

## A Serious Fence

*Gillian Hagenus*

Today at school we learnt about the convicts. In the olden days, in England, they had so many criminals that they couldn't fit them all in the prisons, so they found Australia and took all the criminals who wouldn't fit and dumped them in Australia and said, 'Have fun.'

Mum says, 'It's a bit more complicated than that, but yes, essentially.'

So then all the criminals made a settlement and had lots of babies and built buildings and became Australians.

Mum says, 'It's a bit more complicated than that, but yes, essentially.'

'So, everyone in Australia,' I say to Mum in the car on the way home from school, 'is descended from criminals.'

'Well,' says Mum, 'except Indigenous Australians, who were here before the convicts. And people who weren't born here. And people descended from those people. And also people who came here freely.'

'Okay, fine, but apart from THAT, Australia is like a prison the size of a country,' I say.

Mum makes her big mum sigh and says, 'It's a bit more complicated than that, but yes, essentially.'

'So that means,' I say, and Mum does her mum sigh again and I see her roll her eyes in the rear-view mirror. 'That means that the Yatala Prison is a prison within a prison. And THAT means that criminals who are inside the Yatala prison are extra-EXTRA criminals.'

Mum does that thing where she pretends that she didn't hear me say anything. The short bits at the front of Mum's hair keep falling in her eyes and she flicks it back three times instead of answering me. Her charm bracelet jingles as she turns the wheel and we drive up the driveway to our house and get out of the car.

Our house is okay, I guess. It's not as big as Jacob's house and it doesn't have a home-cinema room, but we do have a pool AND we live right behind the Yatala Prison. Well, technically not RIGHT behind, because there's Dry Creek in the middle, but THEN there's Yatala Prison.

There's lots of cool old buildings in Dry Creek that used to be part of old Yatala Prison but are now just crumbling with graffiti all over them. And also, R M Williams had a house there, but apparently they knocked it down because they were scared criminals who might escape from the Yatala Prison would want to hide there. Which makes sense, because if *I* were a criminal escaping Yatala Prison the first thing *I* would do is steal some boots and a nice coat to cover my prison uniform so nobody would know that I just escaped from Yatala Prison.

I asked Mum what would happen to us if somebody escaped from Yatala Prison because, now that R M Williams is gone, they would have to come to our house to steal clothes.

Mum said, 'Nobody is going to escape from Yatala Prison because the security technology is much better than it was back then.'

I said, 'Okay.'

But I keep my cricket bat under my bed just in case.

It's almost summer school holidays so I am working on building a fort in the backyard that's bigger and better than Jacob's fort so that I can invite Jacob over in the holidays and show him how much bigger and better my fort is. I finish my homework superfast and take my snack out into the backyard to keep working. My little sister Rebe wants to help and I say no, but Mum says, 'Let your sister help,' so I tell Rebe she can help with the decorations, 'But nothing GIRLY, okay?' Rebe has chubby cheeks that are always splotchy and red, so sometimes you just have to say yes to her because it's too hard to tell if she's about to cry or not.

We have a gate in our back fence that leads directly into Dry Creek. Mum lets me play in Dry Creek, but I have to make sure that I can see the house at all times, no ifs and butts about it. And also, don't let the dog out of the yard. Really, I think, it's not very fair because Jacob's mum lets him go to the park all by himself, but Mum says that's because Jacob's mum's a you-know-what and wouldn't know good parenting if it smacked her in the you-know-what. Dry Creek is super cool though. Sometimes we go on walks on the weekend, but when I'm older I can't wait to go and explore the old Yatala Prison ruins by myself so that I can play fire-in-the-hole without Mum saying I have to let Rebe join in.

It's hot, so the dirt on the slope is bone dry and there's a tonne of dried gum leaves and sticks on the ground. I'm looking *pacificaly* for big gum tree branches though, because they are super sturdy so very good for fort building. I collect a few gum drops on the way to put in the

Ammunition Storage Vault and find a branch that's so long I have to drag it by one end up the slope and through the gate. The branch dragging through dry leaves makes crashing noises through the scrub and it scares a group of galahs who scream and flap away. My nose stings from the dust and everything smells spicy. Rebe comes back while I'm coming through the gate to show me the decorations she's got and they're blue ribbons which are GIRLY, but Rebe says they're not because they're blue, and I say they are because they're ribbons, and then Curly takes off through the gate and into Dry Creek.

