

BUT JACKSON-SMYTHE IS DEAD!

by Robin Hillard

Norman Jackson-Smythe is dead!

William knows he is dead. When Jackson-Smythe collapsed, William was in the washroom and he waited until the man stopped breathing before screaming for help. At the hospital doctors confirmed the diagnosis, the undertaker had no qualms about putting the body in a box and the office manager arranged a wreath.

William went to the funeral. When the curtain dropped in front of the coffin he knew where Jackson-Smythe had gone: into the hellfire flames of the crematorium oven. Jackson-Smythe is dead!

But here he is, marching up the street as if he never had that heart attack.

It is not Jackson-Smythe. William forces his legs to move, one in front of the other, carrying him closer to the thing ahead. Is it a ghost? No way. Would a ghost be walking down the street on a Saturday morning?

As it comes nearer the figure will lose its shape and the body will have a stranger's face. For sure.

But the closer it comes, the more it looks like Jackson Smythe.

"You're dead!"

William realises he spoke aloud when a young woman pushing a stroller shies away with a jerk that makes her child scream.

The familiar throat-clearing cough! William leaps sideways through the nearest door, a bakery. He moves to the back of the shop and stares at shelves.

"Two loaves of wholemeal, please," the voice of Jackson-Smythe demands, as it always had, a healthy bread.

Dead men don't eat bread!

William waits till footsteps leave the shop – surely a ghost would move more quietly?

He swings around. Peers out the door and sees saw the customer's back, a back with the shape of Jackson-Smythe, crossing the road. The

woman behind the counter wrinkles her nose as if, like William, she smells a charred meat pie.

He goes straight home and bolts his door. Can dead men walk through doors? He switches on the radio but over the announcer's voice he can hear footsteps. The heavy tread of an overweight man.

"No one is tramping about outside," he tells himself. "No one is coming through the door." He turns off the radio.

It is stuffy with everything closed, and the room smells like burnt meat.

William is nervous for the next few days ... but as time passes he forgets his fear. And things are going well in William's world.

He is next in line for Jackson 's post. Now he is in charge of ordering supplies and can implement his own system. So he often stays back late, to deal with matters that need privacy. Sometimes, in the empty rooms, he thinks he smells scorched steak.

Then one evening in the delivery bay, while he is talking to a contractor, there is an awful stench.

"Pphew," his companion sniffs. "Bit of a pong, eh?"

A crunch of gravel behind them - footsteps of a heavy man? William turns. An overweight back is moving away. AWAY. It stops beside a car. An old black sedan like the one that had been parked, every day, in the space reserved for Jackson-Smythe. The car Sheila drives, now her husband has no need of it.

Ghosts do not drive!

It must be a member of staff, someone who stayed late, going home in an old black car.

The engine starts. The car turns and moves up the lane, heading for William.

He pulls his companion out of the way as a familiar bent antenna scrapes his face.

"Bloody car!"

"Wot car?"

William splutters an explanation and the contractor shrugs. "It's the stink," he says. "Leaking gas. It's getting to you mate."

It must be leaking gas.

Jackson-Smythe – his body reduced to crematorium ash - could not – possibly - be driving his old car.

William accepts a bundle of notes and gives, in exchange the signed order form. He will be glad to be home.

But there in front of his gate is the old, black car.

Ghosts do not drive! It has to be Sheila.

She is waiting on the porch. "I was just passing. I thought I would drop in."

Just passing? In the cul-de-sac? He has to take her inside.

"Careful aren't you," she says as he bolts the door.

"I was sort of hoping you would get in touch."

She prowls around his sitting room, "You know, it was sort of funny, you being there – when Normie died."

Normie?

"He was a bit of a stick. Not that I didn't love him," she says, "I did. But he's gone."

"Has he? I mean," William adds quickly, "sometimes, at work, it's hard to believe..."

"I know. That's what I feel – as if he's still around. And I'm sick of being on my own. Phoo," she sniffs, "Your neighbour's having a barbecue!"

The neighbour is a Buddhist – vegetarian – but William nods. He has to get rid of the woman.

"I've got a meeting," he says, and pushes her outside.

He can't face staying in the flat himself. He drives around for a couple of hours, parks for a sleep and is woken by a torch flashed in his face. He swears he is sober, and his breath proves him right.

"I was a bit tired," he says, "I've been working late."

The young policeman sniffs, grumbles about "that smell" and walks away.

William wrinkles his nose. A stench like burnt roast pork. He opens the window to get some air, and the car swerves dangerously. It veers across the centre line - he pulls it back.

It swerves again. Something is pulling the wheel. He struggles to get control of the car as it moved, purposefully, into the oncoming lights - the huge, round eyes of a lorry.

William screams as he feels the crash and the scorching heat of a burning car. There is a stench of petrol and the acrid smell of burning flesh.

Bio: Robin Hillard has taught in Australia, England, and Canada. She has published a book of poetry and had stories and poems published in a number of print magazines and ezines.