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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

French Toast In Suburbija

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Jadranka gazes at the two piping hot slices of French toast on her Humpty Dumpty plate as she struggles to swallow the third. Her eight-year-old cheeks are about to burst.

Another sizzling, greasy, fried piece of bread lands on Humpty's head.

“Zashto si spora? Ajde che se oladi!” Jadranka's Serbian mum Vesna, a grease-stained apron wrapped around her dark blue denim work overalls and brandishing the frypan that's producing all this toast, scolds her daughter for eating so slow.

With her chock-full cheeks Jadranka peers at the ticking cheap blue Target clock on the wall. She knows her mum has to leave when the big hand is on the '9' and the little hand is on the '7'. Right now both hands overlap on the '7'. *Oh. The. Wait.*

She repeatedly munches as she listens to her mum getting ready in the bedroom next door. Their two-bedroom suburban Australian fibro home is so small Jadranka can often hear her dad peeing in the bathroom when she's watching Wonder Woman up loud in the sitting room. Now that she's thinking of it, her dad pees *a lot*.

Jadranka quickly stashes a piece of the greasy bread in a pocket of her red tartan school uniform.

Vesna doesn't suspect a thing as she adjusts her denim work overalls and kisses her daughter goodbye on her soft fine blonde head, “Vidish kako si dobra, nemoj da zaboravish ruchak.” She's noticed less bread around Humpty and praises Jadranka for being a good girl and reminds her not to forget her lunchbox.

The big hand on the clock is on the '9' when the front door clicks shut and Jadranka is finally home alone. On the verge of vomiting, she zooms to the bathroom

and spits out all the soggy, eggy bread into the tiny hand basin. Her little fingers desperately try to squash and push it down the sinkhole. But it won't all fit. *It won't all fit!* She twists and turns the taps and keeps pressing and plunging.

Jadranka hates *jaja* – eggs. The smell of them. The taste of them. The look of them. How she yearns for Coco Pops but her mum is a non-believer, she's explained to her many times the small sugary brown balls are too flimsy and will not fill Jadranka up. Instead she always prepares *jaja*-based breakfasts. French toast, boiled eggs, scrambled eggs, omelettes and that absolute Serbian specialty - scrambled eggs *with fried green and red capsicums*.

Oh! The water pressure is so slow and there's so much of the saturated bread bobbing in the basin. Jadranka scoops it up with a towel and dumps it in the bathtub. *Oh! Oh!* These taps are much harder to twiddle! But with focus and perseverance comes success, and she watches with relief as the bread gurgles down the hole.

But the smell of *jaja* still fills the bathroom because once a week Vesna washes Jadranka's hair with beaten egg yolks convinced her fine strands will thicken. This happened again this morning while The Gee Your Hair Smells Terrific shampoo sat on the edge of the bathtub, untouched.

She touches the bottle now, flips open the pink lid and breathes in the fragrance - it smells terrific!

At the bottom of the large yard by the chicken coop, capsicum patch and tomato stakes, Jadranka tosses the toast— one by one - high over the fence into the neighbor's yard.

She doesn't like the mean man next door. Once when she watched her mum try to coax her dad out of the coop because he believed he was being stalked by Russian spies, Jadranka heard the mean man holler to his wife in his broad accent "Bloody wogs, someone needs to teach 'em to speak Australian."

The rooster in the coop crows setting off the squawking chickens. The mean man's dog barks viciously, "Garry! Shut it!" he yells.

Petrified, Jadranka freezes wishing the poultry would shoosh. She charges for the back door.

"Oy! You! Whachya think ya doin'?" He peers over the battered corrugated iron fence brandishing a piece of Jadranka's breakfast. Garry continues to bark like mad at the rowdy chooks.

Jadranka keeps running.

"I said 'Oy there' girlie!"

His booming voice panics her, she becomes stuck in her tracks and gasps for breath as she cries over her shoulder, "I just, just, give food to, to dog-gy."

"Ya what?"

"I – I just give to dog-gy some food." She's hyperventilating.

"Don't they teachya English at school girlie? Give ya weird food to ya flippin' chickens, don't be givin' my Garry ya smelly bread."

Run Jadranka Run! She shrieks to herself, charging across the yard almost colliding with the clothesline from fright. Both the screen and kitchen doors slam shut

behind her. Terrified, she peers through the kitchen venetians. The mean man flings all the bread back into her backyard.

