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## Open Category – Third 2021

# NO GOOD DEED

Andrew Roff

The first time, what brought Leah back was the crunch of gravel as her husband’s truck pulled into the driveway. It must have been late, and when she tried to peer out the kitchen window, all she could see was her own reflection. From below, the sink issued a gurgle as washing-up water voided down the plughole. Her fingers, stuck fast in rubber gloves, felt damp and warm. In one hand she held a scourer and from the other, dangling, a baking tray dripped suds onto the floor. A carrot cake sat cooling on the granite benchtop.

Donny—still handsome even with his greying hair, always terrible at reading a room—came barrelling in, dropping his work boots by the door. “What’s this?” He made a show of sniffing the air. “What have you done with my wife?” He stood behind her, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

Leah shrugged him off, started to peel away her gloves. This was all wrong. Amateur baking was a waste of time and materials, and the washing up was the cleaner’s job. Donny seemed to like the cake, even though it was dry. But Leah couldn’t remember how it had

come into being. Not the mixing, or the pouring into the pan, or even the ingredients—had she used two eggs or three? The icing tasted like cream cheese and, yes, there was half-used tub in the fridge. But what recipe had she followed?

The second episode happened on a Sunday afternoon. One minute she was sitting by the side of her tennis court, drinking pinot gris with her friends— ...and then there was a gap. Without preamble, she found herself on her hands and knees in a muddy creek bed. Up on the bank, she saw a pile of bottles, chip packets and other detritus that might have been pulled from the long grass on either side of where she'd been crawling. Leah's favourite blue silk dress—the one she'd been wearing at drinks—was ruined.

Her best friend explained later that Leah had bolted halfway through their get-together, wearing an idiot smile, completely unresponsive to questions. Everyone had thought it was a joke until Leah slammed her car door and reversed down the driveway. Courtside, her friends tutted indignantly as they finished off the wine. When Leah didn't return, they let themselves out.

The third time, Leah gave fifteen thousand dollars to charity. She gathered, based on the receipt she found later in her email inbox, that her donation would help animals whose homes had been destroyed by bushfire. Even now, hills were burning in another state.

“It's intolerable.” Leah squirmed, messing up the neat arrangement of the quilt. She was lying face-up on their super king, head resting on Donny's thick leg. He sat with his back against the headboard, leaning over her, massaging her scalp with his fingers, getting in under her short brown hair to try and soothe her. Leah ignored his puzzled stare, fixing instead on a grey mark she'd noticed on the ceiling that would have to be painted over.

She often spoke of things he didn't fully comprehend, like when she railed about over-zealous conservation laws, or the latest bout of office politics. Even by those standards, her recent behaviour must have seemed baffling. Still, his fingers kept pressing above and behind her ears.

“What if next time, I end up donating to a bunch of activists?” she grumbled. “If word got out, I'd be stuffed.”

Leah co-owned a firm of consulting archaeologists. That's what her business card said and that was how she introduced herself, but what it really meant was that she worked for a handful of big miners. To get a permit to dig or blast anywhere in the state, it was first necessary to consult with the traditional owners of the land. And before that came ethnographic and archaeological surveys that, from the miners' perspective, would ideally turn up little of significance. A heritage management plan would be prepared, with proposals for impact mitigation. Artefacts could be safely removed, and perhaps returned one day. Photographs and charts would memorialise the layout of the site before any ground disturbance. Sub-surface clearances would, probably, identify anything of interest that had not previously been noticed. And local land councils could appoint field officers to observe and assist (but not obstruct) the efforts. Funds would be set aside to teach local children what had been there before the mine, and attitudinal surveys would confirm support for the company's plans.

Leah's team could help with all these things. It was lucrative work, and Leah had a formidable record. Of the nineteen projects she'd assessed during her career, none had stalled on heritage grounds. Among some parts of her profession, that might have raised eyebrows. But her clients loved her, and Leah didn't mind it when a friend or acquaintance questioned her ethics.

She'd got into this line of work because she'd wanted to be in the field, not stuck at a desk in some museum storeroom, cataloguing what had been found or appropriated by others. For the first decade or so, it had been exactly what she'd hoped. Back then she was away more often than not, racking up hours in a double swag she'd customised for comfort. She loved looking up at the stars on a clear night, but when it was cold there was nothing better than zipping up, shutting the world out, and letting the air get funky. Archaeologists were oddballs, as a rule, but camp life was usually enjoyable. Most evenings the crew would drink themselves silly, and during the day they gave Leah plenty of space to think her own thoughts.

