

The House of Poppy Larkin

By

Robert Horne

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May 2012

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The Five People That Matter

There are only five people in this town that matter. *Who* matter, I should say. Who are important in any way. That is my considered opinion and I have certainly had some time to consider the matter.

And they all come into this pub. Or at least, they *have* come in to this pub in living memory. I know, because I've seen them. All of them. In here. At one time or another.

It's not like I'm lying in wait or anything, but that is the reason I come in here so often now. Because it's certain to happen again, and when the time comes I'll be like some part of the furniture and that could well be my moment. Making the connection that kills could happen so naturally. Because it's not what you know in this world it's who you know, and that goes double for this city.

Callum came in a few months ago. He's one of them. We didn't talk much, mainly because he was with that lot of friends of his and they were in for lunch so I left them alone. I was just having a quiet one in the Front Bar. But Callum is a good bloke. He waved as they went through. And he smiled, because he remembered me from back when.

I showed a few pictures at his place in the eighties. Two sales. I won't say to whom. Notice that, *to whom*. Got it right. Anyway, Colin was pleased. He said so at the time. 'Well done,' was what he said, and shook my hand, not just with his own right hand but with his left hand clasped over our grip as well. Real warmth, that. It was like, 'We did this thing together, man.' James Brown would have clasped Johnny Carson like that to thank him for appearing on his show: 'It's a fine thing you've done for the coloured man, Mr Carson.' That kind of thing. I don't know if the Butane Brother ever appeared on the Carson show and I'm not even sure what Johnny Carson looks like now that I come to think of it, but you know the kind of thing I mean.

I mention all this now only because I think it's important for you to know that I am an artist who has sold things. Pictures. Art. The big problem is there's no place for the intellectual in art any more; the 80s was when it all unravelled. Neo-expressionists jostling with abstract painters, installation artists, appropriationists: you know what it's like. What they call the arrival of post-modernism in the world; no place for someone who tells it like it is. And there's more of them now; every pony-tailed Wildy girl and limp-wristed tart from Saints went to art school in the 80s. So you need a lucky break every now and then. You need to know people and Callum is the kind of mate I have to stay good with.

The girl at the bar just served me with the interest people usually take in washing their hands, i.e. just get it right: correct size glass, slip it under the tap without chipping the lip, pout at tap handle while pushing it down, tilt glass for head control, fill to top, take money, correct change, lift chin and eyebrows together towards the next customer in a gesture that is just perceptible, enough to indicate it's time to speak their order and not one facial muscle used that didn't need to be used.

I trust her blankness: because it promises nothing.

I remember the words of the Blondie song, 'cos if you say hello, it means you want to see me, in the flesh'. None of that stuff here. No enticement, no power game; it leaves me alone. No flesh, just beer.

And now just as I am nurturing happily neutral thoughts about life, Charlie the Stick Man walks in to spoil my day. Just the sight of him turns my stomach on a regular basis. In the nineteen seventies he was like a preying mantis, a stick with ears - walking along staring in front of him with his elbows out the way he used to, the way he still does. One of those people who is always following the fashions, as if he had no brains of his own. Which he doesn't. Literally.

But I should explain, otherwise you will not understand. You might think that I was the mad one and not The Stick Man. When Elvis Costello was popular the Stick Man walked around in skinny ties and button down collars. Before that, in the disco era, it was those huge gold sunglasses with holes cut out of the side wings, like the ones the other Elvis used at Vegas. When it

was the Sex Pistols you'd see him going around with that yellow graffiti record of theirs under his arm. Or at least I saw him once like that. But that was back in the days when they had second hand shops in Rundle Street and people could buy records for fifty cents and then they'd walk around the street with them tucked under their arms in paper bags so thin you could see what they'd bought. Days when people were more in touch with each other, when you didn't have to have a huge, solid plastic bag with a fashion store logo every time you bought a pair of underpants.

I remember those days of punk; it was as if the Doobie Brothers and The Eagles and James Taylor were suddenly like a bad smell.

Anyway, he's not a stick with ears any more. He's a stick with ears and a stomach. This hideous bulge hangs over his belt now and I know it can't be beer because if he could afford beer he'd be in here every other day. Probably heats up noodles from the cellophane pack each night. The ones with the flavour sachet full of MSG and the legend on the front that says: No Added MSG. That's the modern world for you. Fill the container up with boiling water, then two minutes in the microwave and she's done. One minute's usually enough though. Yes, stuck in some grubby men's home up Hutt Street probably, with his little bowl of noodles on his lap every night in front of some five dollar black and white telly that someone's pulled out of their shed for the deros and doesn't even get SBS. That'd be his lot on a Saturday night.

Walks around this street like some sort of idiot savant out of Dostoyevski. More idiot than savant. Mumbling to himself and staring at the footpath. And I mean staring: his mouth half open and eyes bulging like he just put his finger in the electric plug. What mind he has left after thirty years of acid trips and booze is permanently elsewhere. I heard someone say once that he hears voices. There are plenty of voices around, but Stick Man hears the ones that just aren't there. If this were a world of the fittest the Stick Man would have been dead and buried decades ago.

Twice I saw people stop him in the street and give him money. Gold coins once and the other time a fiver and a bit of shrapnel. Interesting. The Stick Man stopped, looked at the money in his hand then put it in his pocket and walked on, without a word. The second time it was a couple

who stopped him. When he passed along they looked at each other sadly and said a few words to each other before locking arms and moving on, a kind of 'there but for the grace of god' feel to it.

Why doesn't he just jump in the lake and drown.

But here I go with memories, memories. I feel like I'm dragging this rusty chain of memories through my mind and out through a hole in my forehead, right where a unicorn would normally have a horn. Right there. But instead I have this chain thing pouring out like you see come out of the side of ships and I'm gathering all this mess up in my arms and hugging it to me, memories strapped to my chest like some baby-holder, an amorphous bundle of waste and decay at my chest like cancer.

It has been twenty nine years since I spoke to the Stick Man.

The Start of Something Big

‘Poppy, love, is he going to just go like the others.’

‘Perhaps I just love him. Doesn’t that mean anything.’

‘Poppy,’ she laughed, ‘you *are* such a tonic. Such a pretty girl, still. You’re the envy of everyone with that figure. I’m sure men still want to use you.’

Poppy Larkin pushed her shoulder length honey blonde hair behind her ears and said nothing.

‘Didn’t you say yourself that he came home late the other night, in a ramshackle state.’

Poppy didn’t know why she had to be the only one who couldn’t have a partner who came home late in a ramshackle state from time to time.

‘I do that sometimes too,’ she said. ‘Don’t you?’

‘You said yourself he was drunk, ruffled hair. Lipstick on the cheek. What else do you need to know?’

‘It was only on the cheek. A farewell for some woman off to Canberra. I only told you about it because he looked so funny,’ she said with regret. ‘You don’t think ...’

‘I don’t have to think.’

They were at the Universal. A bit unusual, Poppy thought, to come here. Reggie had to drive in, park in a station, and then drive out again at the end. Poppy only had to walk across the park from Kent Town, so the whole thing suited her and not Reg; that’s the part that was so unusual. If anyone made arrangements to suit herself it was usually Reg.

‘A bit of shopping in the town,’ Regina had said. Poppy had never known her to shop anywhere but Burnside; she had even proselytized the matter. ‘It’s all here, and better quality. Why would anyone want to go into that dreadful Mall.’

People came from all over to go to the Mall. And to Rundle Street. That was the problem. The Mall in particular was too close to the train station that brought them in from the far north and the deep south. ‘They have their own Westfield things out there. Surely that should be enough for them,’ Reg had said to her once, years before.

The Universal was so noisy that sometimes it was like a whole social movement sweeping you away with it. But this time every clank of bentwood chair against hard tiles smacked her in the ear, and the honking ha-has from neighbouring tables made her think of Patsy from Absolutely Fabulous, made her shudder. And he might walk past any minute; this was *his* street.

Reggie was not distracted by anything, but lifted her voice without thinking to join the tympany - another breaking glass in the cut crystal crowd of voices.

‘Of course this place is the jewel,’ she sang out, fluting above the din and with a sigh to the rest of the street. ‘You’ve not heard of the chef? The next Cheong.’

Poppy poked at her noodles and thought that it was not far off what she could make for herself at home. ‘What’s he good at?’

‘Everything. But all these failures hanging about here,’ she waved her hand at the world outside, ‘endlessly walking up and down and pretending to be doing something.’

‘Doing something?’

‘Doing nothing in reality. All pretending to be artists and having breakfast at half past ten in the morning.’

Eoghan had breakfast around here sometimes, around half past ten in the morning. Poppy was silent.

‘What have you been doing anyway? In the last few weeks?’ Reg changed the pace. Poppy was such a dear, but a trouble to herself if not looked after. Past fifty and still getting about in op shop clothes. Never really settled down to anyone at all, and now this boho with a weird Irish name.

‘He has an exhibition coming up at Zounds. It’ll put him right back on his feet.’

Reggie held Poppy’s hand for a moment before returning to her squid tentacles. She smiled sadly.

‘Always in the offing, aren’t they, exhibitions. About six months away?’

Poppy looked down at her noodles, but lifted her still pretty head and spoke up boldly. ‘That’s about what he said as a matter of fact.’

Reggie raised her eyebrows as if in astonishment. ‘An exhibition can be six months off for quite a few years, you know.’

Even Poppy put her hand to her mouth and tittered. ‘I know.’ She didn’t care terribly whether his exhibition went ahead or not.

‘Everyone’s so concerned. We can’t just let you ... disappear on us.’ To Reggie all her friends from the old school years had to be somewhere within a manageable arm’s reach.

Poppy thought about ‘everyone’ for a moment. ‘If I ever disappear it will be because I *want* to disappear,’ she said. She stretched her hands out in front of her face, as if she were Circe holding up a libation bowl to some pagan god, or trickling poison into an enchanted pool. Then she

rasped out, in a hoarse whisper, her intense eyes like those of a gypsy fortune teller in long gone carnival days, ‘Disappear.’

‘Poppy, love. I know you won’t disappear.’ Reggie brought Poppy’s hands down from in front of her, folded them together on the terra firma of the polished wood table and patted them three times. ‘We’ll all be fine.’

‘He’s quite lovely sometimes, you know. When I’m with him and he’s like that I feel like I just don’t have to worry about anything, ever again. I feel like I don’t have to think about what I say, I can do just what I want to do. It’s so natural. Everything just flows.’

‘I have met him, you know. He does have a sort of perverse charm about him.’

‘He’s taught me a few things,’ Poppy said innocently.

Reggie raised one eyebrow. ‘Well, let’s not go into that!’ They laughed together like they did when they were schoolgirls. Poppy blushed and put her hand up to her mouth as if to stifle her titters and then collapsed over her bowl of noodles.

‘What kind of things?’

And they laughed again.

‘Don’t be indiscreet, darling. You can’t be telling your secrets all over town: things get around.’ Was Reggie warning her about other people, or about herself? ‘It’ll come back to hurt you when this is all over.’

When this is all over. What was the meaning of over? And why shouldn’t things be over when they *really* were over? Reggie’s marriage was still going, intact as far as the public eye was concerned, twenty five years after it was really over. Why couldn’t you just live? Without it.

She saw herself in six months' time, if she talked about the exhibition and it never happened. If she talked about all the things they did together and then Eoghan gave her up for another girl. It might be embarrassing. But if you didn't live for love, what did you live for?

'I'm starting not to care what gets around.'

'He *is* having an influence, isn't he.'

'Reggie, he's got stuff up all over the place.'

'You mean he's made stuff-ups all over the place.'

'Oh, Reggie.'

'One rusty bit of tin stuck up in some obscure corner of the Mt Lofty Botanic Gardens.'

'It's right out the front.'

'1982.'

'Well ...'

'When he was going out with Prunella Wishart. He threw the leg over and she gave him a leg up. They'd move something decent in there if they had any funding.'

'I know,' Poppy sighed. 'They would, wouldn't they.' She knew it. She knew it wasn't much of a piece and they'd got it cheap and it was supposed to be the start of something big for Eoghan: the CV entry that opened doors.

'Has he thought of anything new in twenty eight years?'

‘Not really.’ She smiled; they laughed. They laughed out loud. They connected like the friends they had been for thirty five years. And suddenly she looked around and laughed inside herself at the other diners; they were clanking cutlery and making noise, braying endlessly at each other, but it was all so contrived, a comedy really. ‘Still going around in circles, of sorts. The latest one is called *Moonscape*.’

‘Don’t tell me, half moons all welded up in a pattern.’

‘Some full, some half.’

‘Cosmic!’

The third glass of sauvignon blanc was having its effect.

‘Poppy, darling, you must beware. Relationships can go on too long when the sex is brilliant.’

‘How would you know, you’ve been with Phillip for nearly thirty years.’

Reggie raised one eyebrow.

‘How can you keep having sex with the same dentist for that long? Even if he is a specialist.’

‘With big ears.’ The tears came to their eyes.

‘You can’t hold on to those.’

‘Be careful, Reggie. You can’t be telling your secrets all over town.’

‘There’s more angles to the marriage thing than you might think, Poppy: enough on that subject. Anyway, love, it has been such a hoot to catch up. You must come to the school reunion in three weeks.’

‘Lord,’ thought Poppy, ‘the school reunion.’ It had been a few years since she’d dropped out of all that. She was caught by waves of revulsion and fear, and then the odd memory of fun they’d had in the far past. Some of them weren’t too bad. For a moment she weakened.

‘I’ll book you in with Winnie. Oh, you will be such a *piece*.’

‘A piece?’ said Poppy.

‘A piece of good news for everyone. They’re dying to see you.’

And the entry was made in Reggie’s diary with a flourish.

Father

‘Well, when *I* was twelve, something happened that made me look at the world differently.’

I started telling my story in an ironic lecturing style, the kind of tone that young people do adopt when they are a little bit nervous but cover it by reflecting off some reference to popular culture. Folding my fingers together in my lap like David Stratton in *The Movie Show*, I ran to a breathy earnestness that still had a singsong factuality about it. ‘Looking back I’d say it was the day I began to distrust the world, if you think that’s an important change.’

‘Poor baby.’ Cassie laid her own ironic distance over the top of mine. Further out - with the planets, man.

‘Still, you could say that nothing happened at all. Just two people sitting on the beach and a breeze blowing in.’ Wistfully.

‘If you’d get on with it then I’d know,’ she said, filing her nails with her own assumed distraction.

‘It was hot. Father was with us so it must have been a weekend or Australia Day or sometime between Christmas Eve and about the twelfth of January when they all go back to work. Not enough people buy insurance around New Year.’

‘She’s a fluky game all right.’ Cassie shook her head sadly.

‘I think I’d been bad, naughty ... annoying, something like that.’

‘Perhaps you were being punished for not getting on with some story.’

‘I was isolated from the rest of the family, outside the umbrella. We had one of those shades

scissored on to a wooden pole that twisted into the sand on a metal point.’

‘An umbrella, in fact.’

‘That’s it. I was making sand castles; that’s what makes me think I must have been playing up. If I’d been told by my mother that I was being childish or foolish or something, I’d have headed straight into the sun to make sand castles, just to show how juvenile I could *really* be at the age of twelve.

‘Anyway, I was showing them how much I just didn’t need them all. And of course my mother countered by arranging a sortie to the ice-cream shop at that very time. “I think the little man is too deeply involved with his moats to be interested.”’

‘The Little Man?’ Cassie stopped her filing.

‘Uh. I was a kid, yeah?’

‘I’m going to call you Little Man now.’

‘For ever and ever?’

‘Not amen. Get on with it.’

‘I remember the mother said, “His father will watch over him,” as she led the ice-creamers away.

‘My father was in his canvas-covered chair, asleep in the shade, his straw hat pushed forward over his eyes, his left arm pinning the newspaper on his lap. Nothing moved. Outside our shelter there was all the usual buzz of movement: families at cricket, lovers on rugs with radios, kids with dogs and Frisbees. You know, regular holiday life. But nothing about my father stirred; it was as if he was dead.’

‘Was he?’ At least she was listening.

‘My first thought was that I could’ve swiped some money from the pants lying there on the rug and run away to the other shop, the opposite direction from the one the rest of the family went to, and scored my own ice-cream. If I ran I could have got back first with my own ice-cream and that would have really pissed her off. On the other hand I could’ve stayed away just long enough so my mother and her ice-cream party would get back first and find me gone. My old man would be in the shit, asleep on the job, and me no doubt abducted and buried under a slab of concrete somewhere in Somerton Park, you know, the next Beaumont kiddie.’

‘Now that’s somewhere you don’t want to go.’ Cassie wagged her finger in appreciation of this sentiment.

‘You know, our mothers used to tell us that if a strange man stopped us in the street and offered chocolate then on no account were we to go with him. This was what we would nowadays call a mantra. We used to joke that, obviously no way would you go with the man, but if he was offering Caramello, then maybe, just maybe, it might be worth it.’

‘Hilarious.’

‘Anyway, my father was a big, fit bloke, or so I thought. A dominator. But here on the beach, asleep, with his right arm flopped down on the side of the fold-up chair, he looked more vulnerable than I’d ever seen him. His bathing trunks were tight up under his belly and his posture was crunched up in the chair so a roll of fat looped over the edge of the bathers. A life of chops and lunch time beer and patting backs was poking out there, no mistake. He was getting older.

‘I crept up closer. His legs were still wet from wading and particles of sand hung on to them, like sugar onto a pair of buttered knives. I inspected his toenails at close range, which is something you don’t normally get to do. Usually you just see them flashing in and out of socks every once in a blue moon. The toenails were starting to get yellow and you could see the tinea he was

always moaning about. But now it wasn't just a word, it was really shitty red blotches that made you turn away. The newspaper lay over his crotch with the back page already read and hanging by his side. Even though he was dozing, his thighs and knees stayed together to keep the rest of it there in place. It made him look silly.

'I went up closer still; I reckon I would have looked more like an inquisitive dog, on all fours, with its snout stretched and sniffing. I could see the hairs on his nostrils wafting faintly in the breeze, my face no more than a foot from his ear.

'My father was the enforcer, the man with the strap, the big bloke who showed us how to kick a football through a goal with the wrong foot. That day he looked like a big baby.

'Just at that moment the loose page of the newspaper flapped up in the first stirring of the afternoon wind, the proverbial sea breeze. He snorted awake, pushed his hat back and, sort of dazed and unfocused, he looked at me vaguely.

“What are you doing?” he said, not angry, but surprised, and he looked around like he didn't know what was going on. I spoke my first truly cheeky words to him.

“You were asleep. Should've been watching over me.” Father frowned. “Anything could happen out there,” I said, using my mother's words and waving towards the castle and the beach and everything else.

“You can't forget what happened to the Beaumont kiddies,” I stretched it even further.

“Hmnrgh,” was all he could manage.

'No belting, no threats – no mother present, no urger. I began to wonder how many times I'd been alone with my father before, without even my brother around. It occurred to me that this might even be the very first.'

‘So he was a man of straw.’

A man of straw could go up in flames; he wasn’t like that.

‘Sand,’ I said after a moment’s reflection. A wave of purpose could eat at his foundation; he was going with the current like anybody else.

‘They’re all different to what they make you think they are,’ she said.

‘Who are?’

‘People. Grown-ups. Nothing is as it seems.’

‘Well. We’re grown-ups now.’

