

The Back of the Back of Beyond



Sample Chapter: 'No Pets Allowed'



stories by Edwina Harvey

The Back of the Back of Beyond

A collection
of interlinked short stories
by Edwina Harvey

edited by Simon Petrie



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The Whale's Tale (2009)

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Chapter One

No Pets Allowed

Sure I'll tell you about my last flatmate.

He's one of those role-playing sorts. You know, plastic models on every non-moving square inch of furniture, replica guns in his underwear drawer (not that I look in his underwear drawer all that often, you understand). Posters of the battle scenes from the 'Lord of the Rings' movies on most of the walls, a poster of the cast from *The Big Bang Theory* plastered to the ceiling. Not that unusual really.

Me? Well, I'm more the science-fiction/fantasy type. With a pet unicorn. How imaginary the unicorn is depends on how pure your heart is, and whether or not you have ever been startled awake in the middle of a dream in the middle of the night to find the business end of a horn poised at that delicate space between your eyes.

He likes chocolate and ice cream a lot, that unicorn. Life got a lot easier when I got a flatmate who accepted that it wasn't *me* eating all the chocolate and ice cream. Okay, so life got a little easier when I taught the unicorn how to open the fridge door too.

You allergic to unicorns, by any chance? You allergic to any equines as far as you know? No, no reason for asking ...

I had a cat not that long ago, too, and I want to get another one pretty soon to fill the void, but I'll tell you more about that later.

Ah, my last flatmate! Bean he was known as. Has Bean, Bean There Done That, Bean Too Long. I've got

loads more. It's not the sort of name you can take seriously, can you?

And he had some strange friends. They'd come over and they'd spend the whole night talking in his room about role-playing; things like fourteenth level dungeons, thirteen-sided dice, Klingon battle cruisers and salvos—no, not the op-shop where you can buy cheap clothes—and those things music was recorded on before downloads were invented. Records! Yeah, them.

When they weren't talking about things I know nothing about in his room, they'd be playing these games in the lounge room, usually while they were drinking cocktails containing certain substances that weren't quite legal. That didn't really worry me, because if they were sipping on their cocktails it meant they weren't drinking *my* Coca-Cola. Any person of high social standing should have a fridge stocked with the real thing. And I work night shifts and weekends, so I need it for medicinal purposes and reckon it should be tax-deductible.

I don't take kindly to any freeloaders helping themselves to my collection of Coke, though the unicorn is exempt from this ruling. He likes a can on hot summer nights, especially when he's been up at the racecourse pretending he's winning the Melbourne Cup.

When Bean was alone (which wasn't very often, because after a while all his friends became dependent on his cocktails) he dabbled in magic. That's okay with me, because I'm pretty tolerant of anyone's religion. He used to walk around the flat naked chanting incantations, too, but that didn't worry me either because he hasn't got anything I haven't seen on a centrefold in *Playgirl*. (No, I wouldn't dream of looking up that sort of thing on the net—well, at least not when the boss was passing through the office.)

What I didn't like about Bean's practices were that they'd upset my stomach. One of our few differences of opinion was about whether I could have a psychic

stomach that was sensitive to magic. I—as the owner of the stomach—claimed it was true. Bean on the other hand was always of the opinion that I did too much overtime at work to pay for my dependency on Coca-Cola, and the caffeine and stress combined were no doubt giving me an ulcer.

Apart from upsetting my stomach, I can't be sure how effective his occultish dabbles were. We live in one of those suburbs where break and enter is pretty common, so Bean thought it would be prudent to lay a 'Thief Deterrent' spell. I thought it must have been powerful because I had to break out the alka-seltzer. Bean just sniffed and told me it served me right for working both days of the weekend.

His spell worked really well. We were robbed the next day. They got my TV, the DVD player and my iPad, but they didn't touch any of the junk in Bean's room. (No doubt not much call for a Commodore 64 computer you're hanging onto to sell as an antique any day now, and they didn't see the value of an old Betamax video recorder either. The thirteen-sided dice, Cthulhu prints, and drawer of miniature military figurines were likewise overlooked.) Bean claimed this proved his spell had worked. I said it only proved the thieves were after stuff they could fence before it got too hot, though it also proved I don't spend all my overtime on Coca-Cola. We were both right, no doubt.