Promotions had followed, and then a stake in the business, and now it was difficult to escape the office for more than a couple of days at a time. She still loved the country, and she knew that a big find produced its own unstoppable momentum. Better to extract

responsibly, with guidance from experts like her. Her projects were win-win situations, even if not absolutely everyone saw it like that at the time.

# # #

“I think it’s wonderful,” Ruth said when she heard about Leah’s fits of generosity. As she did every year on the seventh of the seventh, Leah had called the old chook up. Between birthdays, Christmases, and updates when distant relatives kicked the bucket, they spoke every few months.

“You’re finally giving back,” Ruth said. “God is working through you, helping you to atone.”

Leah’s mum still ran the chicken shop in the town where Leah had spent her childhood. Ruth had done a solid job for a single parent, but she was always trying to intervene, bestowing advice too eagerly and too often, not least on questions of morality. As far back as Leah could remember, she had felt stifled living in the granny flat behind the takeaway. Decades later, the smell of chip grease still made her feel claustrophobic.

“I don’t want to atone,” Leah said. “I just want to stop these...episodes, attacks, whatever they are.”

“Go to a doctor, then. Better yet, talk to a priest.”

The following morning, Leah was late for work. She’d found herself on the side of the road, waving enthusiastically at a vehicle as it sped away. At her feet were the lug wrench and jack she usually kept in the well of her boot. Checking, she found that the spare tyre was missing.

She recognised the feeling now, when it was about to happen. Her chest would get hot, and she could smell something like dried basil, but sharper. Her vision would turn fuzzy, as if the atoms that made up the world were sand flies jiggling as they had sex with one another. Then, an absence, a lack, until she came back to herself moments or hours later.

As soon as she could get a referral, Leah described all of this to a neurologist. “Interesting,” he said. “Yes, very interesting. Could be a non-epileptic seizure, which would explain the memory loss and perhaps the smell. But the behaviour points to a kind of dissociative

fugue.” He mentioned a conference he’d been to recently, which had been held on a cruise ship, and some papers he’d read which seemed to be of doubtful relevance. Leah wasn’t following as closely as she might have. She kept getting distracted by the way the beams from the surgery’s downlights scattered off the doctor’s bald head. Leah let him prattle for another few minutes, wondering if she’d be billed for an extended consultation, before pointedly checking the time on her wristwatch.

She underwent a succession of tests. When the initial results showed no obvious cause, the neurologist said, “Really, what we need is to look inside your head during one of these events.”

“I told you, they’re random. I can’t bring one on.”

The doctor leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. “That does make things difficult.” He offered a weak, perfunctory smile.

In her time, Leah had wrangled teams of hungover grad students, getting trowels in hands and bodies in trial trenches at first light. This duffer could surely be made to do his job. “Here’s how we’ll play this,” she said. “You’ll put me in a hospital bed. Tie me down if you have to, so I don’t wander off. When it looks like I’m having an episode, race me round and pop me in the scanning machine.”

“The MRI. I’m afraid those machines are busy. You can’t just...without a pre-booked window...”

“You’ll do whatever it takes. No expense spared.” From the way he stiffened, his chin receding into the flesh of his neck, Leah wondered if she might have gone too far. “I’m not myself when these things happen. What if I run out into traffic next time, cause a pile-up? Do you want that on your conscience?”

The doctor’s mouth puckered and he huffed air out of full cheeks, like a football player who’d just blown a shot at goal.

“Besides... I said no expense spared. Once we work this out, you’ll tell me how I can show my gratitude. A charitable foundation, maybe, with you as chair, to help other poor bastards like me. Some of my clients run generous giving programs. Corporate social responsibility

is what they call it now, they can't hand money out fast enough once they find the right story. I bet there's some new equipment you could use at your rooms. Or at the hospital..." Leah had no idea how much that would cost, or if it was achievable. But that was a problem for another time.

She was admitted for observation, and suffered her next attack the following afternoon. When she regained awareness, Leah found herself in a hospital bed, the neurologist by her side. He displayed the kind of genuine affection that one hardly ever sees on the face of a busy practitioner.

"You get it done?"

The doctor nodded. "You were in there for almost an hour. Very compliant. We were able to do some detailed mapping."

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing significant. No tumours, no swelling. You're the owner of a healthy brain. But I would say..." The doctor hesitated. "I—we—myself and the MRI techs, we feel like we understand you better.

"I needed to get you talking," he said, when it was obvious she didn't remember. "So that we could watch your language centres. I asked you for a joke, or a memory, and you said that you knew something about gratitude, because of what happened when you were a child. Events you only learned about much later."

