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RADIO

## Despair Wears a Satin Jacket

By Laura E. Goodin

It was hot and humid for about the fourth day in a row. By the time Shaz drove up that morning to ask for help, it was already pushing 35, and the wet, heavy heat made you feel like you were breathing through a damp sponge. I was sitting on a deck chair in the shade, reading the weekend paper and drinking a lemonade, planning to spend the next two hours like that.

Shaz rolled down the window. "Come on," she said, spitting strands of damp, sweaty hair out of her mouth. Her shirt and face were mottled with mud. "Scotty's bogged the ute in the creek. And he needs to get to the dog show in an hour! I can't fit all the show stuff and the dog into my car. Come and help. Please."

I threw the newspaper down. "Yeah, all right," I said wearily.

I didn't mind Shaz so much, but Scotty and his dog were another matter. The dog's name was something like "Lucifer Telltale McSporran-Dangler". The "Lucifer" part I was sure of, because Scotty called the thing "Lucy", even though it was, in theory, male. According to Shaz, the two of them -- Scotty and the dog -- spent just about every weekend going to dog shows. It wasn't the kind of show where the dog *does* anything, none of those, what do you call them, agility trials. No, the dog was just supposed to *stand* there.

When we got to the place where Scotty had bogged the ute, I had a look around. We were about 20 metres from their house, which was a little

weatherboard. It wasn't very solid, but it looked tidy. Scotty wasn't much on the practical side, but he did like things to look nice. Sometimes, when I ran into him and Shaz in town, I got the impression he was a little embarrassed because there she'd be in jeans and an old shirt, her hair going everywhere and the dirt from the garden still ground into her clothes and under her fingernails.

Anyway, Scotty came over from where he'd been staring in a sad, puzzled way at the ute's tyres. Of course, he'd managed to make everything a hundred times worse by spinning the wheels. By now they were hubcap-deep in mud, and the entire ute was caked in it. The air still reeked of the petrol he'd burned. The creek bed was churned so much that trying to get any footing for pushing the ute out was impossible.

I looked around for rocks big enough to wedge in under the tyres, but there were only pebbles and gravel in either direction. Back a bit behind the truck were two sodden towels, hard to see at first because they were now the same colour as the mud. It looked like Scotty'd tried to put them on the mud for traction, but the tyres had just shot them straight out the back.

The ute had a winch, but there were no big trees anywhere close -- I was wishing there were, if only because the heat was a killer. The cable looked to be in good shape, and it had a large hook on the end. "Is the cable long enough to reach the house?" I asked. "We could anchor onto the verandah."

Scotty and Shaz looked at each other. She had a kind of "told you so" expression. After a second, Scotty just said, "Nah."

"Well, how close does it get?" I said. With some people, you have to take things one step at a time.

"It's short by about eight metres," said Scotty. During this exchange, Shaz kept rubbing her right hand up and down her hip in a nervous sort of way. I

reckoned it was because she was trying not to slap him right there in front of me.

Shaz's car wasn't much, but it had a towball on the back. "Maybe we could park the car next to the verandah, anchor on to the car, and attach the car chassis to the verandah with a rope," I said. "Do you have a rope long enough to go back and forth a few times between the car and the house?"

"Uh...yeah," said Scotty. "Shaz, where's that rope you bought last month?"

"Oh, no. You're not using my new climbing rope. Do you know how much that stuff costs per metre? And once you use it for something like this it's ruined."

"But the show, Shazza, the show! This could be Lucy's big chance! He got so close to Best in Show last time -- and I heard that breeder, you know, the one who I told you bribed the judges -- she and her dirty little pig-dogs aren't going to be there this time, she's off in Tasmania! Please, Shaz, please! Get the rope!"

"No."

"Shaz!" Scotty's voice broke, and he gripped her arm and shook it. "Where's the rope?"

"Use the old clothesline. It's in the shed."

Scotty tried one last time, in a small, shaking voice: "Please."

"No," said Shaz. "No." She shrugged his hand off with a quick, savage motion and stepped back. "I've put up with a lot, but I'm not putting up with this. Week after week you go to these damned shows with that damned dog. All I've got is

the outdoors club, and you're *not* going to stuff that up." She was breathing hard, and her eyes were wide.

I could see Scotty's shoulders slump as he gave in. He stared at her, looking like he could hardly believe that she'd let him down after all these years.

"In the shed?" muttered Scotty.

Shaz closed her eyes and nodded. "Top shelf on the left. There's about 30 metres of it." She just stood there, eyes still closed, while Scotty got the rope from the shed next to the house. He took a while, and I heard a few crashes. But finally Scotty walked out of the shed, rubbing his head with one hand and carrying a bundle of thin, white rope in the other.