If Bean had any redeeming features (apart from being able to unblock a sink and put the garbage out) it was his thing for dragons. I liked his vast knowledge of dragon lore. I liked his models, posters and books of them, but most of all I loved the way his eyes lit up with enthusiasm when he talked about them. He could, and would, talk the night away just telling you about dragons.

I came home one night after working late, my arms all but dragged out of my sockets by the four bottles of two-litre Coke (hey, they were on special!) cradled in those supermarket plastic shopping bags that were designed by a sadomasochist to rip through your fingers if you tried

to carry home more than a hundred grams of feathers in them. Yes, I know, I should have been using my canvas shopping bags, and most of the time I do, but the special caught me unawares, so don't guilt me out, okay?

I'd had a hard day at work, I was tired, my knuckles were dragging on the floor by this stage, and all I really wanted was a nice hot bath, a refreshing glass of Coke and to crawl off into bed with my favourite author ... or at least his most recent book.

I dumped the Coke in the fridge, grabbed a few squares of chocolate (hoping that the unicorn wouldn't notice them missing), then headed to the bathroom, put the plug in the bath and turned on the taps.

That's when I saw it and screamed.

"Bean!"

"HmMMM?" It was the same non-committal noise he makes when I've seen a humungous spider and want him to deal with it.

"What the hell is this thing in the bath?"

"What thing?"

"This big thing."

"Oh *that* thing. It's mine. I got it today."

"Well, would you mind removing it?"

"It's alright where it is. You just go ahead and have your bath. It won't bother you."

Won't bother me? How could something that was spherical, dirty looking, and came up to my thigh sitting in a bath tub that I wanted to have a bath in *not* bother me? Granted, if it had been wrapped in foil I would have mistaken it for the largest Easter egg I've ever seen, and probably wouldn't have been so bothered, but the fact of the matter was that it was sitting in the middle of the bath tub and the hot water I was going to use to soothe away my tensions was swirling around it.

You know the cost of water these days? The overtime didn't just buy toys and Coca-Cola. I really wanted to soak in some steaming hot water right then. I doubted I could

move the newest bathtub fixture without rupturing a disc or giving myself a hernia. (*Damn it! Why couldn't Bean just get himself a rubber duck like everybody else?*) and I didn't want to send all that lovely hot water gurgling down the sink without giving me some benefit first. So I got out of my clothes and into the bath, carefully arranging my legs around the great lump of a thing in the middle.

"Bean!" I shouted my displeasure through the door. "Bring me a Coke!"

Bean knows enough about women to know that once a month they need a slave. A large glass of Coke at the end of a familiar arm inserted itself through the door while he carefully gazed in the opposite direction.

"Thank you." (Just because I treat him like a personal servant doesn't mean I can't be polite.)

The arm was removed, the door was dutifully closed behind, and I was once again serene in my steamy haven, except for the frown when I contemplated the boulder I shared the bath with.

There was something not quite right about it ... was that noise coming from it, or was that the old lady upstairs practicing her tap-dancing again? (I think she uses real taps!) And was that thing rocking, or what?

When I heard and saw the cracks appear, my caffeine-over-saturated system had me up and out of that bath at the speed of light, wrapping a bath sheet around me as a reptilian head emerged from the shell and I stared into the face of a newborn baby dragon.

"Bean, get in here NOW!" I hollered in my best Nefertiti, Queen of the Nile impersonation.

"Gee, you drank that Coke quick," Bean informed me, arriving at the bathroom door, Coke bottle in hand, ready to refill my glass.

He wasn't expecting the bathroom door to be flung open for him, he wasn't expecting to see me wrapped in a towel. He may have thought all his Christmases had come at once, but somehow I doubt it. Then he looked past me

at the big lizard with wings emerging from its shell and fell hopelessly in love.

"My baby! The hot water must have stimulated the hatching! I'll just clean him up and you can get back in the bath if you want."

I glanced into the bath. *Get in and soak in all that amniotic fluid? I don't think so.*

The dragonling made a 'peep peep' noise. I thought it was bonding with Bean, but it was gazing at me.

"Well, congratulations, Daddy."

I doubt Bean heard the sarcasm in my voice. He was too busy breaking off parts of shell, and wiping the hatchling down with one of our best towels. "I wasn't expecting you so soon! You must be hungry. What have we got to feed you?"

"We've got chocolate," I informed him.

"Or maybe you need a liquid diet first?"

