

## Julie and Rosalie by Rob Bullen



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Julie ran the sportswear section. Well, she didn't actually own it, but as far as all the staff, including Julie, were concerned it was her domain. No discarded sweet wrapper ever sullied the pristine floor of Julie's sportswear section. Jackets, skirts, tops, tailored trousers hung in neat rows, arranged exactly in order; first by style, then by colour, then by size.

There had been an incident about a year ago when a young shop assistant decided that coloured tops should be at the front, because that attracted more customers. She'd read it in a trade magazine. Julie didn't make a fuss – she just watched from her chair in the back corner as the poor girl struggled to move the racks. The following morning the girl was in another section, and coloured tops were back against the left-hand wall, next to accessories.

The change rooms were also part of Julie's territory. Each room was regularly cleaned and disinfected. Angela from menswear said they smelled like toilet duck, but Julie insisted it made customers feel safe. You never know who's been in that cubicle before you.

There was a large mirror between Julie's chair and the up-market skirts on the right-hand side. It had a peculiar, asymmetrical wooden frame. Apparently Julie had chosen it herself. A customer asked about it once. Julie said, "Oh, it reminds me of a holiday I took many years ago".

One other thing interrupted the strictly-enforced visual order. There was a small, framed black and white photograph next to the register. A young woman – it could have been Julie many years earlier – looked grudgingly at the camera, against a backdrop of white silk curtains.

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“Oh please hurry up Julie, father’s waiting.” As usual, Rosalie, the older sister, was on time. Her suitcase was large, with straps around it both vertically and horizontally. The forwarding address in London and the return address in Brisbane were both neatly printed on a brightly-coloured card that was secured to the handle.

“Coming,” said Julie from somewhere near the top of the stairs.

Julie’s entrances were always dramatic, and this was no exception. Her hair was now in a Lulu-esque bob – slightly outdated for 1971, but it showed off her delicate, pretty face. There was rouge on her cheeks, her eyebrows were shaped and penciled, and her hairspray would have protected the Brisbane Town Hall in an earthquake. And the skirt.

“Oh, Julie, you’re not going to wear that on the aeroplane?”

“Why not?”

“You know why not. You look like a ... well, anyway, you know father won’t let you.”

Julie pulled her skirt down so that the waist was around her hips and the hem reached a little closer to her knees. She grabbed her suitcase – much smaller than Rosalie’s, and unmarked – and strode through the door. Father was indeed concerned about Julie’s choice of clothes, but her timing had been such that if they were to make their flight he needed to leave now. As they drove off, he said a short prayer for the safe return of his daughters.

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Michael had always been prominent in his local church, and had tried hard to instil respect for traditional Christian values in both Rosalie and Julie. For women, those values were modesty, righteousness and above all chastity. “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.” – 2 Corinthians 7:1.

And for Michael, God was certainly to be feared. He had his own memories of God’s cruel justice as it was delivered with ruthless intensity by his own father. He never spoke of those things, but the tremor in his voice when he delivered his trademark phrase – “God is not mocked” – was enough to tell a tale to those who cared to listen.

With Rosalie, Michael felt his message was safe. She was quiet and obedient. And when she played piano or organ in the church, with such precision yet with such deep, pure emotion, his heart swelled with love and pride.

Julie was another matter. It seemed to him that his message made no mark on her soul. She was wilful and disrespectful, and the clothes she wore (sometimes with the apparent acceptance of her mother) were outrageously provocative. Michael loved her dearly, but of late his love had been shown through a very harsh façade indeed.

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The bar was full, and very noisy, and Julie needed to put her mouth against Rosalie's ear to be heard.

"I think he's looking at me."

Having spent the day exploring the Tate Gallery (Rosalie's idea, of course) it was now Julie's turn to set the agenda. In fact, Rosalie was beginning to quite enjoy the music – so different from what she was used to back home - and would have been prepared to dance with Julie, but Julie had other ideas. She shot a glance across the room that she hoped would be both sophisticated and seductive, and was rewarded with a raised eyebrow. The boy with the black, shoulder-length hair and the black jacket motioned to his friend, and they both ambled across the dance floor toward the young Australian girls.

"Would you like a drink, ladies?" It wasn't the most original opening line in the world, but the London accent made it sound irresistible.

Three hours later, Julie was outside in the back seat of a small red car with her new-found beau. His friend had said a few words to Rosalie, but it was pretty clear that nothing was going to happen on that front, and eventually Rosalie sat in a corner listening to the music and trying to look inconspicuous, while Julie danced and finally disappeared outside.

In the car, kissing had progressed to touching and was about to become seriously intimate when there was a loud crack, coming from outside the car. The boy ignored it, and Julie decided to do likewise, but it was followed by another, even louder, and then shouts and high-pitched squeals. Julie pushed him away, lifted her head and peered through the back window.

"Holy Jesus, it's on fire."

In the street there was mayhem. Young people poured out of the building, while others stood outside screaming the names of friends into the cold night air. Flames danced and sputtered from the walls, through windows and through the roof. Every few seconds there was a crack or a thud as some structural element of the building collapsed. A siren pulsed. A man struggled through a half-open window with his shirt blazing. He tore it off, and the skin of his back came with it.