‘Yes, of course.’ She smiled sadly, then a sudden, brittle laugh cracked the walls and ceiling and subsided just as quickly. ‘I nearly forgot.’

‘But I learnt something from that – about the bluff. Some people intimidate. But it’s the position that does it, not the person. Or it can be. I’ve known it since that day.’

‘Okay, so what did you do about it?’

‘There was a period where I stood up to my father, to both of them. I got the strap a lot. My big brother watched the whole thing as if it was a huge joke.’

‘The troublesome second child, eh.’ She shook her head sadly; I knew she was one as well.

‘And it was just that, a joke. The dog was my best mate.’

‘I knew that dog would come into it somewhere.’

‘She’d come into my room and put her face on my knees and I’d talk to her.’

Cassie made whimpering sounds and an exaggerated sorrowful face.

‘When I married Rosemary pretty early they thought it was the end of the fight. They’d won.’

‘Why did you get married then?’

I scratched around a moment for an answer, but had to tell the truth. ‘I guess I was sort of in love. In a puppy dog way, of course.’

‘There’s that dog again.’ Cassie shook her head.

‘And everybody expected it. I suppose that’s all I can say.’

‘Some rebel.’

And it was true; I had gone along with it. How had the rebel been pulled back into the fold? I could have jumped into an FC Holden and just driven away and never come back. What had made me wait so long? Why had I got so deep before I blew up? I felt as if some image I’d created for myself had melted away like that sand castle at high tide.

‘Interesting story. I mean, truly ... interesting,’ she said as if that might have been a surprise to her. I had hoped to become more interesting to her. She was surprised I had revealed anything about myself, as if I was trying to lead us to some other level, away from our customary cool and detachment. ‘But I think we need to go for beer.’

As we sorted ourselves to go she was thoughtful, in a place I knew she wouldn’t share. Looking back I think it may have been the moment I lost her forever.

Possum

Dawn sunlight through the still trees plays shadows like giant stains on the unbroken lake. Still. And silent but for whooshing cars that once a minute break the spell of morning peace on Bartels Road.

In the man-dug hollow of the park the trees sit quiet in the mist. There is a little lake and a picture-book island with a wooden bridge, and lonesome early officer workers soon emerge from the grey and green of Kent Town and commute the bridge or one of the pounded earth paths that lead to the sad morning city.

But not for him. Not for the man who stands alone, staring at the lake. He stands erect and his arms are like a tin soldier's, not dug in pockets the way a man with all his reason would do on such a morning. At attention, as if awaiting orders.

Not for him that life.

He stares into the lake as if some inevitable, arcane force were there, as if he drank from the lake with his cloudy eyes.

Morning light now strengthens and breaks from the water, at him, in his opaque pools as if connected by a laser beam. The glass-like sheet and its friend the light hold some secret. The man thinks he must break through, break through to find the secret. But his eyes are dazzled and begin to water and he blinks and blinks again.

An ambivalent possum climbs down from his tree, having kissed his wife and children goodbye. He sniffs in all directions to gauge the breeze and what secrets are there, what is out there this morning that was not there last night. Then he lopes across the grass and stops by the man who glances down once at the new arrival and then resumes his waiting posture. The possum bounds

away towards an interesting smell up by the road, then stops and looks back over his shoulder at the man.

‘There’s nuthin’ there, Charlie. Believe me. Friend of mine was tossed in there once, a coupla months ago. Believe me, you don’t want to go there. Whole lotta scungy mildew, urrrgggh. Coupla iced coffee cartons, non-bio-degradable Bertie Beetle wrappers, decomposing banana skins. The whole human tragedy. Forget it.’

The possum lopes back towards the man, warming to his theme.

‘Look at me. Fruits and shoots man; a variation on the old nuts and berries routine.’ The possum stroked his nicely rounded little stomach.

‘Sleek. Check yourself out in the reflection of that lake, baby. Carryin’ a coupla pounds, huh?’

Charlie the Stick Man looked down and stroked his own protruding stomach. Once there had been nothing there. Of all the strikes that he’d had against him in this world and the only thing he ever really liked was food. It was unfair. What did he have left if he didn’t eat? What would he do if he didn’t cook?

What would there be to look forward to?

‘Okay, do it Charlie, jump. Just give me good warning and I’ll step back a coupla paces. We possums don’t like to get splashed you know. If you want to end it so much, end it.’

For all the possum’s bleacher barracking sarcasm, Charlie knew him to be a friend.

‘Ah, phewey.’ The possum turned away. ‘I got a family to feed.’

The possum hopped off towards the pathway and poked about in a yiros wrapper that wasn't there the night before. When his snout came up again it held a three inch scrap of pitta bread soaked in lamb and garlic sauce.

'Not bad,' he muttered between clenched teeth, then scampered away across the grass towards his tree and up the crusty bark. At the top of the trunk he took the crust from his snout and piped back across the park at Charlie, 'Not a bad little territory,' then disappeared into his hole.

'What a nerve,' thought Charlie. And, what with the morning traffic thickening now and his chat with the possum finished, Charlie turned away from the lake and made his way steadily up the embankment towards Rundle Street.

Pearl Earrings

The stairway at the Nova is best descended carefully. Coming down from the cinema up top to the hot, dry street is steep and sudden, like cuffing a daydream with the hard truth. The steps were rude and real.

But that didn't bother Shona as she skipped down two at a time. Stumbles and falls were like prophecies; if you thought about it too much it would happen.

She stopped at the third last step, took one last feet-together hop to the street. Her short, loose dress flounced up for a moment, showing pale upper thighs that topped her thin brown legs. On her feet were new looking blue gym boots and short lime green socks. She looked back up to Katie who kept in touch with the handrail, connecting firmly with each step as she followed.

At the bottom Shona perched on her left leg and did a Charleston routine with both arms swinging in rhythm with her right leg jumping forward and back, tapping the concrete blocks of the footpath with the toe of her boot. Finally Katie joined her in the street.

‘Phew,’ she said, ‘bit of a change down here.’

Shona held out her arms as if to embrace the heat. She stood on her toes, put her hands above her head and twirled around on the spot as people dodged her with their shopping bags and brief-cases.

‘It’s beautiful.’

There had been a girl in the film with a huge pearl earring, the lover of the painter Vermeer. Shona knew that girl had been like her, for she too knew the secret of the sit, the pose, of interpretation; she knew something of the mysteries of art and she too held a gift for love.

Katie eyed Shona with the fear of the unknowable. They'd only known each other since Magenta DeWilde's party last year. She'd been fun that night, leading the singing and dancing; the *life of* really.

'It's just opportunity, isn't it,' Shona blurted as if something she had in mind must have been thought by her friend as well.

'How do you mean?' Katie said soberly. This was now her stock response to Shona thinking out loud and expecting people to know her thoughts.

'I mean, that girl had a gift that the painter's wife didn't have.'

'Mmmm,' Katie was hesitant.

'Well, a lot of people, a lot of us, would have that, wouldn't they?' Shona said, thinking of herself.

'You mean wouldn't *we*, don't you? Meaning you,' Katie laughed.

'I guess so,' Shona laughed too. 'But we just don't get the opportunities. I mean, who's going to come and ask us to sit, in *this* town?' Not having been born in Paris, or New York or London, was an inexplicable accident in Shona's life.

'You don't think you've got enough opportunities already? I mean, to do other things,' Katie checked, bringing Shona down more quickly than the steps had managed.

'I suppose. But you should be able to just ... live more sensually than we do.' Shona looked around her as if the answer was there, too obvious.

In the street people drifted carefully into bookshops and bars, pacing themselves in the sapping heat. High summer had proceeded resolutely into March and fried alive the idea that winter

would ever come again; human existence had ground its way down to a matter of survival; they were waiting for the sun to go down.

‘Beer time?’ said Katie, changing the subject.

‘Yah.’ Shona wouldn’t back down from a challenge like that. It was five o’clock in the afternoon and really too early for good girls to drink, but they had left good girls long behind. And after escape to the movies, escape to the pub was the only logical conclusion.

‘Phew,’ said Shona, her finger had missed the black button on the traffic lights and strayed onto the broiling metal surround. It bit back at her.

‘It was the pearl earrings that did it,’ said Shona standing in the full sun, not seeming to notice the heat. Katie positioned her head in the shadow of the traffic light pylon and looked quizzically at Shona.

‘Did what?’

‘Made her special. The girl.’ Shona paused for a moment, then went on in such a low, conspiratorial voice that she was almost talking to herself. ‘Some things are special, you know, items.’

‘Like talismans.’

‘Yah,’ Shona said with delight. ‘Talismans! Oh, Katie, you are so clever. They can make you strong, like you can do anything.’

‘Oh, Shona.’ Katie hinted doubt at the power of pearl earrings.

‘Anything,’ Shona repeated, and stared at the footpath.

'Come here,' Katie folded her left arm over Shona's neck. The lights changed at last.

'How's the new man,' Katie asked as they disengaged and started up towards The Austral. She'd heard some reports and couldn't wait to dig around a little.

'Good, great. Really good I mean,' and she brightened with pleasure at the idea of The Austral and talking about Jed, showing him off.

'Tell you when we get a beer.' And after a moment she added, 'He might even come.'

'What, here, today?' Katie was surprised.

'He might. He wasn't sure if he could.'

They bought pints of pale and sat in the street under umbrellas: hard living girls of twenty wouldn't be seen dead with schooners these days. The canvas they sat under was decorated with images of Rasta men, dancing girls and stylised fruits of the sea. From the street you could see into the pub through the opened doors, check out the walkers and be seen by the passing traffic too – bugger the heat.

Their first gulps of beer were greedy, lustful to a fault.

'Aah,' they both exhaled. They needed that.

'So, what about it then?'

'Yah. My god, Jed Clark. What a dream. He's doing law, but his family are all medical. His mother's some sort of artist, so, interesting.'

'He didn't want to be a doctor?'

‘Nah, he wanted to do something different, own man sort of thing. He’s already got his first job set up, through some friend of his Dad’s.’

‘Right. Talk about adventurous!’ Katie’s sarcasm went unnoticed.

‘He’s going to do International Law or something. I mean he’s aiming high, really high.’

‘Is he nice?’ Katie was more interested in what he was like than what he did.

‘Oh, yah. Gorgeous, lovely.’

‘How many times have you been out with him?’

‘Four ... or five. Something like that,’ Shona knew with certainty that the total of their dates had been three. ‘We went out to see his mate’s punk band. At Thebarton. My god, you know, they’ve got this cute little pub down there, the Fleet Street or something.’

‘Wheatsheaf?’

‘You know it?’

‘It’s about the only place at Thebarton that doesn’t have topless girls or Port Power posters on the walls.’

‘Yah. Anyway, it was *such* a night. I was *so* pissed.’

‘They have all sorts of beer down there, don’t they.’

‘White wine, darling. That’s what did the damage. Spewed up all over their dinky little toilet.’

‘My god, no!’

‘You should see the thing. Little pink and purple tiles, left over from God knows when.’

‘How was Jed about it?’

‘He thought it was ‘70s retro, reckoned it was OK.’

‘No, I mean about spewing up.’

‘He’s fine. Like I said, he’s so sweet.’

‘Cute too.’ Katie had seen him just twice, a couple of years before, but hadn’t forgotten.

‘Yah, I mean, we did it on the first night. I mean, right, we’re kissing good night and he put his hands down the back of my pants, you know, like one on each cheek. My God, I couldn’t stop then. I hauled him inside and had him on the lounge room floor. Parents were out, of course. Nice thick shag pile, so he didn’t get hurt at all.’

‘Right,’ Katie agreed with some reservation in her voice.

‘Yah, sure. He’d be here now if he was coming. He said he might get held up at Uni.’

‘Mmmm, I guess that’s possible.’ Katie wasn’t sure just how likely it was to be held up in Orientation Week, when students could take whole afternoons off to go to the movies. ‘Did I tell you Jude’s coming?’ she added.

‘Really ... Jude! She knows Jed, I think. Through her cousin and the Wildy crowd. Right, anyway, my buy. Same again?’

‘Yeah, sure. Can’t wait.’

Shona gave the eye to the barman while she got the pints, but he was too busy to notice.

When she got back Katie's neck was craned down the street. 'Jude's late, you know. Said it would only take her half an hour to ride down the river.'

'To ride, my God.' Shona thought life was too short for riding bikes.

'She says it cools her. And makes her feel good to do a bit of work on the way in. You know, earn those beers,' Katie said with an exaggerated, knowing wink.

'Perhaps she had a flat tyre.' Shona wouldn't have minded if she had. She'd only met Jude a couple of times, and briefly, a few months before, but she felt there was something cocky about her, something that didn't click between the two of them.

'She's always on time usually, or early.'

'*Boring*,' Shona offered, and Katie was induced to laugh along with her.

In a minute Katie saw Jude at the lights and waved. Jude rode up, hot but seeming happy with herself. She pulled her helmet off and shook her short black hair, flicking it up with her fingers so the sweat did not slick it down in the shape of a helmet. She wore shorts and jogging shoes and an aqua singlet which was brilliant against her tanned shoulders. Her friendly, freckled face showed white and regular teeth.

'Phew. Hi,' she said to Katie.

'Hi. You know Shona.'

'Yeah, of course, we've met, somewhere or other,' said Jude and raised her hand in salute. Shona smiled sweetly.

‘You’re late,’ said Katie, and tapped her watch with an exaggerated gesture.

‘Oh yeah, ten big minutes,’ she grinned happily. ‘Sorry about that. I bumped into Jed on the way. He was with that Belinda Hastwell.’ Jude delivered her news casually, but neatly, as if it had not been rehearsed at all. It had been trimmed and knocked into shape through the second half of her ride with a velvet hammer that would leave no visible bruises.

‘Jed?’ said Shona, more to herself than to either of them, not able to think beyond that one word for the moment.

‘Yes, Jed Clark. Do you know him?’ Jude asked with an upward inflection, a hint of surprise.

Shona said nothing for a moment, assessing the news, putting the situation together in her mind: Jed on the river park at five thirty in the afternoon. But in which direction had he been heading? He could’ve gone home early and still be coming back in. He might arrive soon.

‘Know him? Yes, of course,’ she said.

‘Oh, really! I didn’t know that.’ Jude turned to Katie. ‘He was with that Belinda Hastwell,’ Jude repeated herself. ‘You remember her?’

‘Hmmm. Vaguely.’ Katie wondered whether it would be a good idea to change the subject again.

‘She’s doing law with Jed. Anyway, I bumped into them. I had to stop – I’ve known Jed since we were toddlers. Hope I’m excused.’ She laughed as she finished locking her bike to the metal bolster. ‘Phew, time for a beer. I think I’ve earned it,’ she said and turned towards the bar.

Shona's eyes were unfocussed, blinded by love's false security.

‘Which way were they walking?’ she blurted, she had to know.

‘Eh.’ Jude turned back, making like she had not heard the question properly.

‘Into the city or out?’

‘Oh, they were going out, towards St Peters. Belinda lives out there. I think they were going to her place. They have a pool you know. I shouldn’t wonder they’d use it on a night like this. Which reminds me ... beer.’

She stepped quickly into the bar, light, nimble and assured. The barman flirted with her and Shona watched her smile back at him, confident and relaxed. Shona wanted to claw the freckles right off her happy little mug.

Jed was walking along the river with some law student, in the heat. He could be here drinking beer with her. Something began to rise from the pit of Shona’s stomach as Jude came back with her schooner.

‘My whole life just changed,’ she whispered to Katie. A well of shame and hurt burst forth in a body-wracking, gasping sob. Shona leant forward with her right hand covering her eyes and cried big, wet tears onto her red face. Katie put her arm around Shona’s shoulder, produced some tissues from her bag and looked over Shona’s head at Jude, who coolly sipped her beer and watched the traffic. A group of guys at the next table turned around for three seconds to look, grinned and shook their heads, then turned back to their pints.

After a minute Jude produced a handkerchief from her back pocket and helped with the last section of the mopping up, saying calmly, ‘There you go. There you go.’ She didn’t like to see a girl go too far down; she was the kind who takes in stray cats and helps ravens with broken wings.

Shona blew her nose on a final tissue and stood up and walked in to the ladies’. When she returned her eyes were dry, and she was composed. She had spent five minutes sitting on a toilet seat staring at the coat hook on the back of the door, thinking how the purple tiles at Thebarton

had made her spew.

*

Shona woke too early the next morning in her underwear and with just a single bed-sheet keeping the world away from her. She rose quickly, as she did most days, needing activity like she always did. She placed the espresso maker on the stove, always pleased by the quick movements needed to rinse the grinds from the previous time, fill it with water to just the right spot, spoon in the coffee and screw on the upper chamber.

She turned on the radio and listened to Triple J; the jangling noise and loud voices filled the room. The girl she shared with was still not back from Noosa and Shona hated the soundless emptiness. It reminded her of the half-filled houses of her childhood, places with grandparents and polished floorboards that your shoes went clumsy clunk on if you didn't concentrate on how you walked. Lengthy hallways with slowly ticking clocks and creeping drafts.

She poured a coffee and lit a cigarette. O-week was a bore but she was going anyway.

It had been a big night. The barman at the Austral had eventually flirted with her heaps. They drank two more pints of beer there and then moved down to the Exeter and had two more. Jude stayed with schooners; what an original that girl is. Then they'd gone on to the Rhino Room and started on the vodka, my god. Jude was still in her riding outfit, what a hoot. The guy on the door at the Rhino did a bit of a double take at her, but how could you keep her out? With a smile and freckles like that you could never say no.

Jude had left early, about midnight. She'd said something unusual to Katie that Shona wondered about now. After big nights out sometimes things came back to her in snatches. Glimpses and memories are patched back together like mosaic.

The two of them were having a conversation that was just out of Shona's earshot because of the music and the people. But just when the music died she heard Jude say to Katie, 'No, that's my

limit,' or 'No, that's the limit,' She wasn't sure whether Jude had been talking about drinking or something else. Probably drinking she decided; Jude was a bit conservative. Just after that Jude had left, giving Shona a brief hug.

They'd been on the dance floor. They'd danced for hours, or at least it seemed like it.

Shona left the radio on for company. She slipped off yesterday's underwear and stepped into the shower. The hot stream on her back was from heaven and she closed her eyes and turned to place her face full into it. She could see Jude on the dance floor at The Rhino; her face had seemed to catch the flickering lights like no other face in the room. Shona had thought she was the most beautiful, perfect person she had ever seen: she was in control of everything around her, she had the natural rhythm; she had an instinct for the music.

As she dried herself Shona remembered leaning, placing her hand on Jude's shoulder as if to tell her something. At the last moment she realised she hadn't anything she wanted to tell Jude at all, she'd just wanted to be close to the happy, healthy, freckled face. As Jude turned her head up to Shona to hear what she had to say, Shona had moved her hand to Jude's head and given her one light, dreamy kiss on the cheek. She'd made to do it again, on the lips this time, but Jude had moved her head back and stepped away, ducking through the maze of arms and legs and tiaras, back to the tables.

Shona stood in the kitchen with her towel in hand. She hoped everything was all right; she'd had a run of nights where she couldn't remember the end.

Then she was in front of the mirror. On her dressing table was a small box of jewellery. In it were a few things her Gran had given her that had belonged to her Mum. She picked out the pearl earrings. She remembered the film, and those long steps down to the hot street. The story of Vermeer and the servant girl who sat for him and had a gift that was timeless and indefinable. It was an instinct; it had been an affirmation of herself and the way she lived, to pack more into one short life.