"We've got Coke." Yeah, I'm just Little Miss Helpful, aren't I? "You'd better go to the convenience store and get some milk or something."

Typical man! He was totally unprepared for motherhood.

It was the first time I saw Bean flustered as he was torn between being the Mother-Nurturer and the Hunter-Gatherer.

"I'll keep an eye on the little fellow. You go get him something to eat and drink. Now go! But take the canvas bags! I've already tried to ruin the planet today. Don't you come home with plastic bags!"

I don't think he ever heard me. Bean went faster than I'd ever seen him move before, while I sat on the toilet seat and admired the newborn dragon, who I had to admit was kind of cute, especially with those hypnotising amber eyes.

Bean was back before I knew it, ushering me away from his dragon. (*Oh, these clucky boys!*) He'd bought four litres of milk and a box of hamburger patties. That would work as a first meal, I guessed.

I went off to put on some clothes, but not before the unicorn wandered in and sniffed warily at the baby dragon before heading for the fridge and the chocolate. He obviously wasn't too happy about the new arrival, because he went out to air his grievances to the cat. I can't say I blame him.

I considered my own situation: now I shared a two-bedroom middle story flat with a role-player, a cat, a unicorn and a baby dragon ... I wondered how we'd all get along.



I didn't have to wonder for long.

For the first few days it was no big deal; I just stepped around the dragon doo-doo and puddles. He was Bean's dragon, Bean could clean up after him. And he did, providing I yelled and tantrumed enough to motivate him.

But flight and fire come early to dragons. Once he started shooting flames and exercising his wings things got a little out of hand.

The dragon sneezed one night and char-broiled the cat, which put my relationship with dragon and Bean (not to mention the ghost of the deceased cat) on edge. I was fond of that cat. That cat had been like a cat to me. I'd raised it from a kitten. Without the cat, the unicorn only had me to talk to, and it seemed to think my conversations—revolving as they did around how much I hated my job and how much I enjoyed chocolate and Coca-Cola—were substandard. The unicorn had never considered Bean worthy of conversation, and that wasn't likely to change now the flat had been turned into a baby-dragon creche.

But he didn't stay a baby dragon for long. The damn thing grew faster than anything has a right to.

When Bean's bedroom could no longer accommodate dragon and Bean, Bean started sleeping on the lounge. But the lounge isn't that comfortable, and that arrangement only lasted a few nights.

I should point out that Bean's gamer friends came over, saw the dragon (how could you miss it?) and all swore off drinking his cocktails with the illegal ingredients. He didn't see them again, but he didn't really miss them, because he had more important things on his mind.

Bean decided the garage downstairs would be a good place for the dragon to live. Bean's back was in agony from sleeping on the lounge by this stage. So my car got evicted, set free to roam the streets ... okay, I had to park it half a block away, but you get my meaning.

Getting the dragon out of the flat, down the stairs, and into the garage without any nosy neighbours catching us was a logistics nightmare, but somehow we managed.

And that was fine for a while. Only he was still growing, and our fun wasn't over yet. When the dragon had got to the stage where his wings scraped the walls of the garage, he ... er ... sort of got out one day. Turns out, unlike bats and bank customers, dragons aren't particularly happy about being left in the dark all of the time. No doubt he craved the wild blue yonder, the wide open sky. Truth to tell, Bean had been a bit slack cleaning out the newly-appointed dragon barn and the poor thing was probably keen for a breath of fresh air as well. There's no fun breathing in the heady odour of your own excrement, I'm sure.

There was no way I was letting Bean drive my car, so he played sky-searching navigator while we chased his dragon around the suburbs. The damn thing tried to pick off a couple of german shepherds along the way. I bet they'll be seeing the doggy psychiatrist for some time to come.

I guess we were lucky that this was the dragon's first flight. He soon got tired and landed in a park, where Bean cornered him. I sort of kept my distance ... I mean we got along okay, this dragon and I, and I didn't want to spoil the relationship by telling him he'd been a very, very naughty boy.

Best to leave that to Daddy.

So Bean made a dragon-halter out of a bundle of rope he'd thrown in the car. Then he leapt on its back, and off they flew with Bean yelling to me that he'd meet me back at the flat.

Yeah, that's about the time the big UFO scare took place. We weren't being invaded by creatures from another planet, it was just an Unidentified Flying Dragon causing a blip on the airport radar.

