



END
OF THE
NIGHT
GIRL

AMY T. MATTHEWS



Wakefield Press

End of the Night Girl

Amy T. Matthews has published short stories in collections including *Best Australian Stories*, and been long-listed for the *Australian/Vogel* literary award. She has co-edited two anthologies of short stories and poetry and is the winner of the 2010 Adelaide Festival Unpublished Manuscript Award. *End of the Night Girl* is her first novel. Amy lives in Adelaide with her husband and children, and teaches at the University of Adelaide.

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To my parents,
Barry and Susan Matthews,
with love

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the taste of pink

I didn't sell one yabby salad all day. Steered my customers to the duck instead.

'It's spectacular,' I said, at least fifteen times, 'kind of a rustic pate, coarsely shredded, served on a hazelnut, orange and beetroot salad – it's what I'd order.'

Then as I was heading out the back door after my shift Peter stopped me. Beautiful Peter, the love of my life.

'Here, Molly,' he said with a smile. I was so riveted by him, dumb as a hot elephant, that I didn't notice what he pulled from his apron pocket until he pressed it into my hand. I squeaked at the touch of her feelers and plated tail. She was still cold and asleep.

'I've been calling her Bertha,' he said, 'it's not very pretty . . . if you want to change it – ' He shrugged. Change it? Change the name Peter chose for our love yabby? I don't think so.

I had her for four years, and she got pretty big. Wish I'd kept the tank.

Mum's on the phone when I finally rock up.

'Well, I don't think there's a secret for choosing good ginger,' she's saying as I wave hello and put the kettle on. She puts her hand over the receiver and whispers, 'It's Lizzie, she's at the supermarket.'

I roll my eyes. Lizzie's my stepsister. For her, everything has to be just so.

'Molly's just come in, darling, I'll hand you to her, after all she's in the industry.'

'What industry?' I ask, as I reluctantly take the phone.

'You know,' my mother says, lifting her floral mugs off their hooks, 'food.'

'Hi, Liz,' I sigh, not really wanting to talk to her. Talking to Lizzie depresses me.

'How do you pick a good ginger?' she says immediately.

‘Oh, I’m fine, a bit overworked, you know how it is this time of year. Weddings, parties, anything. But enough about me, how are you?’

‘I’m in a rush, Molly, I have an extremely brilliant photographer waiting for me at the office.’

‘As opposed to an extremely average photographer? Why do you want to know about ginger? Is it for an article? “Ginger: The New Wonder Diuretic: Lose Kilos Fast!”’

‘It’s not a diuretic, is it?’ she sounds appalled.

‘No. Why? Why do you want to know?’

‘Look,’ she exhales loudly into the phone, ‘I was just asking how to pick a good ginger, what’s the big deal?’

‘There’s no secret,’ I tell her, echoing my mother, ‘but personally I always pick one with fewer knobbls.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Aesthetics?’

‘Right. Thank you.’ There’s a pause. ‘It’s for tea,’ she sighs, ‘I’m making tea, if you have to know.’

‘For the photographer?’

She doesn’t answer. I imagine her fussing through ginger roots.

‘Try peppermint and ginger, it’s more refreshing.’

‘Thank you. Bye.’ She hangs up.

‘You’re so touchy,’ I tell the beeping phone.

My mother is giving me a reproving look as she hands me a cup of good old-fashioned Lipton’s.

‘What?’ I snap. She shakes her head, but I know what she’s thinking. She wants me to be nicer to Lizzie.

‘Where’s Dennis?’ I ask, as I follow her through to the den.

‘Playing golf with Dr Glenn.’

‘Is he wearing the hat I gave him?’ I gave Dennis a checked golf cap for Father’s Day. It would be okay except it’s purple and orange – I picked it up in a punk shop. Well, Mum said get

him something 'golfy'. It was either the hat or the exploding golf balls, and I was a bit worried the golf balls would give him a heart attack.

'I don't know, dear,' she responds vaguely. I have a hunch the cap is buried at the bottom of the wardrobe.