But the earrings she held were not like the massive, luminous glob of lust on the girl in the picture. They were sedate: each single teardrop shape set in a modest silver housing, kept up close to the lobe, years yellowing the lustre of the jewel. She remembered the walk in the heat up to the Austral and the rasping touch of the hot metal plate at the traffic light when she had been careless with the button. It was all an affirmation somehow, of how she just *had* to be.

The rest of it came back to her now. She couldn't wipe the bad parts away this time: the arrival of Jude – her news. Sitting in the toilet, staring at the door. She'd blamed the purple tiles at Thebarton. She sat on the edge of the bed and held her head in her hands. The tears that filled her eyes this time came from somewhere deeper. She wasn't sitting on view in Rundle Street, but naked on the edge of her bed at home alone.

She clasped the pearl earrings to her chest and felt their power. In the thickening feeling around her eyes and in her temples she saw a shadow, a figure dressed in white, a wedding dress, not much more than thirty. Like her, but not her, her mother stepped out of the wedding picture in her dressing table and gazed evenly across nineteen years of time. Shona's soul contacted that part of life where live the vast hordes of the dead. In her mind Shona put the pearl earrings in the figure's ears; her hands placed them in her own ears. She was protected now, by the earrings, by her mother. The ordinary world was left behind.

Shona stood up and looked at herself in the mirror, naked save the single, silver-clasped jewel on each side of her head. She walked the long passageway soundlessly, her bare feet gliding over the hallway runner. She walked with her mother; she was her mother.

Her hand lightly touched a silver button on the machine in her kitchen; the jarring noise of Triple J was cut dead magically. She walked through beautiful silence, on the welcome cool of kitchen tiles, and pushed aside the full-length glass of her back door. On the grass of her tiny back lawn she stood up on her toes; she raised her hands above her head and twirled around, drenching in the warm morning sun like some ancient Druid or Aztec, opening and transforming.

She would go to visit Jude, whose freckled goodness would understand it all. She walked back

through the house, her scuffed feet leaving dusty footprints on the cool tiles. She opened the front door and left it wide open as she passed through. She walked up the red brick path, unhooked the cyclone gate and stepped into the street.

The Street

It wasn't like this when I first started coming here. Sure, there are a lot of things still the same. The road still takes you gently downwards to the park in a way that makes the whole place something more than just a street. The road is going somewhere. And the same park where my possum lives is there untouched - treed and pathwayed and laked the way it always was, as if it truly is the end, as if the world stops here at the Terrace and beyond is a kind of Elysium full of nymphs and satyrs, an other-world of more dramatic darkness and light.

The little lattice balustrades on the balconies of the shops remain. There once were apartments there where people lived, with desperate lives and grimy mattresses and just enough space to spread out the contents of a suitcase over chairs and perhaps into the heavy wooden wardrobes that had been in fashionable houses in the nineteen thirties, but which had dropped rung after rung in the social scale through the fifties and seventies until some singlet wearing desperate hauled it up a narrow staircase and into some room above the Austral Hotel. In those days there would be people up on those balconies, still unshaven at five in the afternoon, reading newspapers and smoking cigarettes with a longneck of beer and no glass, a little smoker's stand beside them.

But there is no-one up there now, or there are so few it is abnormal to see them. And if they are there they are not sallow, unshaven and charismatic, but healthy, purposeful and dull. Those rooms might be full of cardboard boxes now, miniature warehouses with dresses and high-heeled shoes from the sweatshops of Asia. The rooms filled up with junk and no-one left inside.

I used to come across here in the seventies, to go to The Austral. Old guys on barstools with little red faces and noses like toucans, hats pushed to the back of their heads, sitting at the end of the bar with a transistor radio propping up the wall and turned down at the end of a race and then up again when the first leg of the daily double midweek races came on. A hand would caress the volume dial at the end of the race and down the volume went for another few minutes so they could swap commentary and remonstrations, then back up again for the next race. Little round

yellow tins of Capstan or a blue pouch of Drum the companion and ashtrays that yawned in welcome for fags tapped by fingers deep yellowed to the second joint.

They'd say g'day. Wouldn't matter who you were, they'd say g'day. If you were wearing a blue singlet, they'd say g'day. If you were wearing a pink and pale blue striped mohair jumper with suede zip-up boots, they'd say g'day. The league of lads, young or old, of blokes against this arseholed world in which you just can't get ahead. In search of the daily double that would make life smell sweeter for a week. A packet of prawns for dinner on Wednesday night – something to celebrate.

When we'd had enough of The Austral and breathing in the ready rubbed atmosphere we would head east to the wine bar that was on the other side but further down. And a crazy cavalcade of things to explore in between. There was an army surplus store, and a toyshop, the China Gift Store – Gladys Sym Choon sitting right next to Quinney's Sports Store in a juxtaposition that said it all, then fishing tackle, then the Communist bookshop with the union office upstairs where I registered once to do some yakka on a construction site, and you had to have someone they knew with you or they wouldn't let you sign. There was the Grundy shoe store on the other side and the cycle shop, the Camden Art Centre where I bought brushes and paints with the same twenty dollar note I'd earned from selling my first painting. It was only to my girlfriend's auntie, but it was a sale all right.

God, what else was there? The Bible Voice and Gospel Film Ministry right next door to the House of the Gilded Naga where my second best friend's older brother's girlfriend bought her pure white full-length near see through Indian dress for their wedding day. That was the nineteen seventies all right. And the Politis Shoe Store which is a smoke shop now, just before the Exeter, and has about four pairs of shoes in the window in a sad reminder of the days that went. Ruby's Café on the other side where market men had breakfast and which was still going for lunch, and was taken over by bright young things in the eighties. Further down there was the Banana Room where college girls went to buy the clothes they should have found in op-shops at one tenth the cost. But before that a butcher and a hairdresser and camera shop and a tattooist as well, and in every one of them you would walk in and meet the guy who owned it, or her. Or you would meet

his daughter or son or someone who had worked for them for fifteen years and knew every scrap of stock in that whole place. And they would want you to go out of that door happy, whether you bought something or not. You would meet people who cared about what they were doing, and they were proud to be there in Rundle Street. This was family.

Fancy trying to buy a sausage or a can of cockles down this way now.

A coolness creeps over me. Franchise outlets of fashion stores. I came down here today. I wrote them all down. There was the Birdcage and Lorna Jane, Columbia, Paddy Pallin (gear for going places), Apparel, Seed, Betika, Marcs, Metalicus, Naked (what irony), Cerri Bellini and Dangerfield. On the other side Details, Handbags, Real Store, Gladys Sym Choon (now a fashion shop much like the rest), Steve Madden, Saba, Gorman, Morrison, Sass & Bide. You would never have an excuse for being cold on a winter's day with all those clothing shops about. Aurum and Jealousy were there too up from the Exeter, and on the other side Sooki, Lisa Ho, Bauhaus, Calibre, Zimmerman, Jack London, Alannah Hill and amazingly enough, the very last is Bimbo. The main street of Prahran would be the same. Oxford Street in London on Boxing Day when the shops open for the sales is just like this. All these places with seventeen or eighteen year old kids behind the register, lounging about pretending to be working, looking sideways at your shoes or hairstyle as you enter. And some busy girl all of twenty is in charge, the girl most likely, showing leadership to the kids and unblinking accommodation of the system in one neat package – she's the professional one who has been in the industry all of three years and knows the ropes.

When I come down here now there's a string of nine successive fashion shops that lead up to the Politis Shoe Store. Its sweet tobacco smell makes me stop and draw a breath so deep, it takes me back to olden days. I stumble through the first door of The Ex, through the little saloon and around the back way to the Front. I collapse into my stool; the girl purses her lips in that 'here he is again' kind of thing she does and reaches for a pint glass before I say a word. She raises her eyebrows and holds the glass under the pale ale tap for just long enough for me to order something different if I'm of a mind, but I just purse my lips back at her in that 'why not' kind of

thing then half nod, and pull a note quickly from my jeans in time so she doesn't have to wait. But she usually beats me to it. They're quick; they're good; they never fuck you around.

Snake

She was the last to arrive. Ten or twelve of the girls at a long table, probably eleven, she thought, one short of a proper jury. She was to make the twelfth. Of course, an even number, a dozen, at a squared off and properly set up table. It didn't look so much of a formal reunion as a boisterous gossip club in its habitual haunt: the monthly catch-up. Some looked as if they'd come from gym, or tennis; some from the dress shops on The Parade. She with her hair down, vermillion shirt under a shift dress of very fine black and white checks, zipped at the back with tan suede boots. She looked as if she'd tried too hard and not got it right.

The assortment of grins and smirks told her she had been talked about in the last five minutes.

'Poppy, how wonderful you look.'

'Such an interesting outfit.'

'We've been hearing all about you.'

'Do come and sit here.'

'Tell us all about it.'

'What tricks have you learnt this week?'

Tricks? Were they laughing with her or at her? It was just a chat over lunch. She'd said a few things about what she did with Eoghan, as girls do. But Reggie had told her things about her tennis coach that made her gasp. Her tennis coach, wasn't that the total cliché? Perhaps gym instructor was the ultimate. Poppy looked around to find Reggie but she was already up at the bar arranging something with the restaurant, picking up a bottle of savvy. She came back to her place at the other end of the table; she didn't turn around.

Poppy heard the voices around her and said nothing. She studied her table setting and listened. The crowd of voices had forgotten her already. Someone she thought may have been called Phoebe something began talking about her temperamental vineyard in the Clare Valley, as if it were a person, her dear little vineyard, how it had taken her family years to establish properly. It seemed the more love you ploughed into a project, the more it gave back, although there was just no telling about the weather. A quick turn in the discussion followed, about how cold the winter was, as suddenly no-one seemed very interested in Phoebe's vineyard.

Poppy stood up in her place. Her left thigh brushed the table and its legs scraped loudly against the pinewood floor; half full wine glasses jostled about and hands shot out to save them from a fall. A pause in chatter. Faces looked up the way they do when a fork is tapped on a wine glass to call attention to an after dinner speaker. Their eyes bored holes in Poppy Larkin's body and picked like crows at what was left of her inside. It was some turning point in her life, or at least a turning back gone wrong but easily enough righted – a what-was-I-thinking moment. The handle of her bag was in her hand, it had never left her lap; she shook her head and turned for the ladies'. The faces were not in front of her now, just the stage-whispered final words behind her back, 'Still sensitive.'

From the toilet there was a small corridor to the parking lot at the back of the restaurant; Poppy slipped out there. No chance of meeting anyone coming in there as she had been the last to arrive. She might be watched from the window, but better that than going past the lot of them again. To get back to Kent Town she had to walk all the way up the block to William Street and back again up Osmond Terrace. She would disappear; into the arms of her man at best. To Cambodia, India, Morocco, anywhere. Anywhere but here.

She thought of what she had told Reggie about her and Eoghan, about the kind of things they shared with each other: authentic, intimate things – life reduced to gossip that went the circle within a couple of days. They would talk about what they did with their husbands. Or with someone from the tennis club. Or their tennis coach, or life skills coordinator, or personal trainer. And they'd talk about her as if she had just joined the Communist Party. Their talk would turn

from polite to perverse and back again and inside out and around in circles and never seem to amount to much.

But now she knew what she wanted, and how she wanted it. It would somehow repudiate them, slap them in their faces. She stepped forward with more purpose now. Down The Parade, downwards toward the city, past the oval, Norwood v Port this Friday night, past the gallery where his sculptures will one day stand, past the Old Colonist, past the intersection of five roads where she walked against the red light in the bright afternoon sun. Past the college on the left; leave that all behind. As far as Kent Town and home.

He had been different these last two weeks. Remote. But she blamed herself for that now. She had been thinking about lunching, going back to that old gang. She had talked about it, too much. Like she did sometimes but couldn't stop. Out of nervousness perhaps. It had put a gulf between them. How foolish she had been to be sidetracked, by Reggie. She knew better now.

It was even exhilarating to be leaving something at last, irrevocably; the relief of shedding skin, like a snake from hibernation into the springtime sun. The spirit entered her as she walked in that sun and she became that snake. She felt as free now as at any time in her life. If he was there he was there. If he was not she would wait. She would leave. She would return. It did not matter.

She turned her key in the lock. The sound was different. Raw, jangle. Not the confident plangence of male part into female. Her step on carpeted runner. Even that. Puss came to greet her. She looked up to mummy with a worried face, a plaintive meow. House felt like an open inspection.

His books were gone from the shelves in the study, bottles from the rack. Wardrobe empty. All his meagre clobber taken, and all her own things perfectly in place. Dishes washed and neatly stacked for her to put away: the usual routine. Stainless steel top screwed onto coffee jar and put away in place. He'd finally learnt where everything went, she smiled. Somehow that felt like something.

A note was on the kitchen table: 'Gone to Tassie. See you when I get back?' And there was his name underneath: Eoghan. Not signed, more printed. And then below that some more words, 'Wasn't really working out was it.' No question mark: a statement.

She sat in the nearest chair as if to let it wash her, soak her. But in a moment she was on her feet, through the house to the front door and out into the street, as if his mate's utility would be just disappearing into Dequetteville Terrace and she would grasp one final glimpse of him.

A desultory vehicle sauntered past, then another, going the other way. A lazy afternoon surrounded her; peak hour not yet begun. Steady April sun through the trees played patterns on the path. She turned around to look at her empty house, puss licking paws in open doorway. The sun felt warm on her neck. She retraced her steps to the door and the puss followed her inside.

That Whole Adelaide Thing

‘You gotta talk to me *sometime*, Phillip.’

That’s what I said to him. Even though he’d been pretending I wasn’t there for the last five years.

I don’t mind people not saying hello to me when I don’t know them. After all, just because I happen to be in a good mood one day and say hello to someone it doesn’t mean he or she are obliged to say anything back. They might be having a bad day or just not be the type of person who talks to strangers in public places. I can understand that, so saying hello to someone is a risk; we all accept that. And when that someone happens to be a female, phew. Talk about take a risk! And if you happen to be a decade or two older than the person in question, double phew ... no, triple. So, you gotta take your knocks in life when you’re trying to be friendly.

But when it’s someone you do know, and they grimace sarcastically back and walk straight past, and that goes on for years, eventually that’s going to mount up on you. Do you know what he did? The corners of his mouth went up in that stupid exaggerated smile that he has and he held his two drinks up as if they were some kind of trophy, like he’s nine years old and just won the egg and spoon race at the church fete and is having a lot of trouble getting over himself. Holds up the two drinks, *two* drinks get it, not one, like mine, who’s drinking all by himself with no-one to talk to, turns his back on me and walks off to the window by the corner door to his bimbo and gets up on a stool and doesn’t look back.

He has to mount a bar stool like Sir Edmund Hilary because he’s such a squeak of a guy. I even hesitate to call him, to give him the title, ‘guy’. Micro-organism would be closer. He’d be about five foot two in the old way of speaking, but that’s one thing that everyone uses the old scale for, isn’t it. You always say someone’s five foot ten, not ... what, one hundred and eighty something centimetres? What a waste of breath. Anyway, Phil Ransom is a midget. A pudgy, mis-shapen, unhealthy little waste of space of a midget with no education and hair down to his arse that he always has dyed red or green or something like that and with a beret perched on the top of his

head in winter and a cowboy hat in summer. And I know why he has to do all that shit and most people haven't worked it out at all and I know why they haven't worked it out as well.

Firstly, he has to do all that shit because he knows absolutely nothing about anything and he's trying to put it about that he's some kind of genius. I suppose the most generous thing you could say is that he's a survivor.

So why, I hear you ask, does he need to pretend? Because he's the editor of some street mag called *Trash It*. Yes, *Trash It*. You heard me right, gang. I'll say it again, *Trash It*. What an open invitation to do with it absolutely what should be done with it. I'd like to take a hundred copies and stuff them up his arse. And I could do that easily because this week's has just come out and there are about that many sitting in a hopper about six feet away from me as I write and I could go over there pick the whole lot up and carry them up to the front corner door and tip them over his head. Or, yes, stuff 'em up his arse. Yes. That is better. There'd probably be space enough up there to fit the lot, too.

I feel more comfortable just thinking about it.

But touch him and you're gone. Finished. Ruined. Kaput. Touch him and no-one in this town will ever talk to you again, about anything, ever. They'll let you sit there, here, on your own for as long as you live. They'll walk past you to the toilet. They'll ignore you completely. Some of the nicer ones will nod or grimace in a not unfriendly manner with that 'I for one know that you're ok and I'd talk to you if you hadn't been so totally sent to Coventry but unfortunately you have and I don't make the rules around here' kind of look on their faces.

I know people that he knows, you see. And that's the problem. It's that whole Adelaide kind of thing. You just about always know someone who knows someone else that you know, when you meet someone, if you know what I mean. If you dig back far enough; if you toss around that whole acquaintanceship angle with someone for long enough.

Sure there may be 1.2 million people in this town and how can you know all of them or how can you even know someone who knows someone to cover all of those people. That whole 'points of separation' thing. But consider that about three quarters of those people are out in the 'burbs and don't come a lot closer than their local Westfield thing and they must be happy out there or at least they don't have the curiosity to come in any closer and that's ok with me because if they did then things would get really crowded around here and there would be all sorts of infrastructure needed but most importantly life would get seriously complicated and there are just so many red, white and blue scarves that you want to see in the street on a Saturday night.

So that brings the pool down to a couple of hundred thousand and then you rule out the ones who kind of retire into their cottages at Dulwich and have 2.3 kids per couple and worry about school fees and how you are going to hide that from the tax man when the breakup comes. Then slice out the ones in an inappropriate age group that you don't really care about; they're either too old or they don't really matter yet. And you've really only got a few thousand to worry about if you see what I mean.

And if you didn't go to school with them or know someone who went to school with them or someone who did the same course at uni or art school in the same year or near as fucking damnit to the same year, or someone you used to drink with at The British in the seventies who used to go to parties at someone else's house at Gilberton and got kicked out for spewing on her mother's rose bushes, then you're really just not cutting it.

You have to know someone.

Unfortunately I knew this one, or close enough to this one, via the processes mentioned immediately above. I know people that he knows. I met him twice at parties.

And that's the problem.

I have to tell you now about someone that I know, a mate from far enough back, like, school, that far back. That's what I've been putting off telling you about for the last five minutes. And this

isn't a situation like in *Analyse This* where De Niro's gangster goes to Billy Crystal's shrink and tells him that his friend is having panic attacks but we all know it's him, De Niro, having the attacks. This really was a friend of mine.

He had a book of short stories published by this really small publisher with no marketing budget and not going national so none of the papers would touch it for publicity, not even a hundred word review. So then he's trying to get some bookshop to take his thing in and put it on a stand and maybe sell a few, local author, that kind of thing. Anyway the guy in the bookshop looks at this slim little volume and screws up his face and goes like, yeah, but there's no publicity, man. Love to help you, but how can I sell books without some publicity. That kind of thing. Then as my friend is about to release his forelock, pack up his bubble wrap of books and do the unsuccessful-person-shuffle through the door to the cold, hard street the guy says, 'Hey, why don't you go see the street mags. They'll set you right.' So then my friend thinks, hey, yeah, all right, whoah, why didn't I think of that before, I met that editor guy at a party one night. And off he trots off to *Trash It* where our aforementioned green-haired beret sporter acquaintance takes a look at the book and says, sure dude, you're a good guy, I'm a good guy, I'll help you out.

