

From *Smash Palace*, enjoy an excerpt from one of the stories

“Who Is Your Wife?”

Every day at arrival time I hung out at the military air field on Chatham Island, a dot on the Pacific Ocean east of New Zealand. Expecting at least one from the old gang to escape, I peered through the misty rain searching for a familiar face. The dread enemy had advanced steadily – surprise, surprise – against any defense our exhausted forces could muster. For about a year I’d been on Chat (Chatham Island), minus one leg, pretty good at speeding around on my heavy-duty crutches. I’d felt safe and remote until a few days ago when fishermen brought news that refugees were fleeing east from Australia to the islands of Tasmania and New Zealand. Hundreds per day arrived on planes, boats, and all kindsa flotation devices. Now some adventurous types continued even further east to take their chances on Chat. Yesterday, a muggo with a black Mohawk haircut landed here on one of those surfing sail boards.

As the plane from Oamaru, New Zealand, landed, we crowded around the arrival platform. I avoided the first person I recognized, Roach, the guy who ran the dope shop back in the old days on Bathurst Island. Faking a cough, I covered my face with my hand. He staggered away, eyes glazed, and didn’t see me. Geez, what an assortment of losers shuffled off that plane, squinting and blinking against smoke and rain: A young girl, about twelve, alone, bandaged head, using a cane. A boy on a stretcher, carried by a tiny, emaciated man and a gal, about forty, with one green eye that blinked rapidly. Then a pair of knockout gals in matching camouflage parkas: the one with the leather eye-patch clung to a tiny black box, a coffin; the other carted on her hip a baby with a missing arm.

While a forklift unloaded an adult coffin, a commotion erupted on the arrival platform. “Go fuck yourself,” shouted a gal into the pinched face of a fat pilot grabbing at her whiskey bottle. *All right*, some bruto to liven up the day. Hey, it was Blanche the Bomb, now with her hand at the pilot’s throat, the other downing the last of the bottle. Then she raised it high, saying, “Here, you *want* it?” As she faked bringing it down on his skull, he dropped to his knees, and covered his head with his arms. After kicking him back into the darkness of the plane’s guts, she pitched the bottle through the portal, and it exploded, *smash*, against a wall in there. She hadn’t changed much.

Blanche the Bomb limped down the steps, smirking, scanning the sad, gray, misty world before her. They called her Blanche the Bomb because of her temper, which I had seen in action too many times. Also, she always wore her brown leather bomber jacket. If hostiles didn’t get you, and you avoided clashes with killers like the Bomb, you could be labeled a smart operator. The long blonde hair had been mowed into a buzz cut like the gals in the submarine corps. She shot glances left and right, and her gaze lingered on me for a sec. With her back against a truck, she waited for the crowd to thin out, and then limped toward me. Her hand-shake was firm. She was OK.

I went, “Saw you on TV last night.”

“It paid my plane fare. Hey, where’d Roach go?”

I shrugged. She was after dope – some things never change.

Why would she hack off her curly blonde locks? When she caught me staring at her buzz cut, she went, “You got a problem?”

"Negatori," I said. "Last night your hair was long."

"I cut it."

"And you're limping."

"You lost your leg."

Last night she and her dude Bullethead were on TV, contestants on the Kapoor's sex game show *Who Is Your Wife?* Every night at eight the show was transmitted live from Stewart Island, the southernmost point of New Zealand. The only video reception on Chat was at the al joint, the Smash Palace. An al joint is a place that sells alcoholic drinks. Stoned as usual, I was watching the tube when a tall gal, long curly blonde hair, head high, glided on stage. Blanche the Bomb? I'd lost track of her about a year ago. Then a dude in red leather, obviously trashed, was led to center stage. Bullethead. Yepper, it was Blanche and Bullethead. B & B.

I called out to the bar crowd, "Hey, I know them." The barman, filling a cup with al, glanced back at the TV for a sec, saying, "Cool." Smash Palace denizens only got interested if the game went all the way to Climax.

Although I imagined it a thousand and one times, I had never seen her naked. But she took most of it off for the sex show. What a bod. Nuts what people'll do for money. And the Kapoors knew it. With enemy forces advancing relentlessly, time was running out, people needed plane fare, and they'd do anything to get it. The nearest airfield, about two hundred clicks from Stewart Island, was at Oamaru, about a one hour flight west of Chat, at a price of one-fifty dinero per.

Of course, most dudes in the Smash Palace booed when B&B won. Even the shadowy drongos drinking with the flies booed. Why did they boo? I'll get to that later. The muggos didn't boo. They seldom made a peep, a gloomy, silent cluster in a murky corner, zonked out on cough syrup with codeine, a cheap high. Actually it was a cheap *low*, cuz it put you in a dream state. Half the time they had no idea where they were. One day one of them came out of the john saying someone stole his bathtub. You can spot muggos easily: black Mohawks, black clothes, black sunglasses, even at night.

Last night B & B won enough dinero for the plane ticket to get the hell out. But now the Bomb seemed to be alone, and had herself a limp.

I went, "Where's Bullethead?"

She flicked her wrist as if backhanding a pesky fly. "He ain't here. Hey, let's get a drink. Any al joints around?"

"Yah, they got a joint they call the Smash Palace. This way."

Anticipating bushwhackers, she slowed at each crumbling corner, and looked all around, hand buried in jacket pocket where lived the black pistol she affectionately called Killer, the same compact 9 mm SIG Sauer P225 she's had since her days working for the Canadian Armed Forces Military Police, now disbanded cuz they're probably all dead.

The Smash Palace ain't no palace, but you can get smashed there.

No way I was gonna buy her drinks. Let *her* pay. If she could afford plane fare, she had more. "You got dinero?" I asked.

She went, "Still scam scum, eh?" and snatched one of my crutches.

Blanche the Bomb never scared me. I went, "Take it easy, bitch."

Just for kicks, she slapped my face. It didn't hurt much; I've had worse bruto. In fact, I enjoyed a secret thrill that she had touched me.

She went, "Yah, we need dinero," and pointed with my crutch: "Over here." Following her voluptuous derrière right there behind a thin layer of old brown leather, I hopped behind her to the phone booth across from the Smash Palace. Using the heavy end of the crutch she assaulted the phone box until it split in two.