I'm in *serious* trouble.

I tell Rebe, 'Stay here and DON'T TELL MUM and if you don't, I'll let you help build the fort.'

And then I run through the gate after Curly.

Curly is a very little dog, but he runs really fast. I can run pretty good, but Curly is out of sight in SECONDS. NOT good. I keep running in the direction I saw him go, but I have to slow down because it's a bit downhill and the rocks and dirt make it quite slippy. I shoot across the walking path and go through the thick yellow wattle. It spikes my hair on the way through and the inside of my nose stings from the smell of its thick pollen. Now I'm a bit worried because I can't see the house anymore, but I don't want to get in trouble for letting Curly out. So, I keep going and I call 'Curly' really loudly because Mum probably won't be able to hear.

There's no water in the creek, just like always, so it's easy to cross. Curly likes to jump the narrow parts of the bank when we go on walks so I know he has probably gone that way.

The sun's going down. It's like a supernova on the horizon right now, orange and blinding. When I look too near it, I get red spots in my eyes and I can't see what my feet are doing. I'm off the path. Mum says that the paths that look like paths but aren't are actually where water goes, so I think maybe Curly would follow them because I learnt in school that animals have these instincts. They always know where water is. Somehow, I've gotten dirt in my mouth and I wish I had some water. Where the sun's rays don't reach in the scrub, there are cold spots and shadows. I scratch my arm on a yakka bush. It stings and bleeds a little but I can't stop because I have to find Curly. I'm getting puffed out. I DEFINITELY can't see the house anymore.

But I'm not crying, just so you know.

And then, thank GOODNESS, I hear Curly barking. His barking is not very manly because he's little, but you can't ever tell him that because he doesn't like to be reminded that he's not ferocious. I think Curly thinks he's a dingo.

I follow the sound of Curly's bark and finally get out of the bushes near the ruins of the old Yatala Prison. There's the stockade, the Blacksmith's hut, and the old guard's tower in the distance. And just down the hill is the Powder Magazine, its low brick walls covered in blue and grey graffiti.

There are less trees here. Just big open plains covered in dead yellow grass until you get to the barbed wire fences of Yatala Prison. Curly is there and he's barking like crazy and trying to growl and I yell 'CURLY!' in my best alpha male voice, but he doesn't stop. I squint against the sun and shade my eyes and see that Curly is barking at a person. Curly never barks at people. Curly loves people.

The person is a man and he's wearing a dark green jumpsuit, like Mr MacDonald's uniform, the grumpy yard man at school. He's standing very still and I think he's talking to Curly but I can't hear any words because dry, hot wind blows across the hills. It smells like the vacuum cleaner when you empty out the dust.

'Excuse me?' I yell. 'That's my dog. He ran away. Can you help me get his collar so I can take him back home?'

Actually, I have no idea how I'm supposed to get Curly all the way back home. We've been to the ruins more than once, but we take a different path each time. I don't really know the way back home, but maybe the man can help me. I didn't know that they had yard men for Dry Creek, but as a yard man, he probably knows all the shortcuts.

He doesn't have any gardening tools. Mr MacDonald always has gardening tools with him. I think maybe he hasn't heard me, so I jog closer. Curly is still barking.

'Excuse me?'

He turns his head towards me. My eyes throb with colours from the blinding sun. Every time I blink, it splotches his face red and black so I can't really tell what he looks like except that he is very tall. Taller than Dad. And kind of hunched, like he is carrying something invisibly heavy. I get a bit closer so I can see if he has a name tag like most other yard men. I'm close enough to shake his hand if he wants me to, because Dad says that's good manners, but also, I'm glad Curly is between us because I hate shaking strangers' hands. From here I can see that the

man's green jumpsuit looks old and dusty, probably from working in Dry Creek in the summer heat.

But then I start to think. Because maybe the jumpsuit isn't a yard man jumpsuit. On the movies, prison jumpsuits are always orange but Mum says all the time that the movies get things wrong. I think that he is looking right at me, but there's no way to tell. The sun isn't warm anymore.

Okay.

Okay. No sudden movements.