Which sounds like the beautiful end to this plaintive tale. But there was one little sticking point in it all. And if there had been no sticking point, no conflict, no frisson, then it wouldn't be much of a story would it, and I wouldn't be telling it to you here, because what is the value in telling a story with a happy ending. Anyway, my friend looked in the next issue, not necessarily thinking that his review would be there because it's just way too soon for someone to read his little book and pen their thoughts, so no problem there. The next week he got a bit more excited and picked up the *Trash* on Thursday at lunch time, about ten minutes after it hit his local record shop, and no review. Next week he legs it down there again at the same time thinking, this must definitely be the week. Same thing: no review. And the next week, and the week after that, and the week after that, and so on for about two months. So my friend sends the great Phil Ransom a friendly hey, dude, remember my review, kind of email and what do you know ten minutes later his phone rings and it's Ransom saying, sure mate, I'm a good guy, you're a good guy, you'll get your review no probs.

So I think you can guess what is the end of the story. My friend not so hot foots it next week to the record shop around Friday afternoon and, you got it , there was no review. Nor the next week, or the week after that, and so on.

Which is what you might think is par for the course in this world, and that's what my friend thought too in the end. He's a shrug his shoulders kind of guy; maybe that's why he's not so successful. He needs to suck up more. Fine thing for me to be saying because I'm the last person in the world to suck up. In fact things like that just get my goat. I can't let them go without redress. Such arrogance needs to be brought back to the field. They behave like no-one is ever going to touch them. I may not ever win a war, but I've got my eyes set on winning a battle every now and then.

And so it was that Ransom came into this pub at the wrong end of the night one time. At the pissed end of the night, the post midnight end of the night. It was my moment and I let him have it, both barrels, about his attitude problem. About people struggling to get something together in this town, especially people who don't have a lot of connections, people who'd appreciate a bit of a leg-up from someone in his position. And do you know what he did?

His mouth went up in that little smile and he picked up his two drinks from the bar and turned around and walked away, back to his bimbo office girl, hoisted himself up like Hilary scaling Everest, and didn't look back.

But at last, he's going now. Finished his pale ale and off he goes with the bimbo. Couldn't find a home for a saveloy in a meat market if it wasn't for the job he's got. Gone with that little look on his face that's somewhere between a smirk and a snigger. Cunt. At least the coast is clear now and I can get a Dark Ale without hindrance. Then maybe I'll be able to have a look at the *Trash It* and see what's going on in the world, without him seeing that I'm doing it, of course.

So much for the people that matter.

The Jump

At last it was my day to jump.

It should have been the simplest thing. It could have occupied a position in life as important as, say, opening the fridge door and taking out a bottle of milk, as challenging as crossing the main road to go to the shop for Mum to buy sliced meat for cold dinner. But the idea of the jump had become a new rite of passage, like the first day at school, the manly feeling derived from your first pair of long pants, the independence that the bicycle gave. It had assumed its undeserved significance by the process of delay. Rules are power, and it had been said that I could not jump from the Brighton Jetty into the sea until I was twelve years old. 'Same thing for all of them.' My brother had waited, and duly jumped.

The first Sunday after my twelfth birthday, which had fallen on the Thursday of that week, I went down to the jetty, to the jumping place, with just my two cousins for company. Jeffrey and Teddie had been jumping off things for years already. By the way, Teddie isn't his real name. His real name is Graham but his big brother started calling him shithead and his mum drew the line there and told him to stop, so he started calling him Ted then (as in 'thead), then Teddie. I called him Ted too. It suited him and it's better than Graham anyway.

They lived out at Elizabeth so they didn't get to go to the beach very often. Sometimes they would drive over to Semaphore and we would meet them up there; we reckoned the beach had too much seaweed and smelt funny, but we went there anyway, to be with them. But usually they stuck to the pool; it was the place they knew the best. They started jumping into the pool when they were six or seven. They graduated to the low diving platform by the time they were eight or nine and then to the high diving board when they were ten. By the time I was twelve they were the kind of guys who'd hurl themselves off the highest board and into the drink, feet and arse first for the sake of the biggest splash and drawing the most attention to themselves. Mum said they were 'a bit roughhouse.' They could roam around anywhere in their area on their own and go to the pool or hang around at the shops, not like us. They have a really crummy pool out

there. They have a really crummy everything out there, but Mum says not to say that to them. Their house is crummy too, but we don't really care about that. It's not like our house; we have a piano, and books, and carpet in the living room.

So they took me down to the jetty. When we walked up the planks Jeffrey started muscling Teddie with his shoulder, bearing down on his little brother, pushing him, hard, but not quite so hard that he fell over. Teddie kept teetering over and making it look like he was nearly falling but then coming back, big grin on his face, and leaping up and slapping Jeffrey on the ear, then jumping up too and hitting him on the shoulder as well. They continued this way all along the jetty. I kept grinning like it was as funny as they thought it was.

Later in life Jeffrey got into trouble with the police every now and then, petty offences that you get on Saturday nights. Just couldn't pull his head in. Later on he ran a porno shop at Para Hills. After that he drifted out of the news and I haven't heard of him in decades. Teddie ended up working in a bank. I never saw him in one, but then I never went into banks that often. He faded even more quickly into obscurity once we were grown up. My uncle was depressed and died early. My auntie ... well, the less said about her, the better.

But back then we didn't know any of these things were going to happen and no-one thought into the future anyway; jumping off high platforms was paramount. I followed Jeffrey and Teddie down the planks of the jetty. Below us in the steady, gentle waves there were kids thrashing around, arms like bright pink crab claws agitating the water to keep their carapace heads afloat. Intelligent life forms volunteering combat against the elemental sea. Ahead of us was the jumping place, a crowd of rowdy lads and a couple of rough looking girls milling and queuing.

There is a triangular pattern of movement for the jumpers. A little platform has been built before the end of the jetty: you have to climb up the three railings that have been placed there to stop people from falling in, or to stop people from jumping in. Then you pause for a moment, balancing on the top railing, made wet by the feet of thousands of jumpers. Then the approved method is to emit a kind of Tarzan yodel, before leaping out as far as your limbs would take you and plunge, still yodeling, into the briny below. You would then swim further out to join a group

of others who had just jumped, and watch a few more leaps from that perspective. Then, when it seemed time to move, you would swim back to the ladder which had been built about thirty metres up from the diving place, then walk back up the jetty to take your position in line for another leap. And so the day goes on.

We walked up past the place where boys were coming up the ladder to take their place back in the line. They were in groups of three and four, like us. They stared at us, dry and new. They jostled each other and looked us up and down. As we join the queue all the boys are pushing each other, nudging their friends in the back and laughing, spluttering, pushing.

I look up and the sun is in the sky, high and perfect. It was high summer and it was high noon and the sun was in the centre of the sky, so perfect there that it seemed that it would never move, never had moved, had never occupied another place. It was timeless and still like the Sphinx, but not judging - accepting all and giving life the same to all. As if it was some higher power, not living by the rules that guided those of us left behind on earth.

I was nudged along to the spot where I was to jump. Jeffrey and Teddie were in front of me. Eagerly Jeffrey took the three steps that were needed to climb the railing fence, hollered like Tarzan and pushed himself out into the yonder, his legs wiggling like an eggbeater as he plunged with a crash into the great sea below. Next, Teddie leapt at the fence and repeated his brother's act, arms and legs flailing to the depths. I watched him disappear beneath the surface for a few moments, wondering for a second if it ever happened that you just kept on going. If the world did not return you to the top each time, but that you just kept on down and down and down to the bottom of the sea.

But he bobbed back to the surface as you would expect and swam out to join his brother and then they were both looking up, back at the platform on the jetty. Staring up at me. Their mouths were open, their faces played their part somewhere between derision and expectation. Jeffrey said something to Teddie and they laughed. Were they sharing some private joke at me? Were they openly revealing their thoughts to me, where I would never do the same to them? I stopped a moment to watch them, roughhouse lads in harmony with their world.

‘Come on, wanker.’ I heard a voice behind, and a body brushed my shoulder, hard. Harder than it needed to get by me; a blow, aimed. An elbow flung at my ribs as the body passed by. A glancing hit. The next jumper was up there, on top of the railing fence. A big boy. I stood in his shadow for a second; he blotted out the sun. He yodeled like Tarzan for a moment and thrust himself forward, out into the yonder, his legs flailing, his arms waving, and crashed into the sea.

Between the heads of each leering boy, as they passed to climb, to mime, to wave their arms and legs and crash, I saw the heads of my cousins bobbing, swimming back to the jetty, completing the triangle, coming to throw me in.

Love the Hurt

The front room at The Tivoli had more pieces falling off it than any other place I'd seen. Torn posters of rock bands past and future looped off the wall with a sneer and showed where sheets of plaster had slipped out long before. In places the large square lino tiles had vanished from the floor and patches of beer-sod carpet had been worn through to nothing.

The Tivoli may have been a grand place about eighty years before that time and even in my childhood it had been the home of olde time music hall, the kind of thing that is hilarious when you are an eager ten year old and tragic when you are a sophisticated twelve. But from the outside of the Tiv there was still a glimpse of it; the façade held its dignity despite years of decay. But the veil was lifted the moment you stepped past the mahogany staircase and your feet began to stick to the floor.

On *Love The Hurt* night ashen locals were clobbered out in black, black on black, and the just-out-of-bed look, at 10 p.m. Like rocks in a seething ocean were some scrawny boys from out North who had settled for AC/DC T-shirts and little cloth caps; knowing they were not in their place they exaggerated their boisterous attitude of ownership.

The walls were jammed with paper posters – *The Tangerines*, *Five Car Pile-up*, and of course *Love The Hurt*: all uniformly weird I guessed. The notices are slapped on top of the last: the past is dead, and the future is never more than a week away.

Most people do not allow for smiling. There is a short bar. People crowd around each other but are too frigid to touch. Bodies held in secret spaces: together, alone. Drinkers stand as they would in an eighth floor lift, close, but separate. There is a kind of waiting too – a sense that you are filling time up with something. That the real thing is always somewhere else, just out of reach. Next week perhaps, away, somewhere else. Melbourne.

Cassie says, 'Let's get a drink before we die.' I love that girl. For most of the Myrtle Bank

punks, two drinks a night is the limit. Not right to be seen out drunk; so much culture is grained in at convent school. But Cassie cares no fig for that.

Two lads are drinking at the end of the bar. Not sipping, drinking – guzzling almost. They wear close fitting little leather tops made for motorbikes. One wears the cloth cap, the other a bush of curly, ginger hair. I am drawn to their pissed joviality. As I queue for drink I look at them, purse my lips and make to half-nod in their direction. But they see my clothes and take me for one of the others. Their conversation continues; they double in laughter at some news or reminiscence, their voices jarring through the cool.

I merge into the phalanx at the bar. When someone pushes by with their drinks you have to ease back to let them past and risk losing your space to a more assertive drinker. So we can't talk while this is happening; there is too much concentration required. If I lose my place I will be judged for it. Cassie has hung back and lit a cigarette but watches closely. I am male and I must procure. I succeed. Courage and grace under pressure. The beer is cold: we drink beer.

It's *Love The Hurt* we've come to see as well as to be a part of the Tiv. Cassie started telling me about them. They play *Joy Division* songs and all the latest Manchester stuff. Some of their own too, maybe all their own stuff now. That's why we're here, to find out what's new. But she starts to tell me more about *Joy Division*, as if they're the attraction, not *The Hurt*. She hasn't been talking about them for twenty seconds when she moves to Ian Curtis, their singer who snuffed himself rather than go to America with the band. She said they'd found him swinging in his mum's kitchen, as if that were serious validation of his credibility. I said I guessed that must have shown he didn't want to go commercial.

'He wasn't made that way,' she said with emphasis.

'But the other guys in the band were?'

'They were all excited. About going to America, that is. Not about him dying. They started a new band straight away. Sort of.'

‘So if they wanted to go commercial and he didn’t, then it wouldn’t have worked out anyway, would it. Maybe that’s what he saw. Like love gone wrong.’ I gave the last three words emphasis.

She raised an eyebrow, ‘Steady pardner, put down that gun.’ She put her index and middle fingers to her mouth and blew the smoke away. So I said that maybe there were a lot of other things going on in his head that no-one will ever know about.

‘No doubt,’ she said, as if I had made such an obvious statement that I was faintly tiring her. ‘People used to make fun of him, because of what he wrote about. As if it was pretentious, being so dark and writing about the ugly things in life. The things that are really there. Is that the way people treat someone different? Laugh at them?’

‘When they’re afraid of them they sometimes do.’

‘They stopped laughing. When he did it.’

‘You mean they stopped laughing at you?’

Cassie’s eyes were focussed, but narrowed, seemingly on an object far away, out in front of us, on the other side of the room. As if she nursed in her head the seed of an idea that would bloom and ripen in its own due time. I feared her for a moment: her potential to run to extremes, her love of a dark, dead singer, and her arcane thinking, padlocked in her head.

‘He might have had ideas about what’s good and what’s evil. But there’s a lot of grey in this world. Even commercial music can be okay.’

‘There is a lot of bad. Selfishness. Not much else.’ She spoke like she knew.

‘There’s no god then? No judgement?’ Neither of us believed in this.

‘No god. No judgement.’

‘No good deeds.’

‘All good deeds are ego.’

‘No love, no ethics?’

She looked at me, ‘All love is self-interest. There’s nothing else.’ She pulled a Peter Stuyvesant from a packet and lit it quickly. She didn’t offer me one.

‘If there’s no ethics Ian Curtis wouldn’t have cared if they went commercial or not.’

She pursed her lips and looked up at me with a raised eyebrow as if to say, ‘Not a bad try.’

‘Sometimes I wish we’d never had books in the shelf at home,’ I said, ‘It’d be easier that way. You know I read when I was ten or so that there were so many hundreds or thousands of religions in the world. I can’t remember how many it said now – in some encyclopaedia we had. Hundreds of different religions in Africa, just for starters.’ Cassie held onto my arm now, and I poked her hair behind her ears so I could see her face better. ‘But I’d been to Sunday School as well, and they’d said that we were the same as people from all over the world - that we were all just as equal, so to speak. So it seemed to me that if we were telling them all their religions were wrong, and ours was right, then they weren’t our equals any more. In effect we were telling all the Africans they were a mob of no-fucking-hoppers.’

Cassie was thinking then, making connections for herself. ‘I have a friend. He played some gospel music. You know, bluegrass, all that stuff.’

‘Did he have a wispy beard?’ I thought of the few bluegrass people I’d ever met. They all had wispy beards.

‘Not *this* one,’ she answered factually, as if it had been a perfectly sensible question. ‘There’s all this stuff about the Devil. The Devil is in nearly every song. He’s always there, tempting them. As if it’s a person doing it, with horns coming out of his head,’ she laughed.

‘Simple conceptual anthropomorphisation.’

She looked at me with eyebrows raised and lips pursed, the way she did.

‘You get that,’ she said.

‘People think that if there’s a good there always has to be an evil. If you don’t have Satan you can’t have God. That’s why we have the resurrection. Christ can lock horns with the Devil that way. And be perfect too.’

‘Like Superman: truth, justice and the American way. Nice and clean.’ She seemed to be accepting the idea that righteousness might be the way of the simpleton.

‘Something to believe in is good. But grey is more real.’

‘But if nothing comes from God,’ she said, ‘nothing means anything.’

‘Maybe.’

‘That means it doesn’t matter if you’re an artist or you go commercial.’ She adopted her distant look again. ‘Or if you kill yourself, or someone else.’

‘Perhaps,’ I tried to laugh. ‘But there’s a sort of conscience in us, isn’t there. That’s what you have to follow. And we’re all different.’

‘So why don’t people just do things that are true to them?’

‘True to them? They’d have to find out what they are first. Where is anyone going to do that? You’d have to go too far back: childhood and beyond. Do you think *Love The Hurt* would be wrestling with the idea of whether to go commercial or not?’

‘Huh, this *is* commercial now. Things like this are only good before they get big. You know, when I was at school people used to laugh at me for liking them. So I died my hair black, even my eyebrows.’

‘Black!’ I couldn’t see it – platinum to black, as if there was nothing in between.

‘When Ian died they stopped laughing. Did I say that? Straight away. It was a kind of respect. He wasn’t a joke any more. And it was like I had him all to myself, at least I did in that place. But now they’re big. Everyone’s into it. So what do you do?’

‘Move on. Find something different.’

‘I know I have to do something for myself.’

It was the first time she’d admitted anything. Before then she’d recited anecdotes about herself and her family, always showing her sister up in some bad light - bitchy, slutty, superficial. But it was always controlled, like a press secretary leaking information. We were leaning against a pillar at the back of the room waiting for the act to come on and I put my arm around her waist, under her shirt, next to her skin – a risky proprietorial gesture.

She smiled with a kind of resignation, as if I was a cute little boy who’d come in all muddy from play, and she put her hand on my shoulder, above my shirt, not on my skin.

‘Try not to worry about me, Eoghan.’

‘I’m not worried.’ I lied.

I cocked my head at her like an enquiring puppy.

‘I’m going to do something soon,’ she said. ‘I know it. I can feel it coming.’

‘Do something?’

‘Do something, go somewhere. Don’t ask me what because I don’t know myself yet.’ She said ‘know myself’ as if she might not even know who she was.

But the support act was starting and we moved up closer to the stage. The bass player lit a smoke and stuck it ostentatiously in the bridgehead so it could burn down while he played; its smoke drifted back towards him, watering his eyes. The drummer played head down, hard and heavy and almost tidy; he took his shirt off for the last song, just three minutes to make his ritual statement of freedom and individuality.

Two girls were up there with them: one very large kid sang bluesy Janis Joplin vocals and a more shapely one played guitar and did the back-up. The large one said into her mike, between songs, ‘Can I have more of me on fold-back, and less of Kate.’ Three pissed guys at a table in front of us picked up on it, ‘Can we have less of you and more of Kate,’ they shouted out sarcastic. The large girl on stage lifted up one side of her mouth in a mock scowl, in good spirit, like she’s a pro who’s heard it all before and ain’t fazed by no-one.

After a while it’s time for more beer and between songs I said so to Cassie. She said she didn’t have much money. She patted me on the chest and said thoughtfully, ‘Most guys are too scared of me to talk about anything interesting. They just want to fuck me. I guess that makes you different.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I replied, trying to make a joke of something that I really felt. ‘I’m scared of you all right.’ She laughed, so that was all right.

‘But you can’t keep away, can you.’ She lifted one eyebrow and smiled seductively. I don’t think I could’ve been more in love with her than I was at that moment. I wanted to pick her up and squeeze her to bits and take her away to some lonely spot to be together.

The crowd up front thickened, people had been drifting in for half an hour. We took our place at the edge of the serious crowd.

And *Love The Hurt* crept onto the stage.

They all had hair that fell into their eyes, and to compound this they looked down a lot. The guy who stood at front with his guitar wore a navy blue jacket with a candy stripe of cream, and a pink scarf around his neck. The drummer had a paisley shirt of rusty gold; the bass player hid in the shadows. There was something mean about them.

