

The Chocolate Wheel

by Harry Dunn
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Gentle - folk retired to the toilet; roughnecks went to the bog,
City-folk had crappers and cisterns,
And bushies just went - behind a convenient log.
I lived down here in the Fifties
Before Inverloch was blessed with the sewerage,
And water from underground pipes;
But the townies at least had the night-cart,
While the poor cockies had only their dunnies,
All shapes and sizes and types.

The one thing that they all had in common,
For hygiene and old-fashioned nous,
Was their placement well down the back yard,
Away from the back of the house;
Remote from the house for good reason,
Especially the kitchen and cooking,
These dunnies were always obnoxious,
Built for a singular purpose,
And it wasn't for listening or looking:
In my family, they weren't 'privvies' or 'lavvies',
Genteel terms held in little regard,
To us and to many, our ablutions
Were described, simply, as "going down the back yard."

So, when nature called us to action,
And the matter could not be delayed,
A rushed trip to the dunny was needed
Regardless of weather conditions, a trip which had to be made.
It was worse on a wet winter's night,
When, with lantern or candle in hand,
You went down past the chook-house, turned right,
Then into the house of the tanned.

One day, when I was about ten years of age,
My parents went out for a while,
So I painted my push-bike, silver and red,
Back when Silvafross paint was still all the rage
Aluminium-based, and probably loaded with lead,

It was a product much loved by young painters
Of household effects , A to Zed,
Their talents and skills to engage,
And most often carried out in the shed.

When I finished the bike; the day was still sunny
And I still had some paint in the pot,
It was viscous and sticky, not the usual Silvafross - runny,
So I decided to use the whole flaming lot
On the seat of the family dunny,
Whether painting was needed or not.

My intentions were good - no doubt about that,
But my preparation was lacking in detail,
I applied three or four coats, each one on the other,
Then stood back to admire my work,
The impact, the brush-work, the scale;
I just couldn't wait to get the reaction,
Of my long-suffering father and mother,
To this masterpiece I would unveil.

Needless to say, that Silvafross seat
Made quite an impact - while it lasted;
But that sticky old paint never quite dried,
And no matter how hard my poor folks tried,
All attempts at removal resisted,
They tried metho and turps, solvents and slurps
In fact and in truth, that Silvafross was a real bastard:
Even the flies - and they were fulsome and many,
Took great care not to land on that seat,
They saw what it did to the Silver-tail Dunns,
So those blowies were cautious and canny.

My dad then decided to move upwards
In the matter of toilet technology,
And he purchased the latest invention, described
As a 'breakthrough in faecal biology',
Guaranteed, so they said, to change all of our lives for the better
And work wonders for the local ecology.
'Dissolvenator' they named this invention,
Made by the company Hygeia,

Which, by frequent additions of chemicals, caustic,
Would convert faecal matter to a harmless pee soup:
It had passed many tests, many tests diagnostic,
And it needed no water to drink
To make the stuff disappear.
The effluent departed, I think,
Through a pipe mounted high at the rear,
And into an underground tank, where it rested a while to mature
And then - like magician-made smoke - disappear.
It was guaranteed odourless, never to stink,
Or so said the Hygeia brochure.

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I arrived home from school one hot summer's day,
I remember it clearly and well;
The Hygeia was fully installed
In our back-yard Liberty Bell.
It stood where the thunder-box had erstwhile been;
Impressive in size, pot-bellied and round
And painted in chlorophyll green.
The lid looked bulky and heavy, for a toilet which boldly claimed
To be newer and better and greater,
But lifting that lid turned levers and gears,
Some partly immersed, some naked and un-ashamed.
Those gears were attached to a rotating churn,
We dubbed it the Chocolate Wheel
But to Hygeia, this churn was its heart and its soul,
And they thought it had massive appeal,
But I gagged when I saw that thing turn.

Hygeia's patented paper was needed,
The maker's warranty conditions to meet
Shiny, hard, unforgiving and costly,
And the tiniest, flimsiest sheet.
In the past we'd been spoiled by unlimited bumf
Like the pink pages from telephone books,
With their advertisements large and small,
And pages from Hansard, which kept us informed,
And hung from a string which hung from a hook,
Fixed to the dunny wall.

To say the new system was somewhat unloved
Might suggest that the Dunns were slow-learning,
Unable to cope with high fashion and change,
But the smell from that Chocolate Wheel's grinding and churning
Whenever we struggled to open the lid,
And the sight of the contents splashing and turning,
Was gut-wrenching and over the top
Even to a ten-year-old kid.

No-one said much about it, no-one outwardly fussed
We all knew the Chocolate Wheel cost a king's ransom,
More than my folks could afford,
And it wasn't a thing we ever discussed,
When we gathered to eat at the board,
But I think that we all, each in our way,
Wished we'd never laid eyes on that rotten green thing
And pined for the days of the old silver-seat,
Pink pages, and Hansard on string.

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One autumn day, returning from school,
I needed comfort, that's comfort 'at stool',
And hastened down to the back-yard dunny,
Imagine my joy - I was still just a boy,
To behold no Hygeia, chlorophyll-green,
And nary a leaf of that patented paper, hard, aggressive and shiny,
But there in its place - was the old silver disgrace,
The thunder-box out of retirement,
And there on the hook was the pink pages phone-book
The Hansard back in its place
As if these were the latest inventions.
They met our simple toiletic requirements.
The Dissolvenator went off to the tip.
This satisfied our unspoken intentions,
And we were back to basic dunny equip.