

Spoida and Lawrence

A true story

by Harry Dunn

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We were putting the finishing touches on our clean-up at the old holiday house, to make it more presentable for the new tenants, due at any minute. A 'nice young couple' was how the local estate agent described them, and we wanted to make a good impression.

A clunky, multi-coloured Falcon drifted into the driveway, in a hail of small stones and smoke and scraped to a halt only inches from the front gate. A pair of hairy legs protruded from the driver's side rear window and an empty Jim Beam can clattered onto the verandah, tossed expertly with a backhand fling from the other side, amid a symphony of teenage hooting and hollering, and cries of 'Slam Dunk' from the battered Falcon. Four or five teenagers emerged, led by the driver, a long-haired, skinny, unshaven youth wearing trackie pants and a back-to-front baseball cap. A messy-looking rollie hung precariously from his lower lip.

He extended his hand, smiled a gappy but disarming smile and introduced himself:

'I'm Spoida, (it *might* have been Spider) and this is Bev, me sheila. Bev's from The Thaggi', by way of explaining Bev's apparent and hidden shortcomings. 'These here are me mates,' rattling off a few names, 'and who are *youse*?'

'Well, we'se – ah, we're just the cleaners givin this joint a bit of a clean-up for *youse*. I'm Harry and this here is Helen – she's me – ah - she's me *sheila*,' getting into the spirit of the thing, and hoping not to show the rising sense of alarm I felt at this introduction to the 'nice young couple' that our delinquent agent had sent to occupy our valuable little Tarwin Road holiday house. Valuable to *us*, that is.

'How many' I enquired casually, 'how many of youse gunna crash here?'

Spoida laughed heartily at the inanity of this question. 'How many? How would I know, mate? Me mates come and go. The more the merrier. Keeps the cost down. Gotta have coin for grog and take-away and weed, y'know.' Wink, Wink.

I enquired, off-handedly, I hope; 'Who's gunna mow the lawns, kill the weeds – stuff like that?'

Spoida chuckled at this ridiculous question. 'Listen, mate, We're here to have a good time. When yer payin' a hundred bucks a week rent, yer don't mow no lawns. They'll have to get someone like *youse* to worry about stuff like that.'

I asked – off-handedly - ' How long youse reckon you'll be stayin?'

'Who knows' said Spoida, 'until we get booted, I s'pose. Prob'ly months' and then - (a little suspiciously) - 'why do *youse* wanna know?'

'No reason, maaate. Just arxin,'

We packed up our cleaning gear and prepared to leave.

The new tenants had by now opened a slab of Jimmies and Coke and were engaged in an animated discussion concerning their domestic arrangements; little things like who'd be getting a bed and who'd be on the couch; whether the rubbish bins should be located in the lounge, where they belonged, or whether they should be left outside; where to hide the Mary Jane plants when (not *if*) the cops called 'round; where to hide the bean bag – little things like that – just the usual tedious arrangements which must be attended to when a family moves to a new address.

Spoida and his acolytes didn't notice me and me sheila leaving our freshly-cleaned little three-bed fibro in Tarwin Road, on our way down to have a word with the estate agent who had arranged this tenancy for the 'lovely young couple'

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Several weeks passed. Spoida and co were long gone and the house was clean and ready for occupancy once again.

The agent had failed to provide us with the nice, quiet, solvent tenant we needed to help pay the mortgage and the steady stream of bills for insurance, rates, water and sewerage etc etc, so we placed our own ad. in Saturday's 'Age.'

Early the following week, the phone rang and a quietly-spoken male voice identified itself; 'Hello, my name is Lawrence. I'm a non-drinker and a non-smoker. I'm looking for a quiet place in the country to spend the next year or so in quiet contemplation and Bible study. Your place at Inverloch sounds ideal, and I would appreciate an opportunity to inspect it, and no – I'm not troubled by the monthly rent you're asking, if the property measures up to my expectations, as I'm sure it will.'

Such a gentleman, I thought. Not another Spoida. The gods were smiling on us at last.

I informed Lawrence as to why we had placed an ad in The 'Age' Classifieds, and mentioned the letting arrangements through the local agent, if he wished to proceed. Lawrence said that he would prefer to deal directly with us, as he had no faith in estate agents. I was at that time inclined to agree with him concerning their value, so we agreed to work together more or less without the sinister involvement of an odious, blood-sucking realtor.

We agreed to meet at the house the following Saturday.

My eldest son, Peter, accompanied me on the drive from our home in Glen Waverley to Inverloch, and we arrived as arranged at noon, to be greeted by Lawrence, who was relaxing in a deck-chair on the front verandah. Here already. Nice and punctual, I thought.

Lawrence was middle-aged, tall, thin, bearded, long-haired, pale of complexion, with deep-set eyes and dressed in what could have been a 1960's - style caftan. He looked like an emaciated Demis Roussos. He wore sandals, although it was mid-winter, all in all a biblical figure, and one of considerable dignity and presence. I was uncertain as to whether I should genuflect or shake his hand, so I did neither and bowed from the waist. It seemed

appropriate.

Lawrence's appearance was other-worldly. I was surprised but not concerned; he was, after all, a dedicated Bible student and by his own admission, a person in search of inner peace through self-discipline and silent contemplation.

I introduced myself as Harry, a name which Lawrence immediately formalised to Harold. We exchanged pleasantries, and I asked him how he had made his way from Melbourne that morning.

'Been here since Thursday,' said Lawrence, smiling broadly. 'I obtained the key from that estate agent you mentioned when we spoke'. Lawrence delivered this surprising admission with an air of self-congratulation, apparently impressed by his own resourcefulness. The possibility of a charge of breaking and entering had apparently not crossed his mind, so I held my peace.