The guitar sound was jangly, not crashing and annoying but insistent and lulling. The introduction was built through some picked-out chord structures and I was interested, waiting for the song to take wing fully. The chords built up slowly and then came crashing back down again and the breathless singer stepped up to the mike. The vocals followed the progression of the chords and the words were muffled in the echo of the hall and the guitars and the introverted image of the vocalist himself.

The second song came and went like the first and I began to look around me. There was a solid core of thirty or so up the front and in the thrall of *The Hurt*. Others propped up against the walls, arms folded, scrunching their jackets. A few were desultory at the bar, but watching anyway.

I wondered about this place. Where the patrons posed indifference but watched so closely. Where the band came dressed like pansies, but held a snarling hardness within them that was almost frightening. Where the girl I loved had thoughts I knew would never be mine. Nothing was as it seemed.

I’d finished my second beer. Cassie had closed her eyes and was swaying in time with the music,

her shoulders lifting and falling, arms snaking out before her in some labyrinthine spiral dance.

‘Up to scratch?’ I asked.

She smiled and raised her right hand and moved her fingers up and down in a motion that resembled waves moving into the shore or the musical notes on a stave. She was saying, ‘Hi, but don’t bother me, I’m busy.’

After six or seven songs I am bored and feeling claustrophobic. Then *The Hurt* struck up a riff that I recognised from somewhere. Obviously Cassie did too and she started nodding her head up and down in time with the rolling of the shoulders thing.

‘*Where will it end, where will it end,*’ the singer repeated over and over. This was emphatic, not mumbled; a climax of the confusion and dismay which has hinted its way through the repertoire, stabbing out depression over the reserved jangling of the guitars.

‘*This is the room, the start of it all,*’ and something about the ‘*bodies obtained, the bodies obtained, the bodies obtaaaaaaiined*’. And then the ‘*where will it end*’ refrain jarred its way back to centre stage.

The song shuddered to its own inexorable end and Cassie opened her eyes and turned to me as if waking from a dream. ‘That’s enough.’ She’s satisfied now and we can leave.

As we go she told me what the name of Joy Division was about. A team of young Jewish women, pulled from the death camps in the Second World War, for the use of German officers on leave. Joy not even for sale, just bodies for use. The bodies obtained, the bodies obtained.

‘There’s an irony in that title,’ I said.

‘Irony? There’s only irony when there’s meaning. And there’s no meaning, not in anything. Weren’t you listening,’ she looked at me intently, then laughed, ‘to yourself?’

Billy Larkin

For a man on the land Billy Larkin was a funny little tub. Where the Larkin brothers were six footers through and through, baby Billy never made it to five and a half. In the working boots maybe, but not really. Not even close.

Even though Billy had long sold up, come to town and stayed there, he still wore the working boots most days, the same pair he'd had for twenty years: R.M. Williams elastic-siders, size six and a half, made to order. The tops of the flexible ankles were frayed from a thousand wearings and the soles had been re-done a dozen times. 'No use throwing out a perfectly good boot' grumbled Billy when people he met, usually women, suggested that he could do something about his image. But men too teased Billy about his beaten up bone coloured moleskins, the navy blue jumper thinning at the elbows, the washed out checked flannie shirts. Anyway, on these occasions he always blinked agreeably at his good natured tormentors, leaving the matter of his dress in the same order as the sky and the sea and the land itself. It was neither right or wrong, it simply was; not subject to change in a universe whose laws were plain and simple and immutable. I have done Ma'at, he seemed to say, and as his wisdom was so close to the land itself, it seemed that in a blink or two of his bashful eyes there was some inscrutable, pharaonic power that was proven yet again, as if for all time.

'Hrrmph, yes,' Billy chuckled into his Sparkling Ale.

It was as if there had been a procedure invented in the surgically inventive seventies which had attached a pint of ale to his palm: heart transplant surgery, laser beam cataract replacement, Cooper's Ale pint attachments.

I knew Billy years ago when I had an office job for the Government. We've all done that from time to time; those of us who've tried to make a living outside the square have ended up back in the middle of it: the government. Not that Billy would ever do that for a living, or do anything for a living as far as that went. He was permanently outside the square and knew it. But people

from his university days became colleagues of mine. Mild-mannered corduroy-jacketed chaps they were mostly, with daughters who played the piano and wives whose voices were soft and faintly English but whose rules about the time to return home on a Friday night were firmly enforced. No such restrictions on Billy. Whenever there was an after work drink and a bit of good fellowship, Billy was never far away, so I got to know him a bit.

‘People say I have a drinking problem,’ he once remarked to me. ‘Problem is, fitting it all in,’ he grumbled and guffawed, his face lit up in an upward gleam of teeth and his whole body shook with mirth. His Friar Tuck face grinned sheepishly up at me to be certain that I’d taken it in the right spirit. His house in Carrington Street was claustrophobic: towers of books and boxes of wine were piled up in the passageway so visitors were met with the feeling that something was about to topple on them. A dining room table was heaped with old records of estate, more wine, spanners, shirts that had been given as birthday presents years before; it had not been eaten off in seventeen years. The kitchen was as you would expect from someone who made his own curries, brewed beer and cleaned up once a month.

I ran into him a few weeks ago. It was about the time I started writing all this down. By the way it was my shrink said I should. I started to see her because some people said they thought it would be a good idea to go and talk to someone. I was to get it all down and out of me. How simple is that. Too easy. It took her only about eight or nine seconds to outline her ideas. She said just to write down what came into my head about everything, and not structure things too much. I said you want to be careful. Look what happened to that shrink in the film *Lantana*. You don’t want to hang around someone like me, was what I said. I’ve got history. I’ve done bad things. Don’t fall in love with me, because I hurt. She says she thinks I’m making up most of my stories and I laugh along indulgently with her. What does *she* know. These shrinks are glorified hand patters, stabbing in the dark, adding up two and two and coming up with thirteen. But I go along with it. In fact I love it. It’s the best game out.

I told Billy I was going to the shrink. Everyone else I told put their eyebrows in a little frown of concern and nodded their heads knowing and sympathetic. A couple of the women touched my

arm, one of them with both arms - an expression of concern, for themselves. To show how much they cared and what good people they were. Because we all must show how good we are.

But not Billy. His eyes shot up and his face lightened as if this was the brightest news he had heard this month. ‘Marvellous,’ he said, on the brink of hilarity. ‘What crap are they feeding you there?’

I laughed, as I hadn’t in months. Doubled up for a moment. I told him I was telling them that you had to know people in this town; that it didn’t matter how good you were, it was who you knew that counts.

‘Ha, ha, ha.’ Billy’s face broad-beamed with amazement, that anyone would deny the truth of my allegations. ‘They believe their own mythology. They get what they want by sniffing bottom. Ha, ha. That’s what you have to do, unless you are as rich as Job and Croesus put together.’

‘Like you.’

‘Yes, like me of course. I don’t have to sniff anyone’s bottom.’

‘And possessing the combined wealth of Job and Croesus means you don’t *have* to be perfect.’

‘Don’t have to pretend to be. I come from a long line of anarchists.’

‘Boong shooters.’

‘Exactly. What’s the point of pretending to be Jesus Christ? Who out there ...’ and he motioned his free hand out to Rundle Street, beyond that in the direction of the financial district, sixteen storey buildings full of accountants and government bureaucrats, lush parklands around them, ‘hasn’t benefited from it? And the ones who got the lolly want to keep it.’

‘Bad luck to Johnny Come Lately.’

‘Exactly. They want to keep it all to themselves, and once they’ve got used to it they want to be perfect too. Some kind of Christ clone.’

‘You could be a clone of the real Christ and still be most imperfect.’

‘Exactly, exactly!’ Billy hopped about in excitement; he spilled a slurp’s worth of ale on the floor. ‘The real Christ was full of faults. He was yin and yang until they re-jigged him.’

‘Abbott *and* Costello.’

’The only bit they left of the real one was where he tipped the tables of the usurers. Angry bugger I expect he was really. And probably a poof.’

‘Went both ways for sure. Read between the lines.’

Billy looked down at the floor and shook again. ‘Yes, yes, yes.’ He wasn’t finished with the topic. ‘It was the Council of Nicaea that did the trick. Three hundred odd A.D. They had to decide whether to leave him human or make him God. That was where the God story won out.’

‘Bums on seats.’

‘Yes, it tends to put them there.’

‘And when you’re God you have to be perfect.’

‘Oh, yes. No room for the bad stuff. Wouldn’t do.’

‘Rewrite the gospels.’

‘Ban half of them.’

‘More than that.’

‘Exactly. They make him into a model. For us to pretend to be like. When it’s just not possible. So we settle the land with a bible under one arm and a shotgun over the other.’

‘The law of the jungle.’

‘The law of nature.’ Billy watched me as he spoke, and became serious once again. ‘And then they put all this weight of archaic expectations on you about relationships too. You’re supposed to destroy people’s families on one hand, in the name of God, and then be a family man on the other hand, in the name of God. How many layers there are of each of us, eh, that we’re supposed to fit into a relationship? How many of them are we supposed to destroy to make it work? I don’t blame you for what happened. As far as I’m concerned, when it comes to relationships, say no.’

Flinders Fields

I'd picked him up that morning in the car. His car. The one that had been sitting in the shed for the last three months while he was in low care.

'I'll miss your Dad,' the nurse from Florey wing had said. As if he was never coming back.

'We've paid to keep the room on hold.'

'He just reminded me so much of my old Dad. He went nine years ago.'

'It took so long to get him in here we're not letting it go.' She busied herself with the paperwork I had to sign. 'You know he used to live up Beulah Road when he was just a lad.'

'Yep, he told us.' She smiled.

'Used to come past here on the way to school.'

'Yeeeeeep,' she smiled again, as if the story had been often told. Then, 'There's a lot of fluid on those lungs.'

He'd beaten the cancer five months before.

*

At the check-in Dad smiles, grins perhaps, at the petite little girl at the desk who has to organise the whole procedure.

'Nurse has just taken someone up,' she says. We know that is code for 'it's going to take a long time.'

We sit in padded chairs either side of a little bone laminex table and face towards the gum trees and the car park and the double doors that roll open and shut with all the human traffic that comes in and out.

‘Might as well leave the bloody things open,’ Dad says. ‘Save a lot of trouble.’

‘And electricity,’ I remind.

A young nurse comes past and smiles at Dad, at his hopeful, expectant face. Nurses often smiled at Dad. This one is neat, trim, pert.

‘I’d be after that if I was of a marriageable age.’

‘Settle down, Dad. They mightn’t let you in at all if you keep on like that.’

After a silence of a few seconds in which he considered his response, ‘Thought she might be good for you.’

‘Hmmm, too young for *me*, Dad.’

He nods twice to himself, not missing the meaning. Dad was eighty four years old.

Last time we’d been here one of the nurses said to me that he had been the sickest person in the ward and that they’d nearly lost him a couple of times. In all his struggle he had pressed the help button less than any other person there.

*

‘Hit the jackpot,’ I said.

The room was flooded with sunlight. A big window spread out a view over the south west suburbs to the high rise of Glenelg in the distance and the ribbon of sand that hit the blue sea for ten miles along the coast. Across the road and just below us were the playing fields of Flinders University; I'd played maybe two games against them thirty years or so before.

Dad came over to look.

'Uh huh,' he said pursing his lips as if to say, 'not bad.'

'Flinders Fields,' I said.

'Wrong war, mate,' he grinned.

*

I'd had a tough time of it that autumn. Suddenly at school I'd found myself on the wrong side of the deputy principal for reasons I couldn't fathom. Deputy principals are not people you want to be unpopular with; I soon found myself teaching in all the worst rooms, one a windowless dungeon in the centre of a dark office building. It was a depressing place where even the brightest students soon became gloomy and introverted.

When I told him I would be taking the morning off to help out Dad he'd hitched his pants up like old blokes do when they're about to show their authority. Right there in the public waiting area, shoved his hands in his pocket and sighed, 'Jesus Christ, how long's this going to go on for.' It was the third half day I'd had off in two months.

I didn't slap him. Not even when his eyes told me he thought I was making it all up about having this sick parent who needed transporting around from home to hospital to nursing home and back again and that there was no-one else in the family who could do it.

My girlfriend had dropped me two weeks before.

I quit my job. Not because of Dad, not because of him, not because of her. I just had to get out of there.

Still, you should have seen the look on the deputy's face.

*

So I had time to do things. A long ride to Strathalbyn to see Julie seemed like the thing to do. Through suburban roads, up through the hills and their tight hard bends, then long, golden country roads; cows and vineyards, with endless gums on either side, and a chance to flatten it and cruise head down and arse up. We went into the Victoria Hotel for lunch.

Julie and I had known each other since schooldays. Not that we went to the same school or anything. Her brother knew someone from my group and we were all in the same general neighbourhood, so we joined up to be one big gang that hung around together. Her parents were as poor as church mice but they still managed to get her into one of the Catholic girls' schools in the city.

It didn't work though. They say that in those places the rules are so rigid that you've got to be all for it or all against it. She was all against it. Not that the parents seemed to mind that much. After all the lousy cards life had dealt them the matter of having a daughter an atheistic dropout at the age of fifteen didn't seem even slightly unusual to them. Dad had his flagon of sherry and his telly and Mum had her ironing and her fags and they seemed not to expect or ask for anything more or less. We are but pieces of meat and the peculiar results of freakish genetic accidents anyway, or so their every movement seem to say in its acceptance of fate and lack of demonstrable ambition.

Julie and I had a little thing for a while when we were seventeen. Just about three weeks. Once we got to being kind of adults she'd ring up every few months and I'd pop down there to give her something to do. Give me something to do. She was with some bikie called Kenny who never

seemed to do much. He was kind of a nice bloke, but I still steered clear of him for some reason I couldn't explain.

We tuck into our lunches: chicken snitty for her and grilled fish with chips and salad for me. She looks pale, face like oatmeal and her light brown hair dropped in front of her in straggly ropes as she ate. She wore a maroon and gold hippie dress that might have been smart twenty years before, and black kung fu slippers.

'Thanks for dressing up,' I said.

Her mouth crinkled up into a smile and she rasped out of the corner of her mouth, 'Who gives a fuck.'

She looks sick. I wonder if she's taking after her old man, or her mother. Or both. Or Kenny. A fine nest of influences.

I heard from someone else that she was working on the game a few years ago, but the coppers told her to give it up after she tried to scratch some bloke's eyes out. It appears politic to develop a certain bedside manner. That whole thing is something I never ask her about. I wait for her to say something, but she never has.

'That'll put a bit of meat on ya,' I say, nodding at her schnitzel.

'I could use it.'

She is looking more emaciated every time I see her.

Two middle aged woman at the table next to us are talking loudly, about illnesses. Some women of a certain age group seem obsessed with disease, watch all the medical dramas on TV, documentaries on sickness. Amateur experts. Soon they get on to cancer. They went into a mad

gale of laughter about something I didn't catch, and it took them a minute or so to return to their topic.

'It always comes back.'

'Always comes back.' Solemnly.

'Gawd rest 'em.'

'Gawd rest 'em.'

Julie doubled over her plate in mock hilarity. 'Just what *you* need today. Ha ha ha.' Her exaggerated cackle did what it was intended to do. It made me smile.

'Yeah, just what I need. You finished?'

She'd stopped eating, but her plate was half full.

'Yeah, I don't eat much.'

'Waste of money taking you out.'

'You won't even get a root out of me.'

'No thanks, not with a boyfriend looks like yours.' She wheezed again in a role play of mirth.

'Let's get out of here,' she said. 'Place is like a fucken morgue.'

*

We walked in the river park that winds all through the centre of Strath. Rain had washed the autumn leaves into a swampy sludge at the side of the path. The falls of that morning laid about the middle of the path and we kicked our way through them, taking care not to slip on their glistening surfaces.

She told me about her dream.

She said there was a plague of ants that were eating her alive. She said that ever since she was a kid she had been scared of ants. When they made a nest in her back yard and swarmed over the old red bricks that were the path to the lane out back, she would scream when they crawled over her feet. Her mum had to come out with the hose and squirt her clean to shut her up.

But in her dream it was different. The ants were eating her alive, but it wasn't a painful or disastrous experience in any way. She was watching it all happen quite calmly, waiting for them to get down to the bone, so she could be a skeleton. As if that were some pure state she had to achieve before she would be happy, or before she could die peacefully; only then would she feel complete.

'Did they get there?' I asked. She looked at me quizzically. 'Did they finish the job?'

'Oh, dunno. Fucken Kenny got up to go for a piss and I woke up.'

I nodded, deadpan.

'Things don't have to be as bad as people make them,' she said. 'We are all just so *taught* to make a drama out of everything. We are ... all ... so ... important.' She spaced these words out and pronounced them so deliberately it seemed like they might have applied to someone she knew. 'What happens, happens.'

But we do have time to make something of our lives, I thought.

‘Do you think we go somewhere when we die?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. Everyone, but everyone, wants to think they know the answer to that one. But what does it matter anyway? If we go, we go.’

*

When I went down to the country that morning I’d felt like I was riding through a fog. It was all hard work, watching the road, shifting gears, maintaining the balance that keeps the bike working best: conscious, laboured action. But on the way back I was flying; it was not like work. The bends came and went without me even knowing they were there.

When main road appeared I settled into a nice cruising speed I liked and glided past anything in the way. I decided that tomorrow I would look for something physical to do. At the age of only thirty I could feel my muscles getting slack and thought about where that would go in another thirty years.

At the corner of South Road somehow my bike seemed to be making for the right hand lane exit to the hospital, without me really making it go there. It was a time when it seemed some greater being was guiding me.

*

Out of the lift on the fourth floor. The tightly woven beige carpet is tucked neatly up against the wall on either side. A young man in pale blue uniform pushes an old woman in a wheel chair and I step to one side to let them pass. They both smile at me and I suppose I smile back.

Normally I go straight to the room and tap very gently on the door as I enter. I don’t like talking to the nurses much. They give a professional kind of warmth. I know that yakking away to everyone is what they have to do and that it must be hard for them to keep it up all day every day, so I usually let them off the hook with me.

But this day I go straight up to the sacred zone, the nurses' station where there is a high desk on three sides and a wall at the back; where there are always three or four people and where I feel most conscious.

The girl recognises me, but I say my name anyway and who my father is. I mumble something about tests that were done and results that were due maybe today but more likely tomorrow.

'Yep, they've just come in.'

She flicks through a few large envelopes which contain x-rays and the like. Eventually she stops and pulls one out and scans the one page summary that's in there with them.

'Yeeees,' she says. 'It ... looks like the doctor wants to see you about something.'

'Yes, I know.'

She checks her schedule, 'But he's not here right now.'

'I already know.'

'How would you know that?'

'Not about the doctor, about my father.'

'You know ...'

'Yes, I know. I've known about it since lunchtime today.'

The look on her face says that she somehow understands what I'm saying, although I don't really understand it myself.

Cassie Fails English

‘Everyone who does a good deed does it for their egos, babe.’ Cassie was impressing on me the merits of doing bad things.

I thought of my doomed marriage to Rosemary: fetes and committees; public deeds from which there would always evolve a place within a hierarchy. And recognition.

‘Do you know what they made us do in school at Year 11: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Wasn’t that just so sweet of them. I read it when I was, like, eleven years old. When my sister, who is like four years older, did it two years later I told her what to write in her plod-plod essay.’

‘I bet you were the star of the class when your turn came around.’

She looked at me open-mouthed as if there was just so much that I wasn’t even close to understanding.

