

Nine 'til 9 Short Stories

Written by Mat Clarke

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Author's Introduction

These stories you are about to read have been created under many different circumstances. I hope, therefore, each one comes across as unique and entertaining and you'll continue to think about the characters, the story and what could have been, well after you finished reading.

I believe this is essentially what made me want to write in the first place. I would day dream about the plot outcome within a story, book or movie/TV show and wonder what could have changed if the character didn't get into the car, or didn't find the key, etc.

The stories were written while I was either in my home-office, or on a plane or train, in a bar or cafe, or at a writing group I run where we nut out stories after I give people a scenario, place and a few objects. No place seems to be better than another, but varying the location would definitely play a role in how the story and characters play out. Plus, it's much more entertaining for me to write in new places and countries.

These stories have also been written for different reasons. Some because I needed to get a story out (sometimes I need to write something with a scenario that is totally new and unexpected - it gets my skin tingling!). Sometimes to enter a short story competition. Some so I can create an anthology of short stories with the afore mentioned writing group. Sometimes because I've had three beers and writing a story just seemed like a fun idea at the time.

Some of these stories also have links to my novels; a scenario, a character, or just sometimes have been created to fit within a world I previously created. Other stories have links to my other short stories. Some will leave the ending for your imagination to build on. And a few of the shorter ones are just a snippet in a character's life.

Before each story I have included some notes that you may find interesting. None of them give away the ending, but some do give you an idea of the thought process behind the work. If you prefer not to be informed about the "behind the scenes" creative side, feel free to skip over each one. The reading of these notes is definitely not necessary.

You'll also find a few different genres within these pages. Mostly, they will fit the Thriller genre, but a few will stretch themselves outside of these restrictions and become something more.

I do hope you enjoy all these stories, or even just a few. Feel free to look me up online and let me know your thoughts.

Mat Clarke

(Links to my webpages are at the end of this book)

1. Fated for Death

Author's note: Three people, each one different to the other. All coming together in a way that gives them no time to ponder their situation. Written as part of a story competition years ago.

Twenty-seven years ago Mary left her mother's womb and made the journey to start her independent life. She separated from the only other person she had ever known after living symbiotically as two for the full nine months and seven hours.

The last hours had come as severe traumatization. A moment in time that still struck Mary deeply. Although, how she could feel it as a true moment, she was unsure. She only knew that a world she had loved and never wanted to leave, had been mercilessly ripped away.

Maybe that's why other people sought out a life companion; afraid to be alone, needing to be joined to another. Maybe it's why loneliness forever descended upon people and brought overwhelming despair—even when they are with another person. A person that just did not fit right into their round hole.

Mary had never had these kinds of feelings. She had learned from an early age of three to become her own companion, and so she had never felt lonely. The sacred bond of mother and daughter, did still exist, but she didn't love either of her parents and had never grown to love anyone else either.

When Mary thought of companionship, it left her confused and boxed in.

In her teenage years it became clear she could never be like everyone else, or ever have a relationship.

In direct response to this realization, she left her parents home town following her twentieth birthday, and moved to one of the most isolated places in all the world; the extreme centre of the Great Sandy Dessert, Western Australia.

The idea had not come to reality without precaution and planning. The research home she moved into belonged to the university where she had studied for three years in biology. It had often stayed empty as it was difficult to arrange researchers to occupy the facility for any length of time. The fading research of herpetology within the Australian desert, was what they had wanted from her. More than anything she had wanted to lean toward ophiology, especially considering amphibious life was not overly abundant in the desert.

A water source had been established from previous occupation after extensive drilling to underwater reservoirs. A company had also been sourced to make regular monthly supply drops for food, including required supplies for her research.

A single engine plane made a drop by parachute, which fell within one hundred metres of her home. Meat, cleaning products, canned goods, emergency supplies, clothes—if she needed them, spare parts for her tools and equipment, and anything else she called through to the university.

Mary grew the majority of her own food anyway, using the large greenhouse, which she ingeniously controlled the temperature by using already existing caverns underneath the desert floor, enabling a cool air supply. She also benefitted from unlimited solar

power, fairly regular wind power and internet via satellite.

To earn additional money outside the meager income she received from the university she hosted websites and offered web design to large companies. They paid well for her talents and the speed she could complete the work, since her distractions were limited to practically nothing. By the time she reached the age of 27 she found she needn't work ever again if she desired.