Leah felt herself tense. Her eyes wandered over the spotless floor.

The doctor continued, "It must have been a lonely time for you. For your mother. You said I should remind you to visit her."

Leah raised herself up, swung her legs so that they dangled over the side of the bed, unfussed about the way the hospital gown rode up and bunched around her waist. She spoke slowly and deliberately, as if to a backward child. "I couldn't give a rat's arse about any of that. Just tell me what's wrong with me."

The warmth in the doctor's expression guttered out. "Physiologically, I can't find anything

wrong.” Because he was a professional, he refrained from any further assessment.

# # #

Leah took a leave of absence from work. She didn’t have a choice. What if she arrived one day and told the unvarnished truth? She might delete the last line she’d written in her current draft report—Community perspectives about the project are mixed—and fall to transcribing what she’d heard at the last consultation:

I learned the ways of my people from my older brothers. We are custodians, protecting our water, animals and totems as best we can. If this mine proceeds, it will devastate our land. It will disappear the place where our ancestors lived. These effects are irreversible, so we do not consent to this project. We do not consent.

Her field team had been shown engravings. In all probability, hundreds upon hundreds of generations had visited them, preserved them. Supplemented and renewed them. All those activities furthered the union of story and place, and the descendants of those creators had kept knowledge alive through the violence and erasure of the last two centuries. To carry away what had endured for so long, ostensibly in the name of preservation but really just to get at what was underneath, would be to inflict a new wound.

In one of her fits, Leah might openly criticise the permitting system itself. How could it be that Leah, a consultant with no personal link to the site of the proposed mine, was considered more authoritative on this matter than the traditional owners? Their claims would only be given weight if supported by a blow-in like her. The process was so contaminated that no true understanding could ever result from it.

It was hard enough to hold these ideas in her mind, after years of avoidance. Leah knew that writing them down would be ruinous, personally and professionally, and she feared what she would do during her next absence.

# # #

If there was nothing physically wrong with her brain, Leah reasoned, then she must be going mad. She held a deep distrust of anyone who sat around all day talking about feelings. But soon, after she caught herself giving a frail old woman a ride to the shops (a trace of

mothballs and incontinence still lingered in her BMW) Leah gritted her teeth, made a few enquiries, and booked an appointment.

When Leah explained her situation, the psychologist smoothed her skirt and grasped for her notebook. “Interesting,” she said.

They spoke for forty minutes, and Leah strove not to let her impatience show. They talked about Leah’s upbringing. Her body image. It was exactly the sort of idiotic prying that she’d anticipated, but, as she explained, that stuff was irrelevant. She had moved on, geographically and emotionally, from the past. And Leah was happy with the way she looked. A solidly-constructed woman, taller than most men, Leah enjoyed the presence that afforded her when she walked into a room. Most of the time she felt like a boss, and that made sense, because she was one. She didn’t care about winning any beauty contests; she had a husband already and wasn’t looking to trade him in. She almost never wore make-up. No, she had never wanted children of her own.

The psychologist, who was slight, had porcelain skin, and spoke very quietly, made a sort of humming noise when she’d run out of questions. She said, “I don’t suppose you’re familiar with the work of Carl Jung?”

“No.”

“Jung believed that in everybody’s unconscious, there is a part—he called it a person’s ‘shadow’—comprising the qualities that the conscious self has disowned. The qualities that are excluded when we describe ourselves to ourselves.” The psychologist leaned forward, placing her pen so that it rested in perfect orientation with the ruled lines of her notebook. “But no one is absolutely one thing or another, and so the more we deny the existence of our shadow, the more it manifests in unhelpful ways.”

Leah tugged at the cushion behind her back. “Tripe. Pseudo-science.”

“You seem very self-reliant.”

This was hardly a searing insight, and Leah let out a sharp laugh. She thought about Donny, how they’d met when she was studying. Back then she’d worked shifts at a late-night grocery to support herself. Her husband was a good man, but his landscape gardening



business had only ever brought in middling returns, barely contributing to their combined net worth.

“Independence, self-reliance,” the psychologist continued. “Those are strengths. But independent people can be harsh, even cruel. Is that how you think about yourself?”

Leah smirked. “You tell me.”

“I think you’ve been repressing your shadow—in your case, your generous, selfless tendencies—for so long that your unconscious is causing these episodes, as an outlet.

“What I’m telling you, Leah, is that if you want these attacks to stop, you should try embracing your shadow. Be kind. Do something kind for someone, consciously, because you choose to.”