‘I failed.’

‘How could you fail?’

‘Do you know what I wrote in my exam?’

‘No I don’t.’

‘I wrote, “Atticus Finch was up himself.” One sentence. That’s all. What do you think of that? Sums him up perfectly I think, considering what we just agreed.’

‘Well, I suppose you could’ve developed a more sustained argument.’

‘Argument, shmargument. Kid stuff.’ She regarded me seriously. ‘Atticus was the most egotistical man alive.’

I tried to remember what I could of TKMB. Calpurnia was the negro maid who was part of the family. Atticus always trying to reason with people. Occasionally he suppressed a lynching, shot a mad dog in the street, doled out pithy maxims on life.

‘On the fence are we?’

‘It’s just an opinion, you haven’t argued it out.’

‘Ha, too much university training for you, boyo. What happened to your authenticity? Are you ever going to respond to something, or just argue a case?’

‘Well, I suppose there are limits to that kind of thing. We should go beyond too much rationality in our lives.’

‘Get a little Dionysus into ya. If you’re not in touch with the crazy part of you, *then* you go crazy.’

She kissed me quickly and tersely on the lips. Her lips were thin and neat. When Cassie’s lips kissed you could feel each one of them grabbing at you, biting into you. Structure not space. Incision not flesh.

‘At least you’re a reasonable fuck,’ she pronounced.

I held her hands down on the bed, flat behind her head. Her aquamarine dressing gown tumbled open. My mouth reached down to her tiny, hard nipples while I tried to hold her hands down still.

‘Ha, ha, can’t do it can you.’

Her hands lifted off the bed in a wrestling match with mine while I still licked her small breasts. The strength in her wiry arms was terrific; she pushed me back, further down towards her cunt. I found the firm bit beneath the strip of close cropped hair that rose like an obelisk from her cunt. I licked her for a minute until she was at the point of orgasm, then I shoved myself into her for the third time that morning and she gripped my arse cheeks and pushed me into her until she came again and again.

I think about those few minutes very often. I want them back; I want that sex. But I want to change the answers to my questions too. Me not sounding much more than a high school English teacher. Perhaps that was the moment that I lost her.

Memorandum to My Sons James and Matthew Larkin

On the subject of your conduct and deportment within the Colony of South Australia and not least regarding the furtherance of the fortunes of the Larkin family therein.

I take this opportunity to remind you both of the manifold responsibilities which you bear within the new colony of South Australia and to provide guidance on the action necessary to fulfill these responsibilities. I am referring to the procurement which I have made of a section of land to the North of Adelaide, further North, I believe, than most or any settlers have been obliged to proceed in order to secure their fortune. However the section North of the township of Clare, I understand, provide outstanding potential to procurement of fortune and to the benefit of mankind.

It is my understanding that settlement of these sections will be preceded by significant contact with groups of native peoples who have left the land uncultivated. That development and furtherance of the property under the general laws of Progress is perfectly clear. That the development and progress of the native peoples should follow in the wake of settlement is also perfectly clear. Those who do not resist settlement by a superior culture you will find are the more intelligent of what is generally a brutish and uncivilized race. My many years of experience in His Majesty's Navy have taught me one thing above all with regard to the maintenance of order among the lower orders both white and black. With crews scoured from prisons or pressed from the streets of dockside (Cheapside) and carrying our bounty of the most wretched humanity in Africa and the West Indies, there is above all the strictness of discipline to be observed, the abstinence from the abuse of alcohol and the regular reading from Our Lord's Bible. I am moved to write to you this week on engaging in conversation with a member of the Navy Club who has encapsulated the situation more succinctly than any man I ever heard: Religion, Temperance and Flogging. Deviate from these three golden rules and the inevitable result is oblivion. If you can remember only three words, remember these and etch them in your gunstock. Woe betide he who strays from the path.

I have heard from the Governor's wife a distressing description of unnecessary consort between new arrivals to the colony and the natives. Not only have some young men developed an unnatural fascination with the habits and morals of these people but that some have taken to spending their time in the pursuit of recording their primal culture in drawings and collections of such items as spears and shields. I cannot imagine that you, Matthew, would be bewitched by such pastimes as drawing, given that your efforts in this area were most puerile in their execution, in spite of certain sums spent in tutelage at my expense and at your insistence. Let us be clear that artistic endeavours are a matter which must be consigned to the past, an amusing footnote in the family history, if that. I am of the understanding that you are in regular contact with a man of uncertain background whose father is a disgraced sea captain of my small acquaintance, renowned as a rascal of drunken and immoral demeanour. It would be a shame of the highest proportion if you were led into your current condition by your association with these Cawthornes. It is imperative that you extricate yourself from further dealings with these forthwith and that with whatever delicacy or lack of it that you see fit. I will hear no more of your associating with them, nor with the natives.

The natives of the town may be tame enough to your eyes, as there is force sufficient in Adelaide to deter them from their natural proclivity for stealing. But their taint is one which will creep upon you by degrees and which must be avoided at any cost. You must at all times be aware of your place in God's Ladder of Civilisation and steel yourself against the terrible crimes of miscegenation. By whatever moment of temptation or physical weakness you may be beset, do not succumb but remain strong. I have no doubt that you now reside in a place abounding with ungodly fellows of little or no education; innumerable of such I have encountered on the lower decks of His Majesty's Navy and I know their ways of licence too well. You should not fall in with their coarse expressions and habits, but at all times deport yourself as a Christian gentleman should, even when you find yourself for a considerable period employed with those who are in your pay. The freedoms of colonial life are necessary to the establishment of property and of the family selection, and this freedom you must use wisely with regard to both the lower orders and the lower classes, and not foolishly.

Those natives of the bush regions are of the fallen nature of human kind. It is Progress and Invention that leads mankind up the spiritual ladder towards the Godhead. Whether the beneficial effects of Civilisation may yet influence the native to the path of righteousness and honesty is yet another matter. But my requirement of you both is that you maintain a demeanour of the most extreme wariness at all times. You must never let them get behind you for you will find them treacherous and cowardly. Keep them away from where you live, lest they covet and steal away your finery and your victuals. Keep your guns about you at all times. Find yourself two or three dogs and keep them close to your home; feed them yourself that they may know no other master.

The Governor's wife informs me that young men of good background have fallen by the wayside in the necessary freedoms afforded them in the colony. It is said that there is something in the climate of South Australia which metamorphoses the spirit of those who land there. I say poppycock and balderdash. Guard against this with all speed. In your early times you must live within your means, with a modesty of food and especially of drink. Whenever money is made you should respect a portion of this towards the establishment of some church or school, especially within the proximity of the family section when it is found. Guidance of education will be paramount towards the establishment of a secure and moral environment and should establish the name of Larkin as a leader in God's great enterprise in the Southern lands.

You, Matthew, and James, must join together and go upon the land which I have reserved for you some hundred and more miles North of Adelaide and which is named the Lingalee. There you will have such employment as will keep all hands engaged for years to come. I have remitted an amount of 1,000 pounds which will make you into bullock farming until such time as you are fit and able for the procurance of sheep from New South Wales. You shall engage yourselves with industry and steadiness. Your section will be such distance from Adelaide that your visits there will be few and restrained mainly for the purpose of business and for such social action as befits young gentlemen and which is initiated by the Governor and his immediate circle of associates. You will conduct yourselves in a manner of brotherly harmony, in agreement on all matters. However, in the unlikely event of any form of discord between the two it is my instruction that the view of James, in accordance with his position as the elder, shall prevail.

I have written to the Bank of South Australia regarding the sum abovementioned, which shall be available for you in one week. You shall purchase all that is necessary for your undertaking and proceed to the Lingalee forthwith.

May God be with you in this great undertaking, as I am sure He will. And may your own resolve remain strong, as it unquestionably must.

Your father

Admiral William Larkin

Billy

‘So what is this shrink telling you this week?’

I said it was mainly what I was telling her: that not only is there privilege in this world but people pretend that it doesn’t exist. That’s the bit that drives me nuts. People keep telling me that I’m crazy because I say it exists, where I’m saying they’re crazy because they are pretending it doesn’t.’

‘Exactly.’ Billy was in sombre mood that day. ‘Goes back a long way. We’ve had such a control of history that we’ve brushed out the nasty bits, so kids these days think it was all quite nice. They want to keep it all to themselves, and then they want to be perfect too.’

‘The whole society lives off the extermination of the native. And where do you think the capital came from to send the boats out here in the first place?’

I had to think about this one for a moment.

‘The slave trade, of course. Where do you think all the capital came from in the eighteen thirties? We set up a colony and everyone goes around with their chests stuck out because we don’t have any convicts here, but the capital upon which the whole thing was based came out of the slaves! Same thing all those sea captains in Jane Austen were doing when they shipped out from Digby or whatever port it was.’

‘Whitby.’

‘Yes, yes, of course. Age of romance, wasn’t it? My foot, it was.’

I hadn’t thought about it quite like that before. No-one ever talked about it, no-one except Billy, that is. It was the fact that was left out of the dialogue: excess capital in a wealthy, imperial

England. Add into the equation second or third sons who can't inherit the land of their fathers and throw them into a few ships and you have a colony. Capital that came from the slave trade. The mass-delusion societies create. It was like the way no-one ever talked about class here. No-one talked about capital, where it came from, what we did with it.

'And now all these young things come in here,' Billy's voice went on and I had to tune back to follow what he was saying or commit some kind of social blunder, 'young girls who wouldn't have been seen dead or alive in here twenty years ago, six months out of convent school, some of them still in it, wearing their Dr Marten's boots, talking loudly about how they're going to set up in some job in an NGO over Christmas: "Marvellous opportunity, look terrific on the CV." Overlooking completely the fact that they are up to their necks in the merde as well as everyone else, if not more!'

'Undoubtedly more.'

'*Undoubtedly* more.'

'Than average. Except for you, of course.'

'How do you mean?'

'Except for you. You're up to your eyebrows in it.'

'Yes, yes,' Billy cried out, picking up in spirits now as the argument got going, 'yes, I'm up to my eyebrows except that those eyebrows only come up as high as most people's bottoms. Ha Ha. Yes, but at least I'm not going around posing as some kind of Christ clone. I'm not pretending to be anything more or less than I am. I don't dress up in Dr Marten's boots and grow a ponytail and go down to Writers' Week and nod solemnly through the Kaurna greeting. You know, 'We acknowledge that the Kaurna people are the original custodians of this land' or whatever it is.'

'Yes, and we're not going to give any of it back.'

‘That’s right. Not going to give one fucking square inch of it back.’

Billy gobbled the last two inches of his pint in one greedy slurp. ‘Hmmp, not bad,’ he said, as if it jolly well ought to be, and that this pint had come up to the expected mark.

‘Mind you, Billy, I think you’d look nice in Dr. Marten’s.’

‘Ha, ha, er, yes,’ he said dubiously, then turned to the bar, ‘Er, two, two,’ he said, and thrust a red note forward, then came back to the window we usually sat by.

Couples passed on the way to the cinema that was buried away at the back of another lane. Billy watched them wistfully. Some were happy, comfortable, looking downwards as they walked, in their own hemisphere; some were distracted, hurrying, one man led his wife along with a gait that said ‘look, you’ve made us late and now we’ll miss the start if you don’t hurry.’

Their lives may not have been perfect, but they were all connected.

When I looked closely at Billy’s eyes there was something that was alive with agitation as he blinked three times and tipped his beer into his mouth – something that was yearning for all sorts of things beyond his reach. Knowing, well read, forthright Billy, who had the answer to all the problems. Little, round Billy with the permanent pint attachment, who had all the money and no woman to make happy, no life to enrich. His eyes were beautiful with a sadness and longing that I’d never seen before.

Stick Man Dead

Tonight Stephen came in, late. After the theatre. Jubilant, as if he'd just stepped off the stage of a Broadway smash instead of writing a review for the Messenger on some amateur hoot at The Royalty.

I'd been waiting for this a long time. Stephen is someone who matters. We talked. He drank Campari and tonic. He stood with his left hand on hip, cream linen suit jacket swept grandly behind him, his glass and its vermilion contents held near shoulder height and an expectant look painted on his face as if he were expecting to break into a gale of laughter at the very next thing that was said.

Whatever *was* said I don't remember exactly. It had been a long night for me. Saturday night. And I had approached Stephen in that eleven o'clock at night way that you have about you when you are already full, but still have some capacity ... if you know what I mean. After one minute Stephen, somehow managing not to alter that expression of impending hilarity, said, 'Thank you *so* much for the talk,' and turned to his people.

So much, was what he said. The other people. The real people. His people.

And left me standing there.

But at least he didn't pat me on the back, or on the head.

Fucking old queen.

No-one noticed the snub. Or at least they looked away when I turned to them, the other thirty people in the bar, pretended not to notice. I shoved my hand into my pocket and came up with the change I'd got from the first five rounds and plonked it all on the bar. I drank pale ale until there were not enough coins to pay for another. Don't ask me who I talked to or if I did at all.

Later, in the street, fat chicks in spaghetti-strapped dresses in the freezing night barged past me and stared. Some little bloke almost curled his lip, his eyes like beads of chocolate glass stuck in his pasty night time face.

I turned right at the end and past the Stag, the bollards and the looping rope of disco queue. I stared sullenly at the bulging Kentucky Fried sluts and their gormless bank teller dates. I crossed the breezy street to where a path wound away from the road, down through the park with the little lake. A possum scampered down from a tree right next to the road and looked directly at me standing there, watching me closely, as if assessing my intentions. Whether I would go on by the path next to the street, or plunge down into the dangerous late night park. After a couple of seconds he turned and gambolled down the slope towards the little toy lake that was there, as if he was leading me down that way. After a few of his funny little hops he stopped and looked back, blinking twice as if in salute of me. And for all my sins I did go down into that park; I followed the possum into the biting, crystal night, my senses all awake and sharp by now.

Half way down to the little toy lake the possum stopped dead still, and I, without considering any option in the matter, stopped as well and waited, as if through some telepathic secret. The possum looked back up toward the corner of the park. I followed his gaze and then I saw the Stick Man, coming out of the toilets that sat on top of the incline near the road. Who would use the toilets when there was all this space around and not a soul in the park? Only the Stick Man could be so regimented towards the mindless convention. He walked down past where I was, not on any path but ploughing through the dewy grass, head down as always, mumbling to himself, down in a direct line towards the little toy lake. The Stick Man stopped abruptly at the water's edge, where the grass became the concrete verge by which the boats would stop and children and their Daddies clamber off. The little lake that had been dug and concrete-filled to just such a depth that would allow little row boats out on Sundays. A man could stand up in it, water to his waist at most. My own Dad had rowed me there in different days.

The Stick Man stood looking deep into the water, just as he stared down at the footpaths he trod all day long. His arms immediately were slapped down by his side and his knees were all unbent

as if standing in some warped and peculiar parody of military attention. None of this hands in pockets business as anyone else would have done on such a night. And he mumbled to himself. I could not hear what he said but I could see his lips moving in the light that shone from the fluorescent glow outside the closed up kiosk there.

I was attracted closer. I wanted to hear for once whatever his nonsense was, but knew there was something beyond knowledge that drew me to him too. I went carefully down the sloping, un-stepped path that led down by the lake. It was cold and still; the road on all sides above head height at least eighty metres away as we stood motionless in the hollow; moonlight through the winter trees; light shone off the shallow lake. Still the Stick Man stared into the lake and mumbled his orison or sought forgiveness for his sins. Two metres of grass now stood between me and the Stick Man. I stepped off the path, to be closer to him. The Stick Man raised his head to level and after a moment's thought he turned to look in my direction. His dull, flat face was pointed at me, his twisted red mouth was open as it always was; half closed eyes told me nothing of who or what he may have recognised. He looked away suddenly, back to the water, head snapping like a man offended. He stood silently, no mumbling now, arms rigid by his sides. Traffic sounds in the distance; the possum sniffed its way around the park. The Stick Man and I not two metres apart. He stood as if waiting for judgement. It might have been a minute we stood there. The Stick Man waiting, now seeming to deride me for my lack of decision. He was waiting for the end.

‘Aaaaarrgghh,’ I cried and took two, three steps straight at him and crashed him in the back with the full force of my downturned shoulder.

Into the little toy lake he fell without resistance. His back caved in as if there were no flesh on his bones, and his arms were flung backward in a mime of helplessness. I thought for a moment of a chicken flapping its wings before settling. But momentum was such that he didn't settle at all but pitched grossly forward. His stomach hit the water first, with his face and arms flung carelessly outward, then his head turned down, into the still, dark waters as if it were home itself, his mouth open like some baby quail that sees its mother approaching from a distant fruit tree, its beak filled with half masticated pear or apple. Even so did the stick man's mouth open as his

face struck the water. He drank the waters as a thirsty man; a gurgle or two of bubbles and he was still. Suddenly still, arms out, face down.

The stick man lay face down in a two foot lake, splayed like a spatch-cooked chicken.

A brief ripple on the water then still again. Silence. The splash had amounted to little. There was no-one else around. What had he been doing there anyway? A biting cold night. A figure on Rundle Road was walking away, up, on the road, unconcerned, one hundred metres away, shoulders hunched, hands down in overcoat pockets. Too far to have heard. But the next person coming through the path as I had just done would see.

I could fish him out and say that I had found him. No. Christ! Too cold anyway. Fuck that, freezing. He didn't even struggle, over so quickly. Face down. Drank the water. Like he wanted it.

Feet start moving, as if independently, by their own reasoning. Suddenly head is very clear; these few minutes I will remember for the rest of my life. My feet are right; must get away. No-one watching. Start to move faster. Small rose garden left and right, solid path between. Good of the authorities to put this here for me. What on earth was I doing down there anyway. What was *he* doing down there? Staring at the water. Like an idiot. The idiot that he is. Was. I won't see him again. Never, never, never. What was he doing down there. Fool.

Up to Dequetteville Tce. Cars! Not too many. Feet break into run. Dodge through traffic. No problem. Feet are really going now. Up Capper Street. Shouldn't run, shouldn't run, shouldn't run, don't run! What a giveaway. Must stay calm. Walk! Walk! Slow down, man.

Not too quickly! That's better. Keep going. Old school on the right is dark and gothic against this cobalt winter night time sky. Final leaves of autumn whisk around the plane tree street. Council homes on the left, odd juxtaposition. Always thought so. Still, not bad places. Not bad at all. Had a thing with a girl in there once; went on for months, that did. Poppy.

Poppy, Poppy, Poppy. I left you, didn't I. My sins come flooding back.

Stick man gone: dead. Surely someone would have pulled him out by now. Maybe he was still alive.

And as I walked furiously on I saw something of the way loneliness creeps without notice upon us. I saw that one single day is to appearances alike the one that went before, but cannot be the same for in time something has grown that has replaced what was there before and we are not the same. That the uninhabited parts of us grow amorphously and without notice, the way cracks appear in walls in time. And I saw that the sociability of people was so much wall paper and that the whole gone world was forlorn and friendless.

Keep going this way. Up side streets to the Alma, then sharp left over Magill Road. That'll confuse them. Surely someone would have pulled him out by now. He might still be breathing. No, it's not like that. He received the waters like a man released, as if breathing was the very trick of life that reminded him each day of his own concealment and exclusion. Stick Man dead.

Stick Man dead.

Fool.