Three days before the small plane was scheduled to fly overhead with Mary's goods, she headed outside to her greenhouse to re-pot tomato vines which had begun to outgrow their smaller homes. Mary found it easier if the vines stayed in their pots giving them transportability around the enclosure depending on the time of year.

While inside the semi-transparent plastic greenhouse she noticed a car in the distance heading toward her property. This was not a regular occurrence. For the seven years she had lived here, this would be the third time someone had come to pay her a visit. She counted off the seasons on her hand and realized it had now been four years since she had been in contact with another person. Naturally this intrigued her as to who it could be.

Mary wiped her hands free of the rich dark soil that kept her plants alive, and walked toward the door to a midway exit. Then through a second set of doors to the outside. The double doors helped keep the greenhouse at the desired temperature without much air exchange. Also, it kept the bugs out.

She closed the second door and squinted at the approaching vehicle. Her hand helping to shield her eyes. The car hadn't slowed. Another few seconds passed and it appeared as if it might run her greenhouse down if it didn't change course or slow soon. Or it may even collide with her.

The dry heat brought up sweat beads on her forehead, which then flowed down and soaked into her T-shirt. She called out to the car while cupping her mouth. She waved her arms around in the air and to the side. They didn't stop. She ran to the side of the greenhouse and waved her arms there and jumped up and down.

If she had taken her rifle out with her, as she normally did, she could have shot into the air to get their attention. She turned back to the house, her arms still in the air, it would all be too late by the time she ran to get the rifle. The gun had come in handy for killing foxes or rabbits. Not only for a food source, but also for the sake of killing off non-indigenous vermin; a common nuisance for farmers and her own greens and livestock.

Seconds more passed. Her Greenhouse seemed doomed. She jumped up and down and screamed at them. It would hit and there would be nothing she could do. The vehicle swerved. Away from the greenhouse.

Finally! She sighed.

Its wheels dug into the softer sand around her home and it slid as well as turned. With a sudden horrible realization, she saw that the people had acted too late and too violently. Not only would they still clip the side of the greenhouse, but they were also coming straight for her. Mary turned and sprinted away. The vehicle tipped as it flung sideways, staying on two wheels for a moment. Then she heard a crash from behind, and the ground shook. She could only imagine the destruction of the vehicle and the damage it had done to her greenhouse. A terrible grinding noise came from over her

head. She dared not look.

The smile never left Ben's mouth, not just because of the trip he and his sister had decided to take, but because there wasn't a moment he was not happy. *Never with a care*, were the words people used to describe him, especially his teachers in high school who had soon given up on trying to get him to sit still.

When he earned money, he spent it. When he went away on holidays, he took the bare necessities and his surf board. If he needed a place to stay he would drive until he found a vacancy sign or a place where he could sleep in his car. It all worked out in some positive way eventually for Ben.

His sister, Susan, loved him more than anyone, even their parents, which may have come from being born as fraternal twins. Yet, she realized early on that her personality differed greatly from his. So much so that they were almost exact opposites, and not just because of their opposite gender.

They had shared their mother's womb for eight months and 29 days, and come out sharing a devotion toward each other, but little else. And even though neither admitted it, they missed each other's company if separated for any length of time. Hence the reason for this holiday and driving across the narrowest part of the Great Sandy Desert.

They spent time in the city of Perth to begin their holiday and enjoy the sun, the people, the beaches, and tourist attractions. The wealth the city exhibited with events and festivals, was in direct response to money siphoned from the recent mining activity.

Each night they split up and enjoyed very dissimilar activities. Ben loved to get on the streets and see if a party might happen spontaneously (and if one didn't he would create one), while Susan sought out trendy bars, or a movie, depending on what mood took her.

Their plan, devised years before from when they were children, was to travel to the top of Australia and see the small towns along the coast. Have a few days of surfing for Ben, and sightseeing for Susan.

As that time came closer to reality, Susan had discovered a unique place not far off the route they had planned to take. For five years she had kept this special place a secret from Ben. Now as that day came closer, she could barely hold her excitement in check. When Ben questioned her, especially because no beaches lay inland on her detour, she would say, "You'll see."