Stunned, she knows her mum will find it. She's never tried to feed the chickens because she's not sure the thick bread will fit in their tiny beaks. Also *should* they eat *their own eggs*? The mean man is always asleep at this time, *what is he doing up?*

Too freaked to return outside, Jadranka decides she'll have to deal with the bread after school. Her mum doesn't come home until the big hand is on the '6' and the little hand on the '4'. This will give Jadranka plenty of time.

She understands her mum works in something called a factory in a place called 'Holden' one train station away. Five times her mum took Jadranka on the train with her to the employment office. "You have job?" her mum would ask the grumpy man behind the counter in her broken English. "No job," he would mock, like he was a migrant with a thick accent too.

The sixth time, her mum wore a short pink skirt and bright red lipstick she once bought from the lady called Avon who always comes knocking. She asked him again, "You have job?" The response from the grouch was altogether different.

Jadranka has never seen her mum wear the skirt or the lipstick to the factory since.

On weekends they catch two buses to visit Jadranka's dad in a strange hospital with big locks and thick bars. She does not understand what it means when her mum reluctantly tells her in an embarrassed whisper that he's 'mentally sick'. He often sits in silence staring into space and Jadranka wonders when he will get better, and if he'll still fill the washing machine with green apples when he returns home.

Jadranka can't believe the time. The hands on the clock are overlapping already!

She slips on her black beanie, making sure it covers every strand of hair. This helps both contain the egg smell and masks the horrible bowl haircut her mum gave her the week before in the backyard. She wants to wear it all day, but the nuns at school always tell her off.

Outside she sets her brown school satchel and her Bionic Woman lunchbox on the overgrown front lawn. With total concentration she pulls the front door knocker to automatically lock it shut and then with a key secures the screen door. She places the key in an empty Redheads matchbox and hides the box in the sour sobs beneath the tree by the main bedroom window. Her mum has taught her all of this. It's Jadranka's morning ritual.

Despite her parents being Serbian Orthodox (which means among other weird rituals Christmas is celebrated on January 7) she attends a Catholic primary school. This is because she's allowed to walk there by herself, as the school is literally right across the street.

She places her bag and lunchbox on the curb and with due vigilance she looks right, then left, then right again - and bolts across!

Her mum has not taught her this. Jadranka knows it's naughty.

Safe on the other side, she flicks her beanie head right, left, right and *charges* back! This is thrilling!

Out of breath, she picks up her satchel and lunchbox and this time takes her merry

time walking across.

Inside the schoolyard, Jadranka hugs her satchel tight as she swings her skinny red stocking-covered legs off the ground trying to keep warm on the cold bench. The yard's eerily empty.

Having disposed of her breakfast she's now starving. She opens her lunchbox to reveal two salami sandwiches, with capsicum and feta cheese on the side. She wishes her mum could be like the other mums and put butter and Vegemite on the bread. Her lunchbox always has a different smell to the others no wonder nobody wants to be her friend. Plus she has an accent and a strange name. She wishes her mum had called her Suzie.

It's not Jad-RANK-ah – she'd like to yell – it's Yud-RUNK-ka! The other kids simply shorten it to Jad and come up with unpleasant rhyming words. *Bad Jad! Mad Jad! Sad Jad!*

She chomps on her salami sandwich, waiting for arrivals, a school bell, anything. Mid-bite she stops. Watches. Almost in slow motion. Her Mum. Wearing a large coat covering her overalls. Rushing through the gate. Hysterical. Demanding to know why Jadranka's at school, “Shtachesh ti ovde ovako rano?!”

Huh? Jadranka wonders to herself why she's being told off - isn't she supposed here? *What is her MUM doing here?*

Trying to hide the lunch she's not supposed to be having for breakfast, Jadranka explains how she waited for the big hand on the clock to cover up the little hand, like she does every morning.

Fuming, Vesna tells Jadranka she's seen the hands overlap alright – on the '8'! She's left at twenty minutes to *eight*, instead of a quarter to *nine*.

Oh!

Troubled by the events of the morning Jadranka asks her mum if she's finished her shift at the factory *already*. Stressed and tired, Vesna doesn't notice Jadranka dump her sandwich behind the bench as she grabs her daughter's hand with more force than necessary. She rips off Jadranka's beanie telling her it'll mess up her hair, plus it makes her look ridiculous. As they cross the street to return home she explains the boss made a mistake, she has to work the afternoon shift instead.

Jadranka's fraught little mind wonders how to retrieve all that French toast from the backyard before her mum finds it.

THE END