



Source: Michael Luo, 'Gallows humour salve to despair',
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The voice swaying in front of Bat was phasing in and out of sync with the Donkey's mouth. Bolts of pain captioned Donkey's every word in staccato stabs.

'No I don't care if you paid for our windows. I'm not paying for yours. (Stupid git.)'

Bat screwed up her eyes and the muscles in her forehead let forth a fresh wave of throb.

These meetings were always the same. The Donkey and the two Crocodiles had snakes in their pockets every time money was going to be spent on someone else's project. But as soon as it came to feathering their respective homes it was spend spend spend. 'Can't they see it's not how a collective works?' her mother-in-law had said to her just before the meeting. Bundling the baby in the blanket, Bat handed her dearest ruddy-cheeked boy over with a weak smile. She'd spent the last few hours sipping chamomile infusions and radiating loving kindness using the Metta meditation. Why should she take on these animals' shit?

I wish you a life free from enmity.

'Poor old unloved Donkey', she allowed, sighing and stepping-stoning to the facilitator's office. Night after night Bat had worked silently under the stairs through his brays and rasps. The hostility Donkey shouldered from his own family made her teeth itch. The way they spoke to him—a nail dragging over glass. Bat dreaded tuning in every night to the horror coming through the windows and down the walls. His kids hated him as much as they could, calling him spiteful names and pulling his ears even though they were only aged four and eight. He'd eeyore back and lock them outside for twenty minutes or so. Little Donkey would kick the door thump thump pause thump pause thump thump—Bat jerking out of her skin clack clack pause clack pause clack clack clack.

'Step on a crack, break your mother's back,' Princess Donkey laughed cruelly, stamping hard on a wide abyss between two paving stones. As Bat passed them on the street, Donkey held onto the little girl's hand tightly and made a wall with his shoulder. 'Who and what are you trying to protect?' Bat wondered and muttered.

I wish you a life free from enmity, free from suffering, free from pain.

Behind her in the street something in Donkey's cloth bag played a plastic toy-town tune and Princess Donkey continued 'Break your mother's back, she's a stupid twat...'

Wide-mouth Frog sat important and upright at his desk as the group gathered themselves on plastic chairs around him. 'I call this meeting open and so let's begin. Do you accept the minutes of the last general meeting as correct?.' A united chorus of nays, hisses, chirps, growls and grunts. Well at least there was agreement on something. 'Second item on the agenda: walls...'

Ms Crocodile swung her stubby skinny legs onto Mr

Crocodile's lap. The little devil in Bat's head whispered, 'yet again protecting your husband's wallet.' Bat hung her head in shame and bit on her own tongue. She really didn't want to dislike these creatures. Looking up again she recomposed her features and focused on Bear who was talking.

'As to the benefits of this proposal...' Ding ding ding. Ding ding ding. Ding.. dong dong...dong dong. Princess Donkey had pulled out a shiny bright green steering wheel that lit up with five-note ditties. She was watching the meeting intently, and when anyone tried to speak she pressed one of four buttons arranged around a replica mobile phone. Wide-mouth Frog gave her a stern look. Bear, Fox and Dog looked at Donkey. Donkey was pretending to read his notes intently, eyes darting to the Crocodiles for support. Princess Donkey looked at them all with the rebellious eyes of a sixteen year old and stabbed a few more buttons.

The Crocodiles took the opportunity to accuse everyone of bullying them and threatening legal action—snapping their pre-rehearsed speech in unison. As Bear hadn't even finished, it was obvious that they had come to the meeting without intending to listen to any argument. 'Democracy falters', thought Bat, 'and with it peace.'

Ding ding dong dong, ding ding dong dong, ding ding dong dong, dong gong....

Frog was fazed: in a rules-and-regulations world, telling someone else's child to keep quiet could be ruinous. So in the absence of civility and control Bear took it upon himself to speak louder, his town-crier tenor raising the collective pulse. Outside a lorry was backing around a corner into a liquor warehouse, its reverse beeper ringing meep meep meep meep meep meep. Fox stood up, unleashing a torrent of strong opinion in a Thai accent. Ding ding ding dong dong dong. Inside Bat's head, blood was roaring between her ears. A neck vein popped in time to the meep. A momentary blindness took her and as she rose and took a step to get a glass of water she tripped over an insubstantial chair leg and fell over, smashing her knee onto the plastic steering wheel and muzzling it for ever.

The silence was a relief, and so pain-quelling that Bat stuttered out a laugh. Looking up at Princess Donkey from a poll position on the carpet, Bat thought she looked quite pretty. And then she passed out.

As Bat came to, the Crocodiles and Donkeys left. The lorry tootled off to its next destination and Bear was in quiet discussion with Fox and Dog. So they hadn't achieved much today, but Bat was pleased: no antagonistic words had slipped from her lips. She felt like she could still kiss her little boy wonder, that their little corner of the world was for the moment at peace.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Zina Kaye.