This new personality trait she had created for herself sent shivers up her spine, and confused the hell out of Ben, but that was just the start of it. What they were about to see was something he could never expect. She had never kept a secret from Ben. She also never made plans that others didn't expect, and never changed plans once they were set. And these plans had been set from before they could drive. So telling Ben that she wanted to go in a different direction for a detour, but give no explanation why, made Ben a very questioning companion. And he didn't disguise his interest.

"How you doin' there sis', still awake?" Ben asked following the first three hours of driving.

They had been listening to music most of the way up the coast, but recently opted for a more silent journey at Susan's request.

"I'm fine, you can take over in about an hour. I've been keeping an eye out for..."

something. A turn off.”

Ben shook his head and looked about to question Susan again. He then changed his mind. “I’m gonna shut my eyes, wake me if you need me,” Ben rearranged his jacket under his head against the window. “You’ll be okay?”

“Of course. Get your 30 minutes sleep, or whatever, and I’ll wake you in a bit.”

Ben poked his tongue out at his sister, then closed his eyes. Within a minute his breathing became heavy. He wouldn’t wake now unless she shook him—hard.

Her eyelids drooped. If she was going to make this a great surprise, she had to continue the driving. She had to make sure she stayed awake too. It was off this road somewhere, but she had no idea how much further. The place did not show on any maps nor brochures. Instead, she had discovered the place online where people had been discussing an experiment, although mentioned it was secret, so could not give the exact location.

Susan wound down her window and breathed in the hot dry air. The road stretched well past the horizon in a straight line ending in a snowy haze under a blue sky. Heat shimmers rose and wavered in twisting distortions and non-existent pools of water.

Up ahead something took shape on the side of the road. They neared and she realized it was a small building. Further past it, parked on the side of the road, was a large truck. A sign came into view before the building which displayed cold drinks and food. She licked her lips and tasted salt. She needed something, and not water. Something sugary and tasty.

Susan put her indicator on, thinking briefly on the uselessness of the action, and slowed so she could pull up behind the truck. Their four-wheel-drive bumped over the yellow clay dirt on the side of the road and they came to an easy stop. Ben didn’t move. Susan turned off the engine and left the vehicle without a word.

She approached the shop from the side and saw that it didn’t have any windows. She couldn’t even tell if the place was open. The pictures of the drinks and food had all faded and been etched away by wind and sand. At the bottom of the shack it had rusted so much that animals could probably crawl underneath and get in. Rats, mice, other crawlies. She shuddered, then put it out of her mind. Okay, she wouldn’t buy any food, but cans of drink would be well earned. She entered through the metal door and let it close behind her.

It slammed back, and she flinched while her heart beat a thousand beats in a second. The inside of the shack was as silent as the outside. No one stood at the counter. She waited a few moments longer then cleared her throat. No one came to discover who was waiting.

The corrugated shack smelled of sugar rich drinks and pastry. It also buzzed with large black flies. She looked over the few cans available and the displayed hot food in the warmer. Sandwiches and packets of assorted chips and confectioneries decorated the few racks under three yellow lights. At the back of the shack a small music player streamed tunes from the sixties, currently playing a sad tune originally sung by Elvis. In the Ghetto. Her dad had played this song a long time ago before he left them. Again she thought of the place she was taking her brother to. She didn’t think she would find their dad there, but it was a start. And it was the only place she knew he had ever worked at, aside from the basement of their home when they had been young.

Susan jumped as the door behind her banged again. Just the wind. It shuddered, then opened and slammed back into the metal siding once more. She tapped her foot and drummed the counter with her fingers in feigned impatience. She really didn't want to be in this place anymore, and that no one came to the counter it gave her a good excuse to leave this filthy heat-box. The over-priced \$6 cost for the drinks helped make up her mind. The food wasn't much better; around triple what it should be. And although it all looked quite edible, she bet it had been in there for days. She stared into her open purse to a blue ten dollar note, then looked around for a machine which might take her card. She sighed after finding nothing. One drink between them even if someone did come to serve her. She turned back to the door and gripped the handle. It didn't turn.

The last gust of wind must have jammed it shut. The handle wouldn't budge either. Probably broken from the banging as well. She tried with both hands, then hammered at it with her palm. Thoughts of being kidnapped and held in a shitty shack made angry enough that she kicked at the door. It broke and part of the frame came away from the metal sheeting.

"Shit!" She wasn't going to pay to have the damn thing fixed.