After she's checked her emails we go out to lunch. Nowhere special, just to the local café. She orders a turkey baguette; I order linguine. I'm starving, I haven't eaten breakfast and all I ate last night was the naan and chips. Molly Miller's Liquid Diet. Don't know how much weight you'd lose, but I'm guessing you'd feel pretty fabulous.

Mum and I don't talk about much. What am I supposed to say? 'I'm hungover, my house is infested with fish and I fucked the chef last night'?

'I saw Daniel yesterday,' she says, blotting her lips with her napkin, then examining it for signs of cranberry sauce. Daniel. Dan the Man.

'Oh, yeah?' I keep my voice neutral. The last thing I need today is the Dan Discussion. But I can sense it's coming.

'He said he just bought a house.'

'Good for him.' I can hear the bitterness in my voice and I don't like it. I ignore my mother's quick, searching glance. 'Where is it?' I hate the fact I'm curious.

'Unley.'

I choke on my pasta. I scramble for my Diet Coke and try to dislodge the linguine. Unley. That's right near me. Fuck, I'm going to be running into him at the supermarket, the library, the shops, the pool. Unless his house has a pool . . .

'Return-verandah villa. Sandstone, I think he said.'

'What street?'

'I can't remember, dear.'

'It was definitely Unley?'

'Mmm. I remember telling him you were in Parkside.'

He moves in next week. I asked him if he had Aunt Beryl's tablecloth.'

I feel a bit sick. I told Mum he must have taken Aunt Beryl's tablecloth when he moved out, but actually Nat set it on fire one night when we had a dinner party. She didn't mean to, she knocked the candle over.

'What did he say?' I can't look her in the eye.

'He said he'd have a look.'

Thank you, Dan.

I'm glad to get away from my mother. I know if we hang out too long she really will launch into the Dan discussion. (*'Such a shame, he was so nice.'* Subtext: what did you DO to mess that one up?)

I stop by the supermarket on the way home. I should have written a list, I feel lost in the aisles. There is too much to choose from and I can't remember which diet I'm doing. Am I cutting carbs, or was that last week? Should I get low fat yogurt or no fat yogurt? How skim should my milk be? I wish food didn't have to be so complicated.

I stop at the bottle shop on the way out and get a couple of bottles of sauv blanc and some Grey Goose vodka. I've seen the Weight Watchers ad, there's definitely wine drinking going on, so it can't be too bad. I ignore the fact that vodka's made from potatoes. Vodka's practically water and water's fat free, no joule and really good for you. I'm meant to be drinking two litres of water a day but it makes me pee a lot and there's not a lot of time to pee when you're waiting.

At five o'clock I pour myself a vodka and cranberry juice and sit down in front of the telly. I watch the news. It's pretty depressing, except for the bit about the rescued kitten at the end.

‘Though that might depress you guys,’ I say to the fish. ‘One more predator in the world.’

I get quietly drunk, flip channels and wonder what Dan’s new house looks like. It could be a real dump, he fancies himself a bit of a fixer-upper. I bought him a red toolbox last Christmas, I put a hammer and a pair of edible underpants in it. He used the hammer but not the underwear. But, I think morosely, it’s probably not a dump. It’s probably almost perfect. Almost, but not quite, there would have to be *something* for him to fix or paint or build. I wish Mum had got the address, I could walk past it some day, see what it looks like. No, I think, pouring myself another vodka, probably a bad idea.

After a while I get sick of crap TV and put on a DVD instead. I fall asleep on the couch while Barbra Streisand is singing to her dead father. Papa, can you hear me . . . There wasn’t any singing in the book. The ending was different too. In the movie good old Yentl heads off to the New World, where supposedly there are no gender roles. Ha, I think, drifting off.

Gienia’s father was laid to rest in the cemetery behind the *schul*. Encased in his simple wooden coffin he was lowered into the cold earth, to rest alone beneath the unassuming tombstone, generously paid for by Vład. Gienia’s mother lay across the cemetery by the synagogue, beside her first husband, beneath the ornate Magen David, which cast a long shadow over the Jasiński plot.