That was the last I saw of Bean for the next three weeks. Then, just as I was wondering if I should put his name in the Missing Persons column in the newspaper, he turned up to collect his stuff. Said he'd moved out to the desert. The dragon preferred it out there—the wide open spaces, plenty of heat, and feral pigs to feast on when he got hungry.

Bean gave me a forwarding address, just in case the producers of *Mad Max* were looking for extras, or anything like that.

Then he left still owing me two weeks rent, the bastard.

I had to pay to get the whole flat fumigated, to get rid of the dragon smell, on my own.

So this is the room. It could do with another coat of paint ... unless you happen to be into scorch marks as decoration? It's kind-of-clean, and it's cheap. Are you going to take it or not?

By the way ... don't have any pets, do you?

Afterword

Written 25 years ago, 'No Pets Allowed' would have been my first commercial writing sale if the gamers' magazine that accepted it hadn't folded one issue before the issue my story was due to be published in. But the story refused to lie down and die, finding a home in a fanzine and spawning 'Party' and 'My Sweet 286'.

Bean's universe just seemed to be a place I wanted to go hang-out in every few years or so when one thing or another would present itself as a good idea to write a story around and set there.

I have to agree with Liz that the stories are 'fannish', especially since I weaved my sponsors into the storylines, but I hope they appeal to a wider audience too.

If the multiverse theory is ever proven, then somewhere out there, there must be the me who got her redundancy, moved out west, saved a couple of donkeys and a Clydesdale from the knackers' yard and leads an extraordinary life in a quiet country town with aliens as her back-door neighbours.

I hope her knees don't ache and she never reaches the point where she thinks, 'Well, that dream will never happen now'.

And I hope she too is surrounded by fantastic friends who are willing to help some of her dreams come true.

Edwina

Acknowledgements

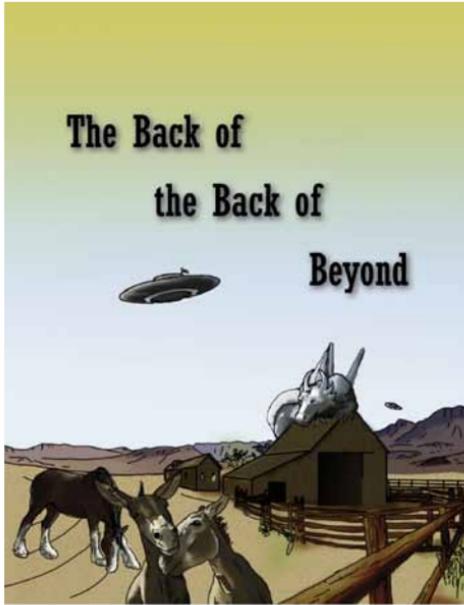
'No Pets Allowed' was first published in *Out of the Ashes* (1987; ed. M. Beamish)

'Get Me To The Worldcon On Time' (extensively rewritten here) was first published in *Fables and Reflections*, issue 1 (2001; ed. Lily Chrywenstrom)

'Party With My Sweet 286' is a mash-up of 'Party', first published in *Antipodean SF*, issue 1 (1998; ed. Ian Newcombe) and 'My Sweet 286', first published in the *AustrAlien Absurdities* anthology (2002, Agog! Press; eds. Chuck McKenzie and Tansy Rayner Roberts)

'The 'R' Word', 'Seeing The Light (When The Fridge Door's Open)', 'Move Your Ass', 'Meet The Neighbours', 'Painters And Decorators', 'Dragoncats' and 'Neighbourhood Watch' are original to this volume, and appear here for the first time.

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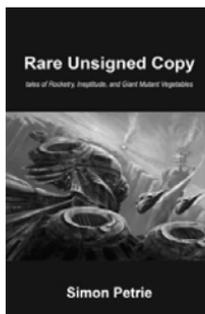
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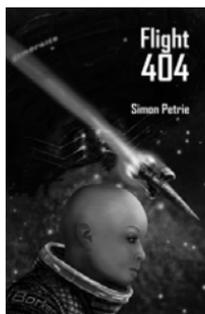
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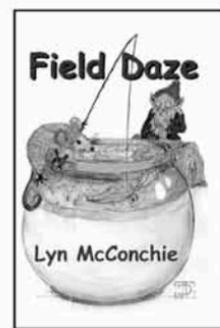
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