

Scrabble

Sean Macgillicuddy

Rural New South Wales, somewhere near the coast, the evening of
December 31:

Robin's standing on a chair at a cupboard in the hall extracting
Scrabble from the bottom of their games: Monopoly, Cluedo, Trivial
Pursuit.

"Careful," he says, as she hands him the box and then grabbing his
shoulder gets down. "You alright?"

"Yeah." She fans her face and smiles at him she's fine.

She's been drinking since lunch but how much he can't say because
some of it she's done on the sly. He doesn't judge, but wonders if
she's keeping what she really drinks from him or is she keeping what
she really drinks from her. Together they sit at the dining room table
and, lid off, set up for the game. As always, Robin goes first, and
opens with the double-letter TRUMP.

"The verb," she explains. "Not the man."

He plays VIRUS off the back of her TRUMP.

"Nice one," she says, sipping her wine, ordering the letters on her
shelf. "If 2020 could be wrapped up in a word —" She plays
BREATH through the T in TRUMP. "Remember this time last year?
Even with the windows closed, the heat and the smoke, wearing PPE
masks outside."

"Who'd have thought they'd get a second outing with COVID."

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“What a year.”

He says, “Black Lives Matter. I can’t breathe.”

“You not drinking.”

Pause. It surprises him she says that and he smiles, the way she’s framed it as a magnitude event. But he’s also suspicious, not sure. How to this point she’s seen his not drinking as some kind of phase, like shedding some pounds.

“Maybe we could play with a theme,” she goes on. “2020 year in review.”

“Proper names allowed?”

“As a New Year’s Eve one off.” Then gulps back the sip in her glass. “You want something from the kitchen?”

“I’m good.”

“It’s OK,” she says. “If you want.”

“If I want to what?”

“You know, let your hair down. Have some wine. My father drank his entire life and never had a problem.”

“Didn’t he die of a heart attack at sixty-three?”

“Exactly.”

She disappears with her glass and he listens to the fridge and the sounds that she makes pouring wine. He doesn’t want a drink but thinks 32 days, the number like a mantra in his head.

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“It always struck me as an odd game for a games night,” she says when she returns. “Scrabble. And New Year’s Eve of all nights. Whatever happened to them, the Millanes? You worked with him, right?”

“Same Department. Yeah.”

“You should look him up and say thanks.”

“What for?”

“If it wasn’t for them and their games night, we wouldn’t be us, we wouldn’t be here.” She raises her glass in the air. “Admittedly,” she says, “alcoholics both, but I liked them, the Millanes, they were fun.” Then reflective: “Like us, we used to be fun.”

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno. Nothing. Ignore me. It’s just, sometimes I feel we got old. You know? Especially this year. It’s not your fault.”

He wonders how blame is an issue and watches her build on the bottom of BREATH, to make BREATHALYSED, counting up 66 points with a triple-word score on the D.

“Bit abstract,” he says. “Given our theme.”

She looks at him — is this where she snaps? She says, “Fine. I’ll play something else.”

“Don’t worry,” he says. “It’s OK.”

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And he means it, but watches to see what she'll do, if she'll leave it or play something else. With a face on, she leaves the word there, and replenishes her letters from the bag. She says, "Sometimes it's hard to keep up."

"With what?"

"What I can and cannot say, and do!"

"I've never asked you to stop drinking. If that's what you're talking about."

"No. But you have a look."

"What look?"

"When I drink you have a look. It's your go."

"I don't judge you," he says.

"Maybe. Or maybe you don't even know. That ever since you stopped it's like there's you and the world. Everyone else. The swill."

"That's ridiculous."

"All that sharing you do with your Facebook pals, their bleeding little hearts counting the days. Sometimes I think — Shit!"

As she leans across the table with the bag, it brushes her glass and spills wine on the board and she takes the glass and leaves for a cloth. In doing so her chair falls to the floor. She ignores it, or doesn't notice it. He thinks about correcting it but he doesn't. He wants her to see it. What she's done. When she returns from the kitchen with a cloth and

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more wine, she looks at the chair and at him. Like he put it there. To fuck with her. Or he has an explanation for it. He doesn't. But he wonders if maybe she's right. That maybe there's more to the chair than he'd like to admit to himself and to her.

Once she's settled in, they play. And every word she makes is like an orchestrated barb, their 2020 theme long gone, or veiled by an ever-diminishing nod to something or other that year. He asks her if she's making a point.

"They're just words," she replies.

"You think?"

She stops and weighs up what he's said — or the evening perhaps, the course of their lives, everything compounded into this. Then: "That's the problem," she says. "Everything has to mean something with you. Be tied into your recovery somehow. I just want it to stop. For things to go back to how they were. To normal."

"Maybe we should call it a night."

"You don't want to count down the year?" She checks her watch.

"A while yet." She gulps back her wine. "Or maybe we should call it a night."

They say lockdowns force people to pay attention. To themselves. Their loved ones. The world. And in many ways, recovery's the same. But like anything of value, it's hard. Because addiction doesn't easily

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let go. It forms an intimate and powerful wrap on the self, like a skin, that refuses to shed. Because to stop is to kill off that part of yourself that enabled you for so long to survive. But it's a necessary death: In order for rejuvenation to occur, something, at some point, must die. For him it began with a scare. He'd gone to their GP for a pain. She checked him out and ordered some bloods. A week later they came back positive for elevated liver enzymes that could indicate toxic hepatitis that could lead to cirrhosis that could lead to death. To be sure, she tested again. And this time turned out he was fine. So to celebrate, on his way home, he stopped in at a bar for a drink. And as always one drink became four. He felt, not reckless, but invincible, reprieved. And drove home up the highway then the two-lane through the bush, he wasn't speeding, feeling good, the music loud. When suddenly approaching a bend in the road, he T-boned a car what-the-fuck! No-one else about, just two cars in the road, when the dust settled, nobody hurt. But the point of impact was the backseat driver's-side door and the kid's seat inside, empty (thank god!), had been dislodged and buckled in half. Now, 32 days later, 32 days of maintaining himself without alcohol, cutting a path, he thinks about the year in review. He and Robin used to joke, after the drought, then the fires, lockdown, the United bloody States, what else could possibly go wrong. And the answer to the question is them. What else

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could go wrong is them. Robin's in the kitchen, he can hear her at the bench, the sound of pouring wine and then she sips. But she miscalculates the bench putting it back, and he hears the glass scrape and then smash on the floor and a pause and then deadpan: "Ow!"

He goes into the kitchen. Robin's slumped on the floor in the spilt pool of wine and her finger's been cut by some glass. She looks helpless and pathetic, now whimpering, holding the hand with the finger, the blood. She sees him in the doorway. "Hi."

And standing there he undergoes a shift. That he's accountable for who they've both become. That she is as much a casualty of his not drinking as he is to her on the floor. And he goes to her and joins her in the blood and the wine and the smell of it all in his head. He says, "Everything's going to be fine."

She looks up at him. With their relationship, her life, now pooling in her eyes, she looks at him and wants it to be true. That maybe he knows something she does not. And if ever there's a time, it's now. To tell her how they might move forward. She looks up at him and asks, pleads with him, begs:

"Is it?"