Fireman

When we all left school in the early nineteen seventies the outlook of young people on life was different to the way it seems to be now. A more righteous way of living had been revealed and it was so simple to grasp that we stood in wonder of all those who didn't get it. The world was never going back to the dog eat dog ways of business in the nineteen sixties, the corruption of Nixon and Watergate was a flagfall on the old times; a new style of government here was a natural part of the whole process.

We knew enough about religions to know that no single one of them could possibly be all true and that even if there was a god he or she would judge us well because we were living in the right way. And even if there wasn't a god, well, we were still living in the right way, weren't we. Our very virtues would be their own reward. We were puzzled by the squares who went off to work each day at the bank. Dressed in their body shirts and wide ties and whatever the latest fashion was, and who filled up the discos on Saturday nights and did all the dances that were imported from American films: the Fever and the good-girl watered down 1950s grease-ball thing. Everything that happened was a tepid reprise of something that had gone before.

And on this subject, there is a moment in the film *The Graduate* where the Dustin Hoffman character is wandering lonely and confused through the graduation party that his father has thrown for him and an old friend of the family takes him aside to give him just one word of advice as sets out on the road of life. This could be it, thinks Dustin, the gem that will make this all more meaningful.

'Plastics' says the family friend. Get into plastics.

Well, that family friend was right in *his* way; plastics took off in a colossal manner. But it wasn't the kind of advice that Dustin was looking for and the crowd that I might once have thought was my generation had just the kind of antidote for that kind of advice.

Dustin should have joined us.

Because we were different. We had been steeped in the authentic voices of the time or of decades before that had influenced the stars of our own day. But we didn't think of them as stars; they were beyond that whole system, man. We consumed the novels of Jack Kerouac, held Dostoyevski in awe and thought Turgenev was worth reading too. We listened to the sounds of Bob Dylan and The Rolling Stones. Some of us even winkled out old Leadbelly albums from the second hand record stores that were still there in Rundle Street before the rent lifts of the eighties drove them out of business. We immersed ourselves in the feel of the Midnight Special the way it was before Credence got hold of it: the Golden Gate Quartet crooning away behind the strident Leadbelly.

I still have the records of course, and a player with a needle that still cranks out a noise. It's an irony that so many of the CDs I've bought that cover much of the same ground and won't play any more, or stop in the middle of a song; the new technology conked out before the one it replaced, long live the new tech. Sometimes I feel good when I put on the old vinyls that just keep going around and around, the little scratches that are in the same places they have been for decades remind me of what we are all like.

I only mention all this because it's been brought back to me so vividly in the last few days. Normally my thoughts on the changing of the times are clanking around somewhere in the back of my mind and it needs something to happen to make it fresh and urgent; just like anything else does I suppose, that lives in the half remembered world of the past.

I bumped into someone a week or so ago, an old friend of sorts who I haven't been in contact with for years. The sort you spot in the street and wonder if you should stop and talk or whether you would be best to look the other way and walk on by. You know pretty much the way the person has turned out and there are probably pretty good reasons you are not great friends anymore. So stopping to talk is going to be just a waste of ten minutes or so, catching up on news of people you really don't care about any more. It's one of those philosophical conundrums that help to fill up our days.

But this day there was no question about it. He had seen me first and saluted enthusiastically, like we were old friends, which is maybe the way things were if you stretched them into a social nicety. He suggested having a drink. We were right outside the King's Head Hotel and they have a reasonable little lounge and it was a Friday afternoon and it was after four, so it hardly seemed an offer I could refuse on any reasonable grounds.

He had broken up with Lucy and that explained his eagerness to make friends again. Lucy had always been brittle and winning, her head ticking like an alarm clock. They had drifted away from the rest of our group after the two of them got together. New friends appeared in his world. It might have been something to do with the night we all went back to her place, to the family room at the back of the house. I dimly remember a pool out back with curved sides, like a kidney shape or something like that. But it was winter time and a cold night at that so we were for the inside. Someone fished out the soundtrack of the film *Borsalino* and slipped on the tango scene. I can't remember if I was playing Jean-Paul Belmondo or Alain Delon, but as then-close-friend Colin and I turned for our third run of the room somehow the longneck of Southwark which had been held in our clasped-together leading hands slipped out and made a bit of a broken-glass-and-foaming-beer type mess on the parquetry. We didn't see much of them after that.

It didn't take long for the conversation to turn to the old crowd. James had some time before also bumped into the very same Colin who had once been my tango partner. James had received the latest news on Colin's not very impressive progress through life. A rented flat in some block at Glenelg, doing odd jobs and mowing lawns, all with the clouded eyes of the life-time dope smoker.

I wasn't that surprised to hear it. If Colin had made it big in something that would have been the real talking point. One night in 1972 we were coming home from some party, driving down the Anzac Highway. Who knows what we had been doing. We'd finished school and done a year at university and for various reasons neither of us had done so brilliantly that we were anxious to race back there. We were both full of the idea that after thirteen straight years of student life we

were just about over it. It was late February and the air was still warm at two o'clock in the morning. There were just two weeks left before resuming for year number fourteen.

'I've got fifty dollars sitting at home,' I ventured. Fifty dollars was quite a bit of money in those days; I'd been cutting grapes at Hamilton's vineyard for three weeks solid.

'Huh,' he grinned. 'I've got fifty bucks from mowing lawns with JD.' The holiday job that became a career.

'Fuck it, let's go,' I said. No further word needed to be said about where. Melbourne. The nearest, biggest city within our sights.

His grinning face looked down at the passenger's side dashboard and his head shook from side to side as I waited for his pronouncement.

'Well, fuck it. Let's go.'

I'd three quarters expected him to say no, but maybe the voice of Kerouac was calling that night.

'I'll drop you off at your joint. Grab your dosh and a couple of blankets and I'll be back in ten minutes with mine.' If we'd been kids doing this thirty years later we would have exchanged high fives or whooped like Homer Simpson, but coming from different cultural times as we were we simply nursed our private, excited thoughts and planned how we would both get into our houses and out again with supplies without waking any parents.

I did wake my brother to tell him I was off.

'How long for?'

'Maybe a week, maybe a year.'

‘Hmmm, orright,’ he managed as his head rolled back onto its pillow and his eyes closed again.

And away Colin and I drove in the middle of the night; our lives had begun.

*

First day in Melbourne we saw a sign outside the Flinders Street station that said, ‘Workers Wanted’: for loading up trains at the goods yard down the other end of the block that was the city square of Melbourne. So we slept in the car again and lined up at eight in the morning like the man said. We both were hired for casual pay by the day and then we got a couple of rooms in some house from the notice boards at the university. The idea was to build up some more cash from the job at the goods and then off to Tasmania to hitch around before coming back to load up some more train trucks and head off north for the winter. In three days we were set with a job and a place and a plan.

Except for one thing. Along with the sign saying ‘Workers Wanted’ there was another one that said ‘Fireman Wanted.’ Now we’re not talking about blokes who go around with funny hats and huge hoses and who win medals for bravery every once in a while. We’re talking an archaic term that comes from guys who used to load wood up into the engines of trains when they were fired up that way. But now it meant the job of a driver’s off-sider. So if the driver has a heart attack or keels over in some other unexpected way there’s still someone there to halt the ship and raise the alarm.

The romance of the train. Bob Dylan sang about flaggin’ down the Double E. Jimmy Rodgers was the yodeling brakeman who became too sickly to work but even as a boy he’d taken his guitar with him each day and remembered every story and poly-glottal song that any tough old bastard ever growled out at smoko. Kerouac was full of hopping freighters for that easy section of the ride to Frisco; the middle class dreamer with the workers’ soul. I laughed years later when I saw a Pee Wee Herman film where he too hops a freighter and runs into a rustic bum; they sing raucously along to *She’ll be comin’ round the mountain*. By the third song Pee Wee is asleep with boredom.

That about sums it up. Colin's job was not just a job, it was also an apprenticeship: five days a week, forty eight weeks a year. End of travelling.

He did nearly the whole apprenticeship before he realised he couldn't take it any more. It turned out to be the dullest, most repetitive job, numbing to both mind and digits. He told me years later of the freezing winds, of adjusting taps and levers with fingers almost devoid of sensation, of sticking the face out into the slipstream to read the signs that might be the difference between life and death.

Adventure is a matter of perception; it lives in our minds. Like pleasure, we know from experience that something is going to be pleasurable and so we may live for that thing as the one and only thing that brings our lives up from the mundane and banal. But sometimes, more often than we would like to admit, we are *told* that something is going to be pleasurable and so we find it to be pleasurable, whether it would have been pleasurable had we been told it would be or not, if you understand my meaning.

*

'And so with the life of trains,' James agreed with me. 'We are told it will be romantic eh, and it takes us three and a half years to realize that it's not.' He sniggered for the foolishness of our mutual friend.

'He was never going to amount to anything, though,' he went on.

The pub was beginning to fill up with the Friday night crowd. Lawyer blokes with ruddy cheeks and black gowns over their shoulders were tucking into red wines in glasses the size of vats, celebrating some win or maybe just another productive week. Spivvy law clerks with skinny ties drifted from the bar to the cocktail lounge and back again. The whole trial of life was in motion. I wondered about what it meant to amount to something.

‘How’s life for yourself, then.’

‘Ah, good, good,’ he said with vacant eyes. ‘Work’s firing along; some of the boys’ll be along in a minute.’

Of course. When I’d bumped into him in the street he’d been half an hour early for his piss-up with the boys from the firm. No wonder he’d been so friendly; couldn’t handle hanging around that long on his own. I drained my glass.

‘So how’s Lucy?’

‘I told you. We broke up.’

‘You know what I mean.’ He still looked mystified. ‘Ever been told something’s going to be romantic and then find out it’s not?’

Signs of understanding appeared in his face. ‘You always were a fucking smartarse prick.’

I picked up my market bags. As I was rising two blokes in suits bowled in all red faced and shiny, looked around for a second then spotted us and swung straight over. James broke into smiles and there were grins and shoulder pats all round.

I had to be introduced, whether I was leaving or not. ‘An old mate of mine from school,’ he said. ‘We just bumped into each other in the street,’ he said by way of explaining my casual dress, my casual attitude, above all that he’d not arranged to meet me. He patted me on the shoulder.

‘Actually I’m just a smartarse prick,’ I said, looking him right in the eyes. The lawyers all laughed heartily, after all it was Friday night and any excuse will do to further the appearance of good fellowship.

‘A standing joke, from long ago,’ was what I heard him say as I passed through the door, not looking back.

The Glass Harpoon

Poppy Larkin arrived first for lunch and took a table to wait for her cousin Jemima. Don Giovanni's was a little haven, just up the street from uni for Jem and a walk in from Gilberton for Pop. The curtain-darkened windows closed out the street and the red and white checked tablecloths topped with raffia-covered chianti bottles took you away from everything for a while; waiters even talked with Italian accents.

Presently Jemima bustled in, always late but never by more than twelve minutes.

'What have you come up with now?' said Poppy. 'And what is this surprise you have for me?'

'One of the perquisites of a researcher's life, this.'

'Perquisites, eh. You couldn't just have perks like anyone else.'

'Indeed, no.'

'But you have perked up our Larkincestor from the grave, I presume.'

'In the grave he remains but from the librarian's vault he is resurrected for all time.'

'So you found him?'

'Have I ever.'

'I'm all ears, anticipation and dutiful attention.'

Jemima held up a large, bound volume, well-preserved for its hundred and thirty years and opened it to the frontispiece: *The Diarium of Matthew Larkin*. Poppy's eyes opened wide in genuine awe.

'So this is it.'

'It really exists. I shouldn't be bringing it out here, so just a tiny peek before lunch. Wouldn't want salami stains on the old boy's confessions anyway; he'd roll over in his mausoleum.'

'My only God,' Poppy's mouth was open and she held out her hands, 'may I hold the baby?'

'Ten seconds.'

A waiter came to the table. 'Two Rieslings,' said Jemima. As the waiter nodded and took the list from her she said, 'Do you ever get the Larkin Estate in? The '72 is *such* a winner.'

'Aaah,' the waiter made a thoughtful face and drew out this syllable as if he was making a real effort to trace through his memory bank for the last time they'd had the Larkin.

'Not enough places stock it,' said Jemima. The waiter nodded and was relieved that this sentence seemed a concession of defeat on part of the enquirer.

'Sometime soon, maybe,' she closed.

'Poor man, you are cheeky,' said Poppy as the waiter left. She flicked through the pages as one does. She pressed it to her cheek to smell the dusty age of the thing but was surprised at how clean it was.

'Time's up,' said Jemima.

'Well preserved.' Poppy passed the book back across the table.

‘Better than *he* was at the end.’

‘But really, it’s like brand new. Looks like it’s been in a plastic bag for a hundred years.’

‘It has, sort of. I don’t think a single person has looked at it. Until now.’

Poppy’s eyes widened again. ‘There isn’t something shocking is there? Oh, please let there be.’

Jemima pulled a wad of photocopied pages from her bag. ‘For you. Matty Larkin’s greatest hits. Edited highlights; if you want the lot one day we’ll see what we can do.’

‘Oh my god,’ said Poppy with her mouth wide open and her eyes fell directly on to the first words on the page before her. ‘I can’t help wondering if there’s something about me in it.’

‘You sausage. You’re not born for a hundred and twenty years.’

‘I know, logically, that’s true. But still ...’ The waiter brought their Clare Valley Rieslings, she took a solid slurp and fell to reading.

‘You go ahead, Pops, I have a call to make anyway.’

Jemima Larkin fished about for a twenty cent piece and went to the phone that was squeezed between the counter and the Rundle Street window. When she returned fifteen minutes later Poppy was looking up for the first time from her reading.

‘It seems our ancestor was rather entranced by the native. That is somewhat endearing, I must say.’

‘I think I know where you’re up to. *Starts off* nicely doesn’t he.’

‘Uh oh.’

‘So, somewhat endearing is the term I’d give it.’

‘Uh oh.’

‘Read on. I wonder what he might have been like without the Admiral. Have you read that one yet? Don’t worry about me, I’ll go over to the counter to order, seeing these waiters are so slack. There’s some juicy stuff in there.’

As she approached the bar waiters chatting over a coffee sprang to their feet, suave and cool, killing Jemima with attention, apologies lush with irony. When she returned to the table Poppy was reading with mouth open, total focus, eyes only inches from the page in a pantomime of total attention. She held a bread roll in one hand, suspended a couple of inches from the table as if she wanted to eat but could not spare the attention from her reading. She looked up at Jemima and said just two words.

‘Admiral. Unbelievable.’

When she had finished she looked up.

‘Crikey,’ was all the comment she could make. She stared back down at the page and read the last two paragraphs over again. ‘Hoist by his own petard.’

‘He was somewhat breeched, yes.’

‘A spear in the shoulder. What irony, Jem. A glass spear head. They worked for the whites to get glass things, then filed them down into spear heads and threw them back at them.’

‘Eventually they did. When they’d had enough of them.’

‘The Glass Harpoon he called it. Still, not such a bad recompense for introducing smallpox, murder, syphilis.’

‘You left off the rape.’

‘Oh, yes, that too.’ Then, after a moment she collected her thoughts, ‘He doesn’t sound the type though, our Matthew, not for that kind of thing; there is still some of that godliness in him somewhere.’

‘Yes, it wasn’t exactly rape he was into.’

‘But ...’

‘*Rape* he wasn’t into.’

‘Meaning?’

‘We might have some distant cousins somewhere.’

‘My god.’

‘He had a number of ‘relationships’ later in life. So, not exactly rape.’

‘My god. How ... exciting. I suppose.’ She thought of all the pale skinned Aborigines she had seen in the main street of Clare, working in the fields on the property, and mustering on stations further north. She wondered for a moment what was the meaning of blood relation, and how much of this was simply placed in the head, a part of culture. Who really means anything to us, except the people we grow up with – the people we know. And even then, how well do we know them? How do we know what’s really inside their heads? She looked over at her cousin, holding their ancestor’s confession like some kind of Academy Award.

‘What are you going to do with it?’

Jemima’s eyes gleamed. ‘PhD. Top grade for sure, for absolute sure now. Poppy, my absolute love ...’ she clasped the Diarium of Matthew Larkin in front of her and her eyes gleamed. ‘This will be published. I will be the first woman professor of the department! Phoebe Ennis will be dust in my wake!’

‘Who is Phoebe Ennis.’

‘I told you, one of the other candidates who thinks she is *so* good.’

Poppy did vaguely remember some story; she had tried to forget.

‘So, after all that, how did he end up?’

‘Oh, he recovered from his wound, all right. Tough bugger. You can’t keep a good man down for long. Went on to bigger and better things.’

‘Do tell.’

‘He set up a committee to quell ‘Native Aggressions on the Murray.’’ Jemima could hardly keep the excitement from her voice.

‘You jest.’

‘I jest not. They went around scoring subscriptions from everyone concerned who might be overlanding stock from New South Wales. In their travels they even raised dosh from people who had nothing to gain directly from such an enterprise.’

‘To do what?’

‘To finance protection raids along the river.’

‘Pre-emptive strikes?’

‘To punish ‘the outrages committed on their countrymen and to restore to them their property’.’

‘Their precious property.’

‘Our property, darling.’

‘Shooting parties,’ said Poppy. There had been talk among the men, up at Lingalee, after long lunches and dinners, in her childhood visits to the station, over the reds and the ports, of outings into the bush by men of the district in days long gone. Jemima stared evenly at the table cloth but a triumphant half smile could not be banished from her lips and made Poppy’s expression change.

‘Oh no, he didn’t go back! He, himself.’

‘Every chance he got.’

Poppy picked up her copy of Matthew Larkin’s Diarium and held in two hands in front of her.

‘You bastard.’

‘He formed the committee, raised the money and led the charge. Started referring to his shoulder as his ‘war wound’.’

‘So he was shagging them at home and shooting them on the frontier.’

‘Not the same sex though I’d imagine, unless there was something he was leaving out of this.’
She smacked the volume in her bag with hearty familiarity. ‘Eventually the Protector of
Aborigines came out to see what was going on.’

‘My god, of course. We had one of those, didn’t we.’

‘Yes, they toddled out every once in a while when things got really bad. He set about finding a
place to site a ‘native location’.’

‘Location?’

‘Where Aborigines, let’s see, I copied that bit, ‘could be congregated and rations passed out to
them’. That’s the way it reads in here.’

‘A concentration camp.’

‘We didn’t call them that until the Boer War; a reservation. Kind of a place reserved for them, as
it were.’ Poppy thought Jemima must know the correct terms as she was the one doing the thesis.
‘At least it kept them alive.’

‘What are you having for lunch?’

‘Marinara.’

‘Me too.’

‘And Riesling.’

‘Share bottle.’

‘Sounds fair.’

‘I’ll order.’

‘But you haven’t seen your surprise yet,’ said Jemima, dipping into her bag once more.

‘You mean, that wasn’t it?’ Poppy nodded at the manuscript on the table.