But the alarm bells had started to ring.

Lawrence was a gracious host; he invited us inside and offered us coffee and biscuits, using the provisions which he had found in our unlocked pantry.

Our host, comfortably ensconced in his new abode, congratulated us on its pristine condition and assured us that he was completely satisfied, to the point, he said, that he intended to invite a couple of like-minded friends, ascetically-inclined single men like himself, to join him in his quest for inner peace, a process which could take many months – possibly years.

'Lawrence,' I asked, apologising for my impertinence, 'are you an early retiree, or do you plan to return to the workforce one day. I mean - after you've found inner peace, perhaps?'

Lawrence's reply to this double-barrelled question was brief;

'Ah, no. Not really.'

Inevitably, the conversation moved along to the sordid but necessary question of *money*, specifically the source of income needed to fund the proposed tenancy.

Lawrence, apparently hoping that this distasteful subject would not be raised so early in our burgeoning friendship, raised his hand in a gesture which implied that he would hear no more of it.

He sighed his disenchantment, and looked down on me, more in sorrow than in anger. 'Mammon, Harold, Mammon! So sad! As the Holy Book tells us: "The love of money is the root of all evil. Timothy 6;10"

' "Labour not to be rich. Cease from thine own wisdom": Proverbs: 23:4 "

'Are you aware, Harold, the Holy Book mentions Mammon only four times in its entire length. So what does that tell us, Harold? It tells us that Almighty God was not concerned with money. And neither should we. "The blessing of the Lord. *It* maketh us rich: Proverbs 10:22."

'Are you telling me, Lawrence, that you have no way of paying rent for this property?'

'Fear not, Harold, fear not. Put your faith in the Lord, Harold, and The Lord will provide.' Lawrence spoke with such conviction that I was for a moment tempted to accept his simple solution to the age-old problem of supply and demand - but only for a moment.

'Lawrence, I absolutely agree with you and I fully understand your abhorrence of all things monetary. I hate the stuff as much as you do, but I've always found it handy when I'm facing the checkout lady at the supermarket. Now, I envy your unshakeable belief in the Lord's provision, if you have faith. Great stuff, but how do I convince the local Council and the Water Board and the insurance company and my other creditors, of this novel method of payment for the quarterly accounts, as an alternative to actual cash, which they seem to favour.'

Lawrence admonished me sternly, looking down from his considerable height; "O ye of little faith. Do you not know that it is more blessed to give than to receive: Acts 20:35"

And "Ye cannot serve two masters, God and Mammon: Matthew 6:24" '

'Perhaps, Lawrence, perhaps, but did *you* not know that The Lord also told us to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's, and on another occasion; "Render therefore to all their dues. Tribute to whom tribute is due: Romans, 13:7" '

That was my learned rejoinder – (or it might have been, if I'd thought of at the time!.)

I decided to put sordid Mammon aside for a while, based on the sorry conclusion that little or none of it was likely to pass from Lawrence's care to mine. I went down the street and bought a parcel of fish and chips, which Lawrence helped us demolish with all the innocent gusto of a man who places his faith entirely in regular provisioning by a merciful Providence and cares not for how or through whom this desirable outcome is achieved.

Lawrence expressed his wish for a few hours of silent contemplation, so Pete and I went fishing, returning around dusk with pizzas and other provender, which Lawrence shared with us, after a rather lengthy recital of a hand-crafted Grace Before Meals, bespoke for the occasion with generous references to the donors, acting, he avowed, as the Hand-maidens of the Lord, heaven-sent to fulfil his entreaty for regular sustenance on this, his very first venture into the provinces. Once again, Lawrence had faith and God had provided.

That night, Peter and I slept in the spare rooms, as Lawrence was by now well-settled in our more comfortable double bedroom. The subject of clean linen and suitable sleeping apparel was not raised.

The following day, Peter and I returned from a trip to Venus Bay around lunch-time, to find the caftanned non-drinking Lawrence seated on the grass with the next-door neighbours, enjoying a sumptuous picnic lunch which they had brought with them on their short visit. The group had by then consumed two bottles of half-decent Hunter River Red which I recognised as those which I had hidden in the pantry for a special occasion. Lawrence had apparently donated this little treasure to the visiting neighbours as his contribution to the lunch-time feast. Lawrence, the tee-totaller, ever generous, ever resourceful!

When Lawrence returned, replete from his lunch (we, by the way, had dined on simpler fare from the local hamburger shop) I suggested that it might be time for us to return to the Metropolis, and Lawrence agreed to ride with us, to be decanted in Carnegie, at a rooming-house which he described as his 'current address', the implication being that the arrangement was under review; a matter of long-term uncertainty, due perhaps to some unpleasantness with the hateful and ungodly estate agents handling his tenancy.

When we arrived in Carnegie, not far from the address which Lawrence had given us, he offered to buy ice-creams all round, nominating an ice-cream parlour which he highly recommended, an offer we happily accepted, 'I love ice-cream. We'll have double-headers all round,' said Lawrence, with unexpected munificence. We followed him into the gelateria, and ordered to our heart's content. The double-headers were served. The lady at the cash-register waited patiently. There was much slapping of pockets, followed by the puzzled look of a man who has just realised that he has forgotten his wallet.

I paid. Lawrence had faith and once again, right on cue, the Lord had provided.

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On the way back to Glen Waverley, I reflected on this brief encounter with Lawrence, a True Believer with a simple philosophy on life and how to live it, based on his unflagging trust in an endlessly-generous Benefactor.

This philosophy – Have faith and God will provide – was clearly working for Lawrence, but it didn't work for me.

Attractive as it was in its simplicity, I found, after several trials, that when used as a financial blueprint, it seemed better suited to the fiduciary interests of the tenant than those of the landlord.