

By Ruth Hessey

## Sniper's Boulevard

I once read that Roald Dahl began his first journeys of the imagination while serving in the airforce in world war 2. Later when he was earthbound and came to write in a garden shed, he worked with a board across his knees, squeezing himself into a tiny space in front of a small window, like a pilot in his cockpit. And this was the only way he could be truly comfortable enough to write.

I was lonely as a child so I can writer almost anywhere. it's a kind of compulsive escapism. It's something I do purely for myself, like brushing my hair out. Some people need whiskey. Some people have to smoke. Others need silence.

So I thought the writing marathon today would be fun.

I knew about the writers' cage in the markets in Paddington which some of my friends thought was some sort of authorial S&M.

But I didn't expect to spend the whole day in cages.

8am, Paddington markets unfurl, and the writers cage is a few bars and some blue tarp. At least noone is pelting me with rocks or peanuts. Is this anything like a tumbrel? – the one Marie Antionette was taken in to the guillotine.

“Did they know you're goin to be around dirty carnies all day and you'd need a cage for protection?” asks a stallholder lubricating his hands with grease.

Fortunately I am befriended by a young American who moves trestle tables but he's also a dancer just back from a tour. Of Finland. If you tell them a joke you can't tell if they think it is funny or not. Perhaps that's because it is nighttime all day. And they have massive funding for the arts.

Not like here in NSW where the ministry for the arts has recently been incorporated into the ministry for sport and recreation.

Which is probably why I am sitting in this cage.

An hour later, my time in the tumbler is up, and we hit a taxi to Kings Cross, where the wayside chapel is undergoing some sort of voluntary refurbishment and the entire football team from Drummoyne is breaking up the yard, and someone is painting the front door, and inside the gloomy wayside cafe people who've just drunk their 'done for the day are stumbling and trying to grab some cheap breakie, and then I turn up..... with a camera crew and a shiny laptop, in a bright red coat, with Richard Gere.

Well marathon supportperson, Peter, is as handsome as a movie star and towers over the hunched and stunted waysiders. You can immediately tell the difference between well fed people and those whose bodies have never seen a piece of fresh fruit.

We are expecting to be filming in the middle of people's fucking breakfast? Sitting here like journalistic hyenas from a current affairs show? This is not what writers do.

I start to bite my nails and crave a cigarette, and need some straight scotch. It's not yet 11 o'clock. I head for the chapel. The stained glass window says: Australian Jesus welcomes the boat people.

Greg is the pastor. He works 14 to 16 hrs a week 7 days a week. “You need to be semi-in-need-of psychiatric help just to sign up for it.

For Christmas says Alma, who is 65 with pink frizzy hair, we sleep here over night and do 3000 sit down meals out of a kitchenette fit for a one room bedsit.

“It’s in the miracle realm,” says Pastor Greg, “and a major pain in the bum. Just the logistics, is seriously a difficult job. However we seem to pull it off every year.”

I have half an hour left. Can I help? I ask Alma. Oh no dear. Can I help I ask Joe who serves tea in the café. Not really, he says with a shrug.

We move on. To a pound in Carlton. Death row for man’s best friends.

You try to sit typing some cute piece of fiction surrounded by Buster and Joey and Connor and Belle, all freaked out and trembling and frantically trying to make you take them home.

Some of them, says a skinny woman in a black tshirt, do get depressed.

You can tell. They don’t bark, or wag a tail, or try to squeeze your heart strings. They just lie at the back of the cage without hope.

So I try to go and meet these little hairy people on their own terms. Toby is a particularly vocal maltese with dirty whiskers who can’t take comfort from my finger pushed thru his cage. Another dog on a leash is trying to hurl itself up over a barrier and nearly hanging himself in the process. I pick him up and try to calm him. Someone takes him away. I’m not allowed to

cuddle him because of insurance and public liability, and occupational health and safety, and ring worms.....

I retreat to a room with the unblinking cats. It is very quiet. There are fewer people interested in taking a cat. They sit and wait and withdraw, and wait, and noone comes.

On the way out I see Toby. A happy looking couple is taking him home.

Fortunately at our next stop, in a bookshop amongst the Authors from A-Z, I am restored to mental health by a reading with a psychic who tells me I have a yellow aura and everything is going to turn out beautifully. I hope she means tonite.

Even more helpful is the time I spend afterwards in a Laundromat. It is warm and filled with the rumble of tumble dryers, and the kind smell of fabric conditioner, and it's actually the most soothing place to write that I experience all day

Then I remember this story.

I have a friend from Bosnia. She spent two years in Sarajevo during the war. Noone had any hot water or even running water or electricity for two years. She learned to get by – to cook, to wash herself, her hair, her clothes, the dishes, and go to the toilet - with 5 litres of water a day. That was as much as she could carry on her own, and she had to walk 3 kilometres to the other side of town to get the water every day. To get there she had to cross a famous boulevard that was very beautiful before the war, but was now very dangerous because of the snipers who watched over it, and would gun anyone down. Even children. You couldn't just cross this street. The snipers picked people off. You could only zig zag, slowly, erratically back and forth.

One day, my friend told me, she had just had enough of the whole thing. I don't know if it was before her husband was killed, or afterwards. She was about 26. She came to the

beginning of the snipers' boulevarde and she just said to herself, fuck it. I'm not going to do this stupid zig zag any more. So she just walked out into the street. And there she was, trudging right down the middle with her water and her bags. And the sniper must have been watching and thought to himself, what is this poor stupid cow, this idiot woman, she has had enough. She has given up.

So he shot the man who was walking next to her.