Gienia didn’t weep when she dropped her handful of dark earth on his coffin. She had wept for him already, alone in the little house on the *shtetl* square, alone in her bed, in the dark.

On the following market day the Zbroik’s furniture was arranged in two neat rows on the platz. Vład sat in the threadbare rocking chair, feet propped on the brocade piano stool that had never belonged to a piano, packing his pipe with tobacco. Gienia stood

by his side, resisting the urge to chew her fingernails. She made do with chewing her cheek, a habit her father had hated.

'Like a cow chewing cud,' he would growl at her.

'Should be a busy day,' Vľad remarked amiably, flicking a match against the arm of the rocking chair, 'spectacular weather.'

It was high summer and the air glowed with the promise of heat. Gienia mumbled agreement and watched as the vendors arranged their stalls. Hillel called out a greeting as he drove his geese past them, toward their wicker enclosure.

It didn't take long for the neighbours to emerge. They picked through Gienia's mother's linen, through her father's tools. Froy Zazula took home all the pots and pans, much to the annoyance of Froy Brun.

'She couldn't have left even *one* for the rest of us?' she complained, shooting an evil glare at the Zazula house.

Gienia tried to commiserate as she loaded Froy Brun's basket with her father's books, 'At least she left these.'

'Of course she did,' Froy Brun said, with a smug toss of her head, 'she doesn't have sons.'

Gienia watched the older woman strut past the Zazula's with her overflowing basket of books.

The furniture was all sold by mid-afternoon. The last thing to go was the old iron frame to her parents' bed: Saul the bookseller strapped it to the back of his cart, sniffing all the while about how they'd taken advantage of his generous nature.

'I'll round up Luba and my aunts,' Vľad said, 'and you can get started on the house. Where are your things? I'll take them home with me.'

Gienia watched as he hefted her trunk into the back of his cart. Everything she had left in the world was in that trunk. It looked small in the wooden tray.

She couldn't face going back inside the empty house, not alone. Instead she wandered across the platz, idly watching the

bustle and flow of traffic. She paused briefly at Milla Tepper's fabric stall. They had been friends, before Milla married Abram Tepper. Now at *Schul* on Saturdays Milla sat with the married women and gossiped about children and housework and whose husband had come home late from Mendi's, reeling and reeking of spirits.

Gienia ran her hand over the bolts of cloth and waited for Milla to finish serving Happy Symche's wife.

'I just don't know if Symche will like it,' the woman sighed, fingering the brown cotton. Gienia tried not to snort. Happy Symche didn't like anything. The summer days were too hot. The autumn rains were too late. Winter lasted too long. Spring was too muddy.

'Of course he will,' Milla coaxed.

'He certainly won't like the price.'

Milla pursed her lips. 'You won't find cheaper cotton anywhere.'

'I could have sworn Ana Czerkaski had some just like it ...' Symche's wife gave Milla a sly upwards glance. Gienia could tell by Milla's sigh that the sale was done. Milla didn't have the patience God gave a goose.

'Old cow,' she muttered to Gienia as Happy Symche's wife left with the brown cotton. She fussed with her wares for a minute, digging out the brighter bolts and placing them on the top of the pile. 'Everything sold?' she asked Gienia.

'Every last bit.'

'When do you leave?'

'Tomorrow.'

'By train? I don't trust them: trains,' she mused, 'must give you an awful stomachache, going that fast. Warsaw, isn't it? You're going to Warsaw?'

Gienia nodded.

'Yes, well, you be careful. Big place, Warsaw. Full of who knows what kind of people.'

'Vlad says it's as beautiful as Paris,' Gienia said.

'Oh ho, and he'd know, would he? Prince Vlad's never been out of town in his life.'

'He's read about it.'

'Well, I went to stay at my cousin's once.'

'We were nine.'

'Ten,' Milla corrected.

'Another *shtetl*?'

'Bigger than here,' Milla replied emphatically, '*much* bigger.'

'Dangerous, was it?'

Milla didn't notice the facetious edge to Gienia's voice. 'When a place gets too big of course it's dangerous. People you don't know. I mean they could be any type of person. And in Warsaw you have to deal with Poles.'

