Same As It Ever Was

Andrew Burke

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Outside the shops the footpath is thin and interrupted by parking signs. I tell you this because along comes an up-market gopher with tall zipped-up plastic walls like an oblong of shower curtains driven through the drizzle of a spring day. It parks outside the chemist and an old hand unzips a side panel carefully. Tall and stooped, rickety on frail legs, Merv leans on his walking stick and steps out, then just as carefully zips the panel up. He travels slowly on worn slippers, his stick as third leg. Down the path come two lads, twenty or so, cocky, sure of their balance and future. Mrs O’Reilly, grandson’s hand in hers, moves closer to the wall. The boys don’t notice. On legs swift and sure, a teenage schoolgirl walks past, hips alive, and as she passes she bends and waves at the boy. The big boys wave back, mockingly. They know her sister, the one with a rose tattoo. This one’s younger, solitary, waiting at the lights, balancing first on
one leg, then the other. Just now
a gleeful burst of young children
runs down the street, gold and green
streamers flying. Merv pauses
in the doorway to let them pass.
No respect, he thinks, no respect anymore.
His gopher has left a thin stream
on the footpath and one whooping boy
takes a tumble, no worse than
a fall at footy but today
it's a fright and he rubs
his coccyx. The chemist's girl
comes to help. Merv waves
his stick to Shoo! them away,
then slowly zips up a panel,
walking stick on his arm
Hoagy Carmichael style. I
watch from the prompter's pit
how they play their roles so truly. I'm
at The Globe when my wife returns,
shopping bags in each arm. I start
the car. She says, 'This lot'd cost
a pretty penny without a pension card.'
I steer out and over a speed hump,
windows up tight against the wind.

Andrew Burke is an Australian writer with books of poetry published, small plays decades ago, short stories in literary mags, and a novel waiting to be published.