yard, through the back fence to the Cameron's house, or two houses down the street to the Jones' house, to safety. I would often wet myself with fear while running in the dark. The rooster chased me as I ran through the chook yard to the back gate, and I was terrified!

'Like many backyards, in those days, there was a small wooden gate into the back neighbours' yard. Beyond it and above it, there was a huge old Jacaranda tree, in which there was a tree house, just a platform of wood, made by old Mr Cameron, or Cam, as I knew him, for his grandchildren. The back fence was covered in vines and often the little gate was hard to locate in the dark. The Camerons always left their back door open for me and the bed made up in their back room. My other refuge was the Jones' house, two doors down our street, but I had to climb into their side window over the sharp brick window sill to get to safety there.'

'One sunny day when I was collecting the eggs from the chook yard, the rooster ran at me, and as I kicked out with my shoes, one came off. The rooster sensed my fear and attacked my legs with his beak and spurs. My father, who was in the backyard, roared up to him and strangled him, hanging him on the fence between two palings. I can still see him hanging there with his tongue sticking out. It was a violent, traumatic event and his death an image that I will never forget and for which I felt so guilty at the time. My father reminded me too, for many years more, that if it had not been for me, that the rooster would still be alive.'