The rope was some sort of plastic, not much better than twine, and looked like it would stretch a fair bit, which I wasn't real happy about. But there was enough of it to wrap between the car and the verandah three or four times. I was hoping the stretch would distribute along the rope enough so it wouldn't snap. Shaz got in her car and moved it close to the verandah.

After some fiddling, we managed to tie the sturdiest bits of the car to the sturdiest bits of the verandah. While Shaz and I worked, Scotty twitched and squirmed nearby. He went up to the dog, which had been lying all this time on the verandah, tied by a collar and lead to the railing. It was dressed in a satin jacket with embroidery all over it. Sequins and everything; they flashed in the sun as the dog's rapid panting shook its little body. Every now and then, it would turn and gnaw fretfully at the strap that held the jacket on.

Scotty actually kissed that dog on the head and started talking to it in a whiny, baby-talk voice. "Don't worry, Lucy, we'll get to the show, I promise. That woman and her pig-dogs aren't going to cheat you again." The dog didn't even look at him.

I hooked the cable to the towbar on Shaz's car. "Got any electrical tape?" I asked Shaz. "I'd hate for the hook to pop off the towball and hit someone in the head."

Shaz glanced at Scotty, and her eyes narrowed, but she got me some tape from the shed. I ran a few wraps of it between the point of the hook and the shank. I grabbed a blanket from the verandah that I assumed was the dog's, and draped it over the steel cable, to keep the ends from whipping around in case it snapped.

"Okay," I said. "Shaz, can you stand near the verandah -- not too near, though -- and keep an eye on that clothesline?" She nodded and took up her station. "Scotty?" He looked up, startled, from nuzzling the dog. I took a deep breath. "Never mind." He dropped his loving gaze back to the dog. At least he was far enough away from the cable that he was probably safe.

I went to the ute, inserted the winch handle, and started cranking the winch. The clicking of the ratchet sounded like machine-gun fire in the still, steamy air. The cable tightened. I kept cranking, and slowly the ute began to move. The mud made sucking sounds as the wheels came loose. I took tiny steps to keep alongside the ute as I turned the crank. So far so good. As the ute rolled sluggishly up the bank, I started to relax. This was going to be okay. I looked at Shaz and gave her a grin and a thumbs-up. She returned a thin smile that vanished almost instantly, and looked over at Scotty, crouched next to the limp, panting dog.

It only took a few minutes to get the ute back onto firm ground. I got in and drove it forward to get the cable loose, then got out and undid the electrical tape and took the hook off the towball.

We had just coiled the cable back onto the drum and moved Shaz's car up to slacken the rope. That's when the dog -- the dog that had never actually acted like a dog in its entire limp, sequinned life -- saw a rabbit, slipped its collar and ran off. I'd never seen it move at all before now, let alone move so *fast*. "Huh!" I said thoughtlessly. "Look at it go!"

Scotty watched the dog disappearing for a long, horror-stricken moment. I saw him glance at the ute, still some metres away, then at Shaz's car right there at his elbow, the keys in the ignition, then at Shaz. Before we knew what he was doing, he jumped into Shaz's car, turned the key, threw it into reverse, and gunned it, hard.

The hideous squeal of that verandah tearing off the house will feature in every nightmare I ever have from now on. It stopped only when the car gave a human-sounding, strangled yelp and stalled. The verandah hung by a few nails, swinging slightly and groaning in the silence. I watched Scotty's head wobble inside the car as the loops of clothesline sagged and snapped tight, sagged and snapped tight.

The car door opened. Slowly, Scotty got out. He walked over to where something was lying in the dirt: the dog's jacket. He picked it up and let it dangle from his hand as he stared after the dog.

Shaz was completely quiet for a solid minute. Squeak, squeak went the porch. Then she turned to look at Scotty. Didn't say a thing. Then I heard her draw a long, shuddering breath. I figured this was my cue to start walking back to my place.

I guess the one good thing about all the yelling was that Scotty wouldn't be able to hear the sound of a dog barking, away over the fields and up into the hills, where the heat was already breaking into thunder and rain.

*Laura E. Goodin's stories have appeared in publications including Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, Wet Ink, The Lifted Brow, and Adbusters, as well as several anthologies. Her plays have been produced in Australia and the UK, and her poetry has been performed internationally. She is currently working on a Ph.D. in creative writing from the University of Western Australia, and she attended the 2007 Clarion South workshop. She lives in New South Wales with her husband, composer Houston Dunleavy, and their actor daughter.*