Julie pushed maniacally toward the front door, calling her sister's name. Just as she reached it, a cordon of firefighters formed and closed it off.

"My sister's in there."

"We'll get her out."

"I have to find her."

"Stand back, please, you're not helping by getting in the way."

Julie sat on the ground and cried, and screamed, and peered at every face that emerged, either walking or being carried, and beat her head with her hands when it wasn't Rosalie. Finally a limp body came out of the building on a makeshift stretcher. Oh God, no. NO!

Julie had heard her father well enough, and part of her had believed him. Perhaps she would be punished for her rebelliousness. She had imagined being blinded, or contracting some hideous disease. If that were to be, she had thought, let it be. But not this. Never had she imagined this. God's punishment for immorality – to watch her sister die.

They laid the stretcher on the ground and Julie rushed toward it. A paramedic put out her arm to stop her, but with no success. A male colleague had to physically hold her to prevent her from touching the body.

“She's badly burned. If you touch her, it will make it much worse.”

Julie saw her breathe. Rosalie even opened her eyes briefly, then closed them again. Apart from that, she didn't move. They covered her with a kind of linen cloth, and she lay on the stretcher for what seemed like hours. A piece of wood from the building had been placed above her head, and another below her feet. It was like a picture, the wood and the stretcher poles framing Rosalie's innocent, motionless, linen-covered body. In the distant future, a similar frame would enclose a mirror, and whenever Julie walked past, the body inside would be not Rosalie's, but hers.

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Within a week, Rosalie was sitting up. Her hair was burned, and there were a couple of small marks on her forehead, but apart from that her face was unscathed. Her body, however, was a different matter. Part of a ceiling joist had fallen across her, pinning her to the floor. By the time the firefighters arrived, her dress was alight, and there were serious burns to her lower abdomen and upper thigh. She would bear the scars forever.

“Just where he was touching me,” thought Julie, and the idea that Rosalie had been punished for her own sins deepened. Describing to her parents what had happened on that night was the most difficult conversation she had ever had – indeed it was to be the most difficult conversation of her entire life. Her mother comforted her, and her father tried his best to refrain from judgemental language, but Julie was now convinced that she knew where the guilt lay. All the teachings of her childhood led her to the inescapable conclusion that she was a sinner who had brought disaster to those she loved, through God's unyielding law. God is not mocked.

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Almost as soon as she could speak, Rosalie requested one of the new cassette players by her bedside, and recordings of London bands like the one she heard at the bar. Donovan was interesting, but the really exciting music was from The Kinks, T Rex, and especially a young singer called David Bowie. The music she played at the local church was nothing like this. This was the real world. An idea formed in her mind. She could be part of this scene – why not?

Four weeks later, it was time for Rosalie to leave, and the doctors announced she would be fit to fly home. Her father was relieved.

“I'll get the tickets tomorrow. They say we should be able to find a flight back on Friday.”

“Dad, I don't want to go back. I'm staying here.” Rosalie's voice was quiet, but firm.

“On your own?” Her mother was uncomprehending.

“Yes, on my own. I’ve just been given a second chance at life. I’m going to take it.”

“Rosalie, what’s got into you? Has this thing done something to your head?” Having almost lost a daughter once, the thought of losing her again was terrifying.

“Look, I love you all, but I have to do this for myself. I’m going to be a musician.”

That was the last straw. Julie joined in.

“In London? Ros, you don’t know anyone here. And there’s drugs, and who knows what else. It’s not safe.”

“Don’t talk to me about taking risks, Julie.”

That was not what Julie needed to hear. She buried her face in her hands and began sobbing softly. Her mother was about to say “Now look what you’ve done,” but thought better of it.

Rosalie reached out her hand, trying to find Julie’s arm, but Julie stepped back.

“I’m sorry. None of this is your fault, Julie. Really. It’s not your fault.” Julie lifted her head, and nodded, but in her mind she knew her nod was a lie. The rest of her life would be dedicated to quiet repentance.

Before she flew off, Julie went to Rosalie’s suitcase while she was out of the room and found her travel papers. Just as she had suspected, Rosalie kept a spare copy of her passport photo. It was in black and white, and showed her in front of some silk curtains. Julie slipped it into her handbag. In the distant future, it would be framed on a desk in a department store.

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Rosalie’s foray into the music industry didn’t last long. She borrowed a keyboard from one of the Kensington music stores, worked hard on rhythms and chords, and played with a few bands. But at the store she met a man called Graham, who was a flying instructor. Graham was quite keen on Rosalie and offered to give her a couple of lessons for free. Ten years later, Rosalie was a commercial pilot for Monarch Airlines, and the relationship with Graham was long gone.

Ten years later still, Rosalie was one of the first female captains for British Airways. She lived outside London, but spent a lot of time at her latest boyfriend’s villa in the south of France. After her father’s death, visits to Brisbane became less frequent. She still liked to visit her mother and Julie, but as time went on she found she had less and less in common with them.

Julie joined David Jones as a shop assistant and worked her way up. She joined a church, and sat always in the same pew, third from the rear. And it seemed that the longer she worked, the smaller her world became. Finally, eventually, Julie’s entire world shrank to the size of the sportswear section, just to the right of the escalators, on the second floor.