Leah got to her feet. “You better hope I’m feeling kind when I get your bill.” She started for the door.

In a hurried, breathy voice, the psychologist called after her. “You’re fascinating, you know. I wonder if you’d let me use you as a case study? I could talk about you at conferences. You’d just need to sign a consent.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Well, keep it in mind.” The psychologist’s mouth stayed botox-straight, but there was a troubling liveliness in her eyes. “If your attacks don’t stop, perhaps you’ll reconsider.”

# # #

Leah tried to forget all the rubbish she’d heard about shadows and repression, but then she suffered three more attacks in the space of a week. Valuable objects started to go missing from the house. Once, she came to her senses just in time to hear a metallic thunnng as the flap closed on a charity donation bin. Try as she might, her arm wouldn’t reach far enough down the chute to reclaim what she’d given.

Going against her strongest instincts, Leah made preparations to transfer her assets—the house, her term deposits, her share portfolio—into a protective trust. She read about powers of attorney and guardianship, and fretted about who she’d put in charge, if it came to that.

Donny was honest but stupid; her usual lawyer perhaps too cunning.

The following Saturday, very early in the morning, she shook her husband to wake him.

Donny snuffled in his sleep and tried to roll away. She whacked him hard on the meaty bit of flesh above his hip, leaving a red mark.

He'd been manhandled out the door and into the car before he received an explanation.

"We've got a round of golf booked at ten," she said curtly. "At that place down the coast, the one you've been rabbiting on about."

"You hate golf."

"I'll drive the buggy."

Donny frowned. "Are you having one of your...spells?"

Leah ignored him and turned out onto the road.

She spent the day spotting for her husband as he zig-zagged up the fairways. She knew he was enjoying himself by the way he moved, unhurriedly and with loping strides, looking up at the sky and the trees.

They stopped in for a drink at the clubhouse when he'd finished. They sat side by side at the edge of a balcony overlooking the first tee, and took turns critiquing the form of the golfers starting their rounds.

"Do you think I'm a selfish person?" she asked.

He put down his beer. It took him a while to respond. "How could I think that? Everything you have, you've shared with me."

She let him pick the music on the drive home.

When she could stand it, she kept trying to be good. She called Ruth, just to talk. She volunteered to speak at a primary school about archaeology, and kept her cynicism in check. Most difficult of all, Leah decided to renounce her stake in the consultancy. She couldn't go back, even though she still loved the guts of the work. There was value in discovery, in learning and recording. But not in the way they'd been doing it, in service of the narrow interests of her old clients.

For eleven days straight, Leah didn't suffer an attack, and she allowed herself to hope. Little by little, the maintenance of Affable Leah felt like less of a charade. But on the twelfth day she woke up on a long-haul passenger bus, rolling down some highway. It was just after two in the morning. She didn't have her car keys and there was no cash in her purse.

The bus, it transpired, was an interstate service carrying her back to a depot near where she lived. She decided not to file a police report about her missing car. How could she? She couldn't state with any certainty that it had been stolen. More likely, she'd chanced on some no-hoper and had just given it over.

Every day was another prospect for taking back control, but the absences kept occurring. In the map of her memory, there were locations now that were simply null, as if some crooked process had deemed them unimportant, and countenanced their demolition. But those missing spans were important. She lost her paternal grandmother's pearl earrings, the only heirloom that had passed down to her from that side of the family. Despite everything, Ruth had always conceded that Leah's father's mother was a kind woman, and the earrings were the 'something old' that Leah had chosen to wear on the day she'd married Donny. After they vanished, Leah spent mornings visiting pawn shops and jewellers, but it was no good.

Leah had spent a career working with objects. She knew that some special things were the bones over which memories and meanings were layered. Stories had sequences, parts deployed in order. Lose some of the parts, or scramble the sequence, and what remained was a useless mess.

Almost a full week would pass without an attack, but then some days it would happen twice. Every time she came back from an absence it was sickening, as she realised that moments before, her true self had not been in charge.

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In desperation, she took her mother's advice.

Leah found the old priest singing quietly to himself as he distributed hymn books along the ends of each pew. He was dressed casually in a bottle green jumper and open-collared shirt, but she remembered the careful way he moved, and the reedy timbre of his voice as he'd

delivered one of his marathon homilies, back in the day.