I slowly reach down and grab Curly's collar. He's too busy barking and growling to notice.

'Um, thank you for finding my dog,' I say, because I feel like I should say something. I wish I had my cricket bat. I reach into my pocket where the gum nuts are.

Okay.

Lightning fast, I throw the gum nuts at the Prison man and turn and run. I let go of Curly's collar and he goes with me. We crash back into the scrub and just fly. I don't really know where I'm going, but we reach the creek and Curly and I leap.

I've never jumped further.

I've never run faster.

I don't even feel my legs moving, I'm just running.

I'm convinced I hear the prison man crashing through the brush behind me, but I don't DARE look back.

Somehow, I reach the walking path. Okay. The house is up ahead. I launch myself up the steep hill, but slide back down a few times because I'm not paying attention. The Prison man is right behind me, I'm sure. And then, finally, I make it up and through the gate and Mum's there. Rebe must have told on me, but there's no time to worry about that now.

I scream, 'MUM!! THERE'S A MURDERER!!' and Mum says, 'WHAT?' and I turn around and there's no one there.

Maybe I lost him. I slam the gate shut with a huge metal clang.

I'm so puffed and a little bit croaky from yelling so it takes a while for Mum to understand what happened, but she immediately locks the gate, runs inside with us and goes around locking all the doors and windows and pulling the blinds down.

It's gloomy in the kitchen, but not entirely dark. The windows are grey squares outlined in setting sun. Mum gets us all – Rebe, Curly, and Me – into a huddle on the floor behind the island bench and calls the police. Her voice is low, almost a whisper, but it shakes and shakes and Mum's hands around us are clenched really tight. I think she's bruising my leg. Curly does a circle, then goes to sleep in Rebe's lap.

I say, 'Mum, you're bruising my leg.'

And Rebe says, 'Are we playing hide and seek? Who's seeking?'

And Mum says 'SHH I need you to be really, really quiet,' and to the police on the phone she says, 'Please hurry.'

The tiles are ice cold from the air conditioner. The handle on the cupboard pokes at my skull. There is an old crusty splotch of tomato sauce on the tile next to me and I start scraping at it with my fingernail. Mum's hands shake and shake. The sauce won't come off.

The police tell me off. They don't believe me, and it's so unfair. They are both tall and sometimes I have to say 'Pardon?' to them because their guns in their belts are much larger than I ever thought they would be. I would ask if I can hold one, because once when Jacob was in a car accident, the police officer let him hold her handcuffs and a gun would be way cooler. Except, I'm in deep trouble.

They say that no-one escaped Yatala Prison. That everyone was counted four and it was impossible that I met a prisoner in Dry Creek.

They say, 'If you're going to tell a lie, at least get your facts straight. Yatala prisoners don't wear dark green jumpsuits anymore. Lying to the police is a serious fence and next time we won't be so quick to let it go.'

They take up a lot of space in the dining room. It looks smaller after they leave.

Mum says she's extremely disappointed in me and Dad only sits really straight in his chair with his suit still on and his belly sucked in and says, 'We will discuss this in the morning.'

I know what I saw. And if Curly could talk, he'd back me up.

I tell Mum I really don't want to go to bed by myself. Because *I* know the Yatala man is out there still and he could be coming here. He will wait until all of the lights go off and he will come for me for ruining his escape plans. I can't stop thinking about the way his face flickered in

between the spots of red and black, like an old light trying to turn on. I try to sleep with my light on but Mum tells me, 'Don't be ridiculous.' I leap onto my bed from the doorway.

I have my cricket bat under the covers. The wood is cold. Outside is dead quiet except for a dog barking somewhere. Sweat sits in my elbows and behind my knees, but I don't dare kick the covers off. I squeeze my eyes shut as tight as they can go and don't fall asleep until it's almost light outside.

**Gillian Hagenus** is a writer and editor living and working on Kaurna land in South Australia. Her short fiction has appeared in *Voiceworks*, *SWAMP*, and *The Antigonish Review*, and is forthcoming in *The Social Alternatives Journal*. She is currently a Masters candidate in Creative writing at The University of Adelaide, where she is working to prove that the Australian suburbs are - despite a noted lack of crumbling castles and swooning maidens - very Gothic spaces.