'I'll be careful.'

'Yes, well,' Milla said dismissively, 'at least you'll have a husband to look after you.'

Gienia was glad to see Vlad's formidable grandmother sweep into the platz, trailed by Luba and The Aunts.

'Gienia,' Milla called as Gienia said goodbye and made to leave. Gienia turned to find Milla thrusting a folded square of hand-worked lace at her. Gienia looked at her quizzically.

'A wedding present,' Milla told her with an embarrassed shrug, 'for your *chuppah*.'

'Thank you.' Gienia was touched. She took the lace and impulsively kissed Milla on the cheek.

'Yes, well,' Milla grumbled shyly, 'I suppose I thought you'd always be here, in the *shtetl*.'

'Me too,' Gienia dropped her gaze to the lace and stroked it gently. '*Shalom*, Milla.'

‘Look, here’s a couple looking for an attractive man twenty-five to thirty-five, to share “fun times”,’ I read aloud from the Personals as I sit by the kitchen waiting for dinner. The restaurant is quiet except for the rustle of Ping Pong unpacking boxes and the chatter of talkback on the radio. They’re talking about the proposed changes to immigration laws. I raise my voice, hoping Harry won’t notice. When you get him started on that stuff he’s impossible to shut up.

‘Must be discreet. You might be on for a bit there, Harry,’ I say.

‘I wouldn’t do a threesome with another man,’ Harry sniffs. I watch his boning knife slide through a salmon carcass. ‘Two chicks on the other hand . . .’

‘I did two chicks once,’ Des says.

I wish I hadn’t brought the subject up.

‘You never.’

‘I did.’

‘Were they good-looking?’

‘So-so.’

‘Yeah, good-looking chicks only do that kind of stuff in movies. It’s the ugly ones who do it, they’ll do anything for a bit of action.’

‘Otherwise Harry would still be a virgin,’ Chef says, sliding staffies up onto the pass. Pasta. At least it’s penne, so I won’t mess up my shirt.

‘Come eat in the office,’ Chef says to me, ‘these tossers have to eat while they work, they’re way behind.’

I follow him into the office and sit at Kevin’s desk to eat. On the desk there’s a photo of Kevin and Connie on their wedding day, in a thick silver frame. The frame was probably a wedding present. I stare at it while I eat, not sure what to say to Chef. I’ve seen him naked, I think nervously. I try

to think of something to talk about but my brain is stuck; I keep hearing Harry's voice talking about threesomes. Chef doesn't speak either. After ten minutes his bowl is empty and he leaves. I stare at Kevin in his wedding suit and red bow tie. His hair is parted right down the centre and his ears stick out. He's looking at Connie like he can't quite believe his good fortune. Connie's an Amazon of a woman, slightly taller than Kev, and what I'd call handsome. There's something about her that catches your eye and holds it. I don't know why she married Kevin. I wonder if she knows.

I finish reading the Personals. A lot of gay men. Married men looking for a bit of secret fun. Couples looking to spice things up with a third player. It makes me feel sad. The older people are the only thing that gives me hope. 'Trim, fiftyish widow, looking for friendship and romance.' 'Young at heart gentleman, sixty-seven, looking for a lady to share fine dining experiences. Good taste, good company, good tipper.' I find it heartening, especially the bit about being a good tipper. Around here, leading up to Christmas, the tips are hopeless. We get people who don't eat in restaurants and who are horrified at the price of the steak, and people putting the bill on the company card who don't want to explain a tip to the boss (and who won't dip their hands into their own pockets, despite having just enjoyed a free meal). It's dismal.

The best tip I ever got was at Green River – seven hundred dollars. Can you believe it? From Norwegian whalers in town for a summit. They were big blokes who drank a hell of a lot. When the guy signed his Amex slip I thought he'd made a mistake. I took it back down to him and nervously pointed at his jagged blue scrawl.

'For you,' he said, resting a meaty hand against my cheek and gazing at me with boozy affection. 'You've been wonderful.'