The red brick building remained squat and austere, the interior lit dimly through crude stained-glass windows that inspired no one. A whiff of incense and some grubby finger-marks around the holy water stoup took Leah back to the last time she'd been here, under protest, just before she'd left for good. To her teenage self, church had been purely tedious. But returning now, Leah was struck by how much this place must have meant to her mother. It had become Ruth's community, and at the same time her sanctuary from others. Even though he'd arrived at the parish a decade before Ruth and Leah, Father Marras had remained an outsider, too: a bookish theologian, posted to a backwater town whose inhabitants were largely descended from Irish migrants fleeing the Great Hunger. The people here could be spiteful, and now that Leah was grown, she could recall some of the remarks she'd overheard but not understood back then. Snide whispers: Poor old Ruthy—I try not to cringe when she asks if I want my fish battered.

“Hello, Father,” Leah said.

She watched him as recognition dawned. “Leah.” His posture relaxed, shoulders settling into a deep hunch. He'd been old when she left, and now he was ancient. “It's a joy to see you.”

They sat down next to each other, and Leah told the priest her story. Details of every attack. Her search, fruitless, for a sensible explanation. It came tumbling from her: ...And then I must've told the doctor what happened, with mum. How she had to run, to make sure I was safe...

She spoke of her fear, and held nothing back: ...I can't do my job—and I keep giving stuff away. Soon it'll all be gone. Without money, what good am I to anyone? To Donny...

It was a forensic account. It took her the better part of half an hour.

When she was done, Father Marras bowed his head, and she wondered if he was thinking or praying. When he looked back up at her, he only said, “Interesting.”

“Mum says it's God working through me.”

The old man considered this. “I'd be setting a poor example if I dismissed the possibility.”

“Then I need your help. Please.” She ground her teeth together, hating what she’d come here to ask. “I need an exorcism.”

Father Marras made a grunting noise. He might have been stifling a cough. “I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“I’ve tried everything else. I’m telling you, I’m at my wit’s end.”

He shook his head. “What I mean is, if you awoke in pools of blood...If you were muttering curses, then an exorcism might be worth the attempt. But Leah, when you suffer one of these occurrences, you do good. If this really is possession, then it’s as your mother says. And it isn’t given to me—to anyone—to cast Him out.”

Leah folded at the waist, head in hands. Deep, angry shame, a long-forgotten feeling, roiled inside. Her attacks had driven her here, back to everything she’d repudiated. Consumed with self-pity, she had begged this man to banish his own god; a god she didn’t believe in.

She wept. Even as she gave herself over to sorrow, part of Leah marvelled at the feeling. She couldn’t remember ever crying, but she supposed she must have when she was young. The priest sat by her side, squeezing her shoulder, compounding her humiliation.

It took a long time for composure to return, or at least it seemed that way. She was taking heaving breaths, and she tried to concentrate on drawing air in slowly, exhaling slowly. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

To allow her time, perhaps, the priest said, “When we speak about the afterlife, we tend to imagine it as a wonderful place. But older religions had more complicated cosmologies. We borrow from the Jews, and the Jews borrowed from the Sumerians, who believed that there are seven discrete heavens, and seven earths, too. And that what goes on up there creates little ripples for those of us stuck here.”

“The Divine Comedy,” Leah said, remembering a long-ago Classics course she’d taken. “What’s-his-face. Dante.”

“Like Dante, yes,” said the priest, unable to mask his surprise.

“What’s your point?”

“I suppose that...existence is complicated. It is not for us to know all that there is, much less understand it. Perhaps we are in one of the heavens right now.”

“Is that what you think?”

“No,” he said, frowning. “I don’t think this is any kind of paradise.”

Gingerly, the priest knelt. He placed his hands on hers and spoke softly. “Heaven or earth, I can’t tell. But ask yourself: during these episodes, have you been hurt? Really hurt?”

Leah weighed the question, casting for the truth. “No,” she said.

“Have you hurt anyone?”

She shook her head, more certain. “No.”

Behind the rheum in the priest’s eyes, there was something like mirth. “Then celebrate,” he said.

She waited, but there was nothing more for her here. As she studied the varnished whorls of the bench in front, she felt him withdraw, heard the sound of steps receding. The swinging shut of a door.

For a while longer she sat, conscious of something new. Frightening, in its way, but not malicious. If she allowed it time, if she could refrain from snuffing it out, one day it might reveal itself.

When she was ready, Leah grabbed the side of the pew and levered herself up. On her way outside, as she passed through the vestibule, she slowed. For three heartbeats she considered the donation box.

In the afternoon’s diagonal glare, Leah walked the streets of her home town, arriving at her mother’s front door.