She stamped her foot on the dusty ground where the rubber mat stopped short of the door. This place probably had shallow graves out back full of unlucky customers who had stopped here dying of thirst. And that's after the people were robbed and had fuck-knows what else done to them. Maybe the original shop owners were buried back there as well. And the new owners were lunatics with lots of sharp tools.

"You've a great imagination, Susan, but you need to think straight and get back to the car." Her underarms sweated a torrent and ran down her side to her waist. The damn place could double as a sauna. She grumbled another swear and tried the handle again, this time pulling back and forward, which just made it clatter and bang.

"Hello?" she called. "Your stupid door doesn't work."

Sweat dripped from her forehead and into the dirt staining the ground in dark muddy brown puddles. Enough was enough, there was no way she would stay stuck in a crappy shop in the middle of who-knows-bloody-where.

She climbed up the counter and shimmied on her bottom, maneuvering around the bench, then looked to the sandy dirt floor on the other side where a doorway led to a dark back room. There had to be a another way out. Glass smashed outside. Susan turned and over-balanced. She tumbled off the edge and onto a small rubber mat on the opposite side of the counter. She landed on her bottom in a pile of candy wrappers, half eaten food, and gun shells. Spent ones.

A closed change box, fairly new looking, sat underneath the counter with a key poking from the top.

With legs like springs, she got up and ran straight through the back open doorway to shadow veiled rooms. She quick walked past the first room where old rusted number plates covered the dirt floor, piled into something like a make-shift bed.

Cobwebs dangled from the metal rusting roof in thick clumps, matted with dust. Susan dodged these and navigated her way down the next narrow corridor past two smaller rooms. The dark stole her sight and it also notably quietened as if entering a crypt. She couldn't even hear the wind outside. This room smelled so bad it had to be close to the indoor toilet, one that needed some acid strength cleaning. At the end of the

corridor she reached another door. Light streamed in from every gap and created long hard edged lines along the walls, roof, and sandy floor.

She gripped the handle and turned it. The door opened easily with just the slightest push. She sighed and stepped through.

Susan ran around the back of the shack, larger than what she thought it had been, and back to the road and the four-wheel drive. Her brother had probably slept through the whole stupid thing.

“Ben!” she called, trying to keep her voice low, but urgent.

She then saw his window. It was his window that had smashed. Blood dripped from his forehead and down the panels and shattered glass.

“Ben, what is it?” She gripped his shoulder through the broken window. He groaned, but did not wake.

“No, no, no, no...” Her voice trailed off into a moan.

She ran to the other side of their four-wheel drive and jumped in. At the same time, turning the ignition and putting the car into gear. She slammed her foot on the accelerator and they sped from the stone curb and onto the road.

A bang came from behind. Then a crack. A sharp jab thumped into her back.

The intense pain caused her hands to go numb. Her eyes unfocussed. The car drifted to the side of the clay-dirt shoulder. Susan saw this happen, but felt too groggy to do anything about it. She thought of her mum, the last time she had seen her dad, then of Ben.

“Ben!” She had to get him to a hospital. Her ears rang and her nose burned like she wanted to sneeze.

She re-gripped the wheel, a fraction of her strength returning. The car continued to veer away from the road and the wheels thumped over thick sand. The front wheels hit a large mound running parallel to the road, and they leapt into the air. Susan screamed and clung to the wheel, locking her arms. They landed on one front wheel then the others, and bounced about until they leveled again.

The wheels slid in the sand, left then right, the steering wheel useless over soft ground. She flattened her foot, desperate to keep going. Desperate to get away. If she kept going they had to be okay.

The engine revved hard with the wheels spinning. The vehicle shot up another smaller mound and hit harder ground. Baked mud tore and ripped away under the heavy rubber tread. The car straightened automatically at speed. Susan kept her grip tight, her back straight. The rubber steering wheel creaked under her white knuckles

She looked down to her side and saw blood bubbling from a hole in her side.

Tears filled her eyes. “No.”

She put one hand over the wound and winced. She then looked around for something to stop the bleeding. Napkins from their last stop bulged out from the centre console and so she grabbed a big handful and pushed them up against the wound.

She just had to work out what to do. Deal with this situation like she would deal with any other problem. She would plan it, calculate it, then take the best action and work her idea through until she made it happen. It’s what she did!

“Ben, Ben, are you okay.”

He groaned but did not talk. Susan didn’t know what she would be able to do for