

NQR

Margaret McKenzie

margmck01@optusnet.com.au

Phone: (03) 9877 2732

Characters:

Ronnie, 16, daughter of Louise

Mitch, 17, works at NQR supermarket

Louise, 34, also works at NQR

The three characters are on stage at the same time, each in their own light and space.

Ronnie enters pushing a shopping trolley half full of baby's clothes and toys.

Mitch enters in NQR uniform and sits on a bench to eat his lunch.

Louise enters Ronnie's bedroom and sits in front of the dressing table.

RONNIE: I watch mums and their kids in the supermarket. It doesn't look so hard. The kid sits in the trolley seat. And the mum gives her a Chupa Chup if she cries. I found this one down the creek.

Someone just dumped it there. It's got a wonky wheel. But I can fit a lot in it.

MITCH: First time I saw her she was standing on the back of a trolley. In the car park. No-one else around. Taking herself for a crazy ride. And laughing out loud. I thought, She must be some happy girl.

LOUISE: I keep her bedroom as she left it. Her nightlight on. Not too old to be scared of the dark.

MITCH: It's my job to collect the trolleys. So I call out to her, 'Stop.' And she comes to a screaming halt in front of me. 'Am I in trouble?'

she asks. She's got these sparkly eyes. 'I won't tell,' I say. 'I'm on my break as soon as I round this lot up. Why don't you wait for me on the bench here?' She says, 'Okay.'

RONNIE: You need special clothes when you're pregnant. To hide where the baby is. But I look at the women in the shopping centre, and I reckon I can tell which ones are pregnant.

MITCH: And she does. Wait for me. I ask, 'What's your name?' She says, 'Ronnie.' I say, 'My uncle is Ronnie.' 'My real name's Veronica,' she says. 'But only Mum calls me that.'

LOUISE: I can't let it happen. Not again. Just getting my life together and she does this.

RONNIE: (*She takes the newspaper article out of her pocket.*) I first see the lady in *Baby Bunting's*. She's just like in the photo. She's looking at the racks of tiny clothes. You need lots of clothes. You need a baby's bib. So when you feed her you won't get food all over her dress. The lady doesn't buy anything. I follow her to K-Mart. She buys some pink booties. So I know the baby is a girl.

MITCH: I offer her a smoke. She says, 'Yeah.' But I don't reckon she's had one before 'cause she coughs and coughs. We both laugh. Tells me she's left school but hasn't got a job yet. I say, 'I could put a word in for you at the supermarket.' She laughs again. Says, 'Mum works here too, and she's put my name down.'

RONNIE: I watch her going into the toilets. You go to the toilet a lot when you're pregnant. I follow her in. We're the only ones there. It's near closing time.

LOUISE: I've had to make my own way. Been to night school. Worked my way up to assistant manager. I want her to make something of her life.

MITCH: Every day Ronnie is sitting on the bench here. Waiting for me to finish my shift. I like that. I ask her to the pictures.

LOUISE: Mitch seems a nice kid. I watch him in the store. Works hard. Always polite. A good influence on Veronica, I think. Her first boyfriend.

MITCH: I pick her up in my Ford pickup. We have a laugh about that. I open the door for her. And she says, 'I like the way you smell.' Jeez.

LOUISE: What am I thinking of! Like I forget about her father. That motorbike. His leathers. Clinging to his back as we roared around the hills.

(Louise and Ronnie speak to each other.)

LOUISE: Have you had your period?

RONNIE: No.

LOUISE: How late is it?

RONNIE: Don't know.

LOUISE: Well, you should bloody well know. Didn't they teach you anything at that school? I know just by looking at you. Like the cat that swallowed the canary.

RONNIE: What?

LOUISE: You two have had sex.

(Louise and Ronnie face the front again.)

MITCH: Then one day she says she can't see me any more. I asked her mum, 'Why not?' She says I've caused enough trouble as it is. And if I try to see her again my job will be on the line.

RONNIE: You need a sharp knife. I asked the man in *Bunnings* which was the sharpest. He looked at me a bit funny. So I walked off. Went back later and pinched one. Carried it out under my coat. No-one knows what I've got under here.

(Louise and Ronnie face each other.)

RONNIE: Will it hurt?

LOUISE: You won't feel anything.

RONNIE: But remember when I was little. I had to have my tooth out. And the man told me to count backwards from 100. But I hadn't learnt that yet.

LOUISE: You were asleep the next moment.

RONNIE: Will he cut the baby out?

LOUISE: It isn't a baby yet. Just the start of a baby.

RONNIE: Can I take Eliza with me?

LOUISE: Sure.

(LOUISE and RONNIE face the front again.)

LOUISE: Eliza is her doll. She has holes in her head from when Ronnie threw her against a wall. And she rattles. Ronnie pushed some nails down her throat to see if they'd come out the other end.

MITCH: I didn't force her or anything. It just felt right, you know. Like she wanted it too.

LOUISE: When I bring her home from the clinic, she's limp, still clutching Eliza. I put her to bed. She sleeps for a day. I begin to think she'll never wake up. When she does surface, she won't speak. I make her favourite, macaroni cheese, but she won't touch it. Three days without a word. I say, 'If you think you're making me feel guilty, you're not' When I come back from the shops on the third day, she's sitting on the floor cutting up a newspaper. I say, 'Give me the scissors. I'm taking you to the doctor first thing in the morning.'

RONNIE: I have this big hole where my baby was. He took her out and gave her to another mother. I have to get her back.

MITCH: I still expect to see her here or riding a trolley. And then I do see her. In the Centre. With a trolley. I call out but she doesn't hear me.

I'm sure it's her. She's heading for the toilets. I just want to know how she is.

LOUISE: She's taken nothing. No clothes. No money. No food. Just the doll.

RONNIE: I know what to do. I have to be quick. Like in the story. The lady won't scream. She'll fall onto the tiles. And there'll blood on her head. I'll put my coat over her face so she can't see.

LOUISE: I see those girls on the train stations, in doorways. You hear such awful stories. Taken into prostitution. Murder even. She's out there and the nights are closing in.

MITCH: She's quite a while in there. And then I see her pushing the trolley out. It's full of baby stuff. I think, Oh, no. She's been

shoplifting. I yell, 'Hey, Ronnie.' But she just pushes that trolley right by me. Like I don't exist. I haven't seen her since.

LOUISE: I wait for the phone call.

(Lights down on Louise)

MITCH: I still look for her on my breaks. Hope I might see her riding a trolley again.

(Lights down on Mitch)

RONNIE: *(She takes a baby's bib out of the trolley and ties it around her ears, so that we see only her eyes. She unwraps a baby's blanket to reveal her doll.)*

You are so small. So quiet. Come with me. I'll look after you. We need a bassinet and a baby bath. I know where I can find them.

We'll be all right now.

(She begins to sing a lullaby as the light fades.)