‘Not quite.’ From her bag she produced a wad of tissue paper, placed it on the table and gently prised it open with her fingers. She smoothed the paper flat and there glinted the glass harpoon, three inches or so of spear still bound to it with string and gum. Poppy picked it up in her fingers and held it to the light. Even in the noise and all the distractions of the restaurant she was struck by the extraordinary precision and delicacy with which its three barbs were cut. She held it up to the fluorescent wand in the dull lunchtime restaurant but the light did not cut from the harpoon in the way she had read in her ancestor’s story. Without a word to her cousin she walked out past the lounging waiters, onto the edge of Rundle Street, where the cars passed. She held the glass harpoon up to the cloudless midday sky and marvelled at the way the sun was caught on its tines; for minutes she held it up, watching the light prickling, flicking capriciously about, unable to be predicted, impossible to harness, sparkling the eye then disappearing. She was captivated by the strange magic that poured from it and seemed to be filling her with some vibrant glow that she had never felt before, some spirit that entered her from those knife sharp edges and that she knew was her, and would remain so for ever and ever.

Return of the Stick Man

I saw the Stick Man today.

Really, to emphasise the importance of this statement it should be followed by a lengthy pause, some kind of serious blank on the paper about a page and a half long, to make a representation of the shock that this should have been.

Because he was killed a week before. And this isn't going to be one of those false endings where the pushed guy goes into the lake, looks as dead as he can get, but of course the pusher has left the scene, like the villains always did in the *Batman* series, leaving just enough time for a rescuer to arrive or for the pushee to winkle some nifty solution from his utility belt. When I ran from the scene he looked dead; he stayed dead.

People talked about it. Someone pushed him into the little boat lake down in the park at the end of Rundle Street. Or else he jumped. How could he not stand up in two foot of water? That was what people were asking. Someone must have held him down. And you would, wouldn't you. Ask that, I mean. At least that's what they started asking after TV news cameras and those after-the-news type 'current affairs' inquests got through with him and Charlie The Stick Man became the most famous person in the city for days. *Did he jump or was he pushed?* And then there was: *'Was he the loneliest man alive? The last days of Charlie Foster.* He was the man who walked the parklands and the streets of the city of Adelaide. Who never asked for money but accepted it if it was given to him. Who had been a physics student at the university until a freak accident on the football field left him the way he was. The club still looked after him, a little bit. Charlie was well known around the town, a noted eccentric.' These were the things we heard. We, the community - the things we needed to know about. The attention he received. The posthumous fame he received, and I gave it to him. It was me who gave him the kind of fame that I deserved, and I was left to look on in silence.

Charlie.

Foster. I never knew his name before. His second name, family name. It made him seem more real to me, like he had parents and uncles and aunties. Friends? He was a place and a continuum. He wasn't just an idea I'd had that had burned away inside me for twenty years and that I'd had to do something about to finish it.

There was a crime scene; I saw it all as I walked the city at first light. Yellow tape on sticks made a new home for Charlie for fifty metres in each way about. A handful of people stood around the outside of the scene, looking at what was nothing more than a patch of earth with grass and air. Staring at some idea of death, or celebrity; or because something had happened here that became proof of our own existence. The strong had subsumed the weak, and some ancient truth had been upheld that we go none such but for the grace of god or with the approval tacit or stated of the powers that dwell in places high.

Only the possum took no notice, hopping as he always did beneath the radar of the tape, the police, and their forensic kind of truth.

I walked through, into The Street for breakfast, for something to do. No good in hanging about. I usually didn't make it until at least ten o'clock; the place was eerie at six thirty: chilly, breezy, most places were shut. I walked all the way up to Hungry Jack's. I asked for a coffee and whatever the smallest thing was to eat.

'Coffee, awesome,' said the lad on duty, and set about preparing a fresh pot. He made me smile with the personality he put into every detail of his task; new on the job and the graveyard shift didn't faze him none. Everything seemed to suit him so well and he sang as he went about the coffee job.

I took one bite of my junior burger before eating a little of the meat then pushing it away. The coffee was hot at least.

Back out in the street there were stirrings of humanity. Sprightly sixty year old apartment dwellers up for their constitutional and a bottle of milk from the seven eleven. Little white dogs on leads scampered busily around the ankles of their mistresses, growling and yapping low in play as those who passed, anxious for their morning crap.

I'd had a lot to drink that night and I hadn't slept and I was conscious of the way I looked among these shining citizens, but no-one seemed to mind me or even notice. I guess I had at least been home, laid down and spent some time staring into the darkness of my room, at the crack in the ceiling that I knew was there but couldn't see.

I walked away down Frome Road, under the rustling plane trees that meet over head like sentinels with their arms outstretched, presenting arms. Through Botanic Park and past the zoo where there were lions but you wouldn't know it for their voices were silent. Birds awoke in trees and were saluting their neighbours. The smells of excrement followed me down the twisting path: pandas, giraffes and bandicoots just the other side of the fence. Across Hackney Road without a car in sight and past the pub and back into the treed suburbs of privilege and the cold draughts of their sunless streets.

In which I lived.

Rented.

It took me three days to go back to the pub. What I did in those three days I can't remember now. But in the pub there must have been some talk because even on the Wednesday some bloke who'd been interstate came in and asked about it. It seemed I'd made the national news.

'Yeah, just down 'ere,' the barman showed the way, his arm outstretched and finger bent as if it could reach all the way to the end of the street, around the corner at the Stag, across the road, past the possum's tree and down the path and point itself into the still, crystal lake.

Another three days after that, on the Saturday night, our one week anniversary, he came in. It was the quiet time around seven thirty, when the cinemas were still full, the afternoon people had long gone home and the younger crowd had not yet surfaced.

He came in like he sometimes did. His hands flopped down at his sides; a dull expression, eyes half open. Instead of standing at the bar and putting his couple of gold coins on the counter he walked up to my place. Without expression he said, 'Shall we go out the back.'

'I'll get you one.' I signalled for a small beer.

I followed him to the place out there; a brick paved courtyard with the hanging ferns and Perspex roof. It was chilly. Charlie was in his Hawaiian shirt and thin cotton pants, like a man on holiday.

'I come back to thank you for your help. I think I needed it.'

'I'm glad you came.'

'The possum told me to go home and don't worry about it. I knew you were going to help. I think the possum's pissed off. Don't go down there for a few days.'

I told him I surely would not.

'Possum tries to play it cool,' Charlie looked at me, 'but he's really wired.'

Charlie Foster sat there for a few moments, nodding his head every so often, like a man for whom things have worked out well, but he's still trying to work out the way that it has all happened.

Then he stood up in his place, bolt upright.

'That's enough.'

I followed him back into the bar. I stopped at my place and he walked on, through the bar to the corner door and out into the street without looking around.

Billy Steps In

‘I’ve done some pretty crazy things.’

‘Don’t tell me that shrink’s been at you again. You’re no more nuts than I am.’

‘Billy, when you say things like that sometimes I’m not sure exactly what you mean.’

‘Take it any way you want. You are probably the sanest person in this pub.’

I looked up the length of the bar. At the end, near the street, a big man in his thirties with a bushie hat, wild eyes and a huge red beard looked expectantly down at us as if he were ready to leap on someone for conversation. A couple of sickly looking girls with sleep in their eyes were rolling ciggies at the bar. An old bloke with a large port sat further up in a reminder of what you might have seen in this place twenty five years before, when the fruit and vegetable markets were still in swing.

‘Does the barman count?’

Billy looked around to check who was on duty. ‘You’re saner than him anyway.’

‘Thanks.’

Billy’s gaze focused on the other side of the side window at The Exeter, where people sat in small groups at tables and people passed by in pairs. It was almost as if he were making a decision on something.

‘We’re almost related now, you know,’ he said at last, and hesitated again, his mouth pursing up and down. ‘Or we should be,’ he finished. This was as eloquent as Billy ever was when it came to personal matters.

I could think of nothing to say for a moment, so shocked was I. A space of silence developed between us.

‘She liked you,’ he said quickly, as if he’d thought, it’s true so I might as well say it. And that would end the talk, and also justify everything he had said.

‘I did something pretty bad to her once. At least I think it was pretty bad. On the other hand the person may have wanted it to happen. I’m sure the person wanted it to happen. And that I was just there. And then I wasn’t there, if you know what I mean. And that might really have been the best thing for her.’

And there I was talking about Poppy Larkin as ‘the person’, trying to seem objective, as if I had been doing her a favour.

‘And you decide what’s the best thing for her, do you?’

‘Sometimes you do,’ I replied, hopeful that my hideous attempt at paternalistic objectivity could still hold some credibility.

‘She’s my family,’ said Billy. ‘She’s the only decent one in it.’

He looked away, out the window at couples going down the lane towards the cinema, some holding hands, some hurrying, some just comfortable together.

‘Hrrmph. And this thing you did, is it in the past, the present or in the future?’

I sensed a trick question, and from many people it might have been one. But from Billy, for whom all things were self-evident, I could see that it was no more than the question it appeared on the surface to be.

‘Well, it’s in the past.’

‘Good. And as long as we keep it there, we should experience little problem with it; time to put it away. Speaking of which ...’ He upended his glass and tipped the last portion of ale down his ever greedy throat and smacked his lips, nodding for me to do the same.

I stood next to him at the bar while he ordered. It was difficult for him to speak of personal things. For all his ebullience, there was so much locked up inside him. I remembered that seven years before this he had told me that his older sister was a hard woman, and very conservative. I took that to mean that she disapproved of Billy in every way, and that she might be one of the reasons he kept to the city now. No other drop from his personal life had Billy ever squeezed out.

We drank in silence for the first time ever. Billy’s few sentences had exhausted and disturbed him.

‘I ...’ I stopped there, no easier for me to go to that place inside than it had been for Billy. ‘I’m not really worthy of her.’

‘Worthy! Tell her that.’

‘I’m supposed to be an artist and I haven’t had an exhibition in twelve years.’

‘Have you been working?’

‘Of course, always.’

‘Your work’s as good as the crap you get in most places isn’t it?’

‘Better, I reckon.’

‘Well, let’s have an exhibition then.’ Billy brightened so quickly, his face crinkled up in delight, glad of a diversion that would take him from the dark personal world. Suddenly he could have a project. And I saw for a moment the aimless loneliness of wealth. Of Billy Larkin toddling from pub to pub, of Poppy’s friends with lunch and shopping and affairs with tennis coaches – the endless circular motion.

‘Yes,’ cried Billy. ‘We’ll do an exhibition. Ha, ha. Poppy will love it.’

‘Not so simple, Billy.’

‘Why I saw Callum not ninety minutes ago, going through to lunch.’

‘Callum? Callum Prescott?’

‘Yes, we were at Geelong together.’

‘You were at school with Callum Prescott?’

‘Of course, known him since I was eleven years old.’

‘You never said ...’

Without answering Billy trotted off, pint still in hand, carrying that distracted but purposeful, half drunk grimace with him. I could see him in my mind, paying his respects to Callum and guests in his gruff, abrupt way, then getting straight to the point. Perhaps Callum was in that post-prandial ‘whatever you say old boy’ condition. I was nervous as I waited, not for talking to Callum, but that it might actually happen. Were my pictures really good? Had I been kidding myself all these years? Would I need to do some more?

‘Ah, here he is!’ Callum, a little flushed from lunch, beaming though, happy.

‘Sorry to drag you away from lunch,’ I managed.

‘Not in the least, delighted. Let me get you one. Three pints of sparkling ale, please.’

‘I guzzled the last third of the one I had. ‘That’s the lad,’ said Callum. ‘Been a while,’ he went on.

‘Hasn’t it though,’ was the best I could do, gasping for wind after my little skull of quite strong beer.

‘Been making quite a name for yourself.’

I was wary. ‘Wasn’t aware.’

‘Yes, yes, up to some marvellous antics.’

“I have?”

If the blood didn’t drain from me, it should have. A lightning bolt did go down my spine. ‘Yes, making some magnificent speeches late at night in this bar. I believe you are quite an orator when the spirit is upon you. Dishevelled appearances at galleries, you have taken the artist rascalion thing to new heights.’ I could barely breathe let alone speak, with anticipation of what was going to happen to me. Two of the gods, the people who mattered, were before me and my fate had been decided, and I had not been told of it yet.

‘And then there have been sightings in Rymill Park, talking to possums, imagining all kinds of things. We can use that. Funny I never put two and two together before, but as soon as Billy mentioned you needed an exhibition, the whole thing clicked into place.’

‘It did?’

‘Yes, we haven’t had a mad artist in this town for twenty years. Did quite nicely out of the last one. We’ll get the newspaper down for a story and photo shoot. Tell them about your adventures in the park.’

I had blotted them from my mind. ‘You know more about them than I do.’

‘In that case *I’ll* tell them. Oh, and grow a moustache, like that Spanish fellow.’

‘Dali?’

‘The one. You can do that bug-eyed stare thing. The one that shows the world that you’re half crazy.’ I did a Dali stare.

‘Marvellous,’ said Billy, chuckling into his beer.

‘Fabulous,’ said Callum, ‘we’ll have this one skun in no time. Have the work ready to show in two months time.’

‘I have plenty of pictures. Don’t know if they are in the right style or not though.’

‘The more things change the more they remain the same. Marvellous.’

‘Marvellous,’ said Billy.

‘Oh and I think we need to zip up the name a bit.’

‘Oh yes, the name.’

‘No-one’s ever sure how to pronounce it.’

‘As in Owen.’

‘Yes, I know that, but how many others do?’

‘Yes, it’s the confusion over the E. thing.’

‘Hmmm ...’

‘But that’s good,’ cried Billy, a eureka look on his face.

Callum and I looked at him. ‘What’s good?’ one of us said.

‘Just use your initial,’ cried Billy.

‘Eh?’

‘Not A., E. You are The Artist E.’ he confirmed.

‘Extraordinary,’ cried Callum, and he raised his pint of ale.

‘Marvellous,’ said the artist E. raising his.

We all raised our glasses and drank to the glory of E.

I left them ordering at the bar and went through the corner door into the street. The sun was out; the days were getting longer.

I took the sunny side, over to the book shop, past the chocolate shop that did wicked drinks that I’d never tried, but had only watched people through the window. I must take Poppy to try something. Noodle bars flashed by, all good and, considering the location, quite cheap. Then the Argentinian restaurant that grilled enormous steaks - The Stag I didn’t even see. Across East

Terrace and down into the park I plunged. There was no possum out today. People were still passing through on their way home from work.

I stopped at the lake and looked into it, but only for a second. I remembered Charlie the Stick Man, Charlie Foster, who'd waited for me there. Who had made a little glance over his shoulder at me as I hesitated, whom I had loathed for so many years. Who may have been a power beyond my knowing. My feet were moving of their own accord, not unlike the way they had on that other night. And it felt good to be so abandoned. But this time I knew where they were going and that felt good as well.

Across the terrace and into Kent Town. It must have taken seven minutes but felt like two, so quickly did everything seem to happen. I stopped outside the house of Poppy Larkin and watched it for a while. Nothing moved; there was no light. It was late afternoon now and I thought I saw a wisp of smoke drift from a chimney top away towards the hills. I stepped across the street; I pushed her little gate and stepped inside. In the fading day an object pinned above the door caught my attention as it caught a speck of whatever light was left. It was a sharp, glassy object like I had never seen before, with little barbs like a miniature harpoon. On another day it might have made me stop to inspect it further, secured as it was to some little plaque up there, just within arm's reach of a reasonable sized person standing on a stool. But I had other business on my mind. I knocked on the door, took two steps back, folded my hands in front of me, and waited.

Epilogue

Poppy said to meet her in Rymill Park, the place where Dads rowed their kids around in little wooden dinghies and which was safe as a house because it was only two feet deep and you could stand up if you fell out so you would need to be a fool to drown in there. The park had been so much of me once, the sheltered retirement it gave in the day, the rambling troubled walk beneath massive shade trees. Its undulations making secret hollowed late night nooks, where trees with knotted recesses loomed and where families of possums lived, an other world that lives beneath our goodly day time order, a place in which I had once needed to play.

It was her day – Poppy’s day. Again. Another year and it was autumn once more and the leaves from the plane trees collected in the footpaths and decorated the rolling lawns with banks of gold like the foam on breaking waves. The kids were all back at school, the festivals of March were over and we had our place back again. Poppy had decided that for her birthday treat we would meet in the park and take a little walk and then she would decide where we would go for lunch. An easy thing, I thought, there must be twenty places within five minutes walk up Rundle Street or along East Tce or even in the Botanic Gardens where the linen tablecloth and bow-tied waitered place might at last be in my grasp.

But Poppy knew I hadn’t been back into that park for a year or more. So I suppose it was one of those facing your demons sessions where you confront the devil head on and poke him one on the eye and waltz on to a fluffy future floating on a seamless cloud, no cracks to fall through. But I would never be light as air, not like that. I was not born to be like that.

No boats were on the lake. The steady perfect April sun flickered through the trees, making patterns like cranky, craggy arms on the lawn beside me: the peace of the park. Mums with little kids were at the seesaws up the hill towards the bowling club where grey haired blokes in white bent and delivered, whence the occasional chink of bowl on jack and soft laughter came.

At exactly one o'clock a vision walked down the pathway from Rundle Street and all the scene around her became like a blur of green and yellow and blue that lacked all substance and definition. A beautiful woman in a red frock, close fitting, belted at a waist which was tidy, of which you could be proud whether you were the girl herself or whether you were the boy who held her. Audrey Hepburn would have worn a dress like this once in a movie dream. Red stiletto heeled shoes, a cream handbag, no hat, honey blonde hair. She stepped through autumn leaves; one caught in her hair as it fell and she laughed as she brushed it away. She dazzled me as I might have been had Athena swept down in a golden chariot and drawn herself up before me. But it was no Greek goddess, it was Poppy Larkin, out for lunch with me, in her best.

'Where are we going,' were the first words I remember saying, although we had already embraced and said hello and kissed. She tilted her head towards the little shop at the edge of the crazy pavers that surrounded our little lake.

'Ice cream,' she said.

'Ice cream before lunch?'

'Ice cream is lunch, or it can be.'

'Two Cornettos, please,' she said to the boy behind the counter. 'He's paying,' she finished, when he held out the goods for us, and I fumbled in the pocket for some gold coins.

'Come this way,' and she tilted her head again, back towards the lake, holding both Cornettos which she had taken from the boy while I was paying, clearly enjoying her plan. 'You've got some work to do.'

We walked down to the shore of the lake, to where the little boats were. 'In you jump, then.'

'What?'

‘You get in first, making sure to spread you weight firmly and evenly before you sit down, to firmly secure the vessel, then as the lady steps aboard you half rise and take her hand.’

‘I suppose I get it,’ I said as I wobbled aboard, careful not to upset the thing. It might only be two foot deep this lake, but that wasn’t the point.

‘We’ll make a gentleman of you yet.’

‘It’s not in my image profile.’

‘I think it’s about time you learnt that you are not your image.’ I would have stopped to think about this, but there was not time. ‘You are essentially a nice boy, you must remember that. Now I board quite gracefully and daintily, a bit like Audrey Hepburn might.’

‘I knew Audrey Hepburn would come into this.’

‘Sit up that end now, with your back to the pointy bit.’

‘You’ve done this before.’

‘All right, now that we’re both settled, I expect it’s rather a case of off you go,’ and she waved a Cornetto at me in the general direction of where I should be rowing, and I began struggling with the oars.

‘If you get around three times before I finish this Cornetto you get yours as a reward. Off!’

‘But I’ll never do that, not the way you’re woofing into that one.’

‘Bad boy. Commence rowing.’

And so I pushed out with the oar and set to the simple task of rowing across the broad section of the lake towards the first of two bridges that joined the shore with the little island that was in the middle. I remembered my own Dad coming through here, what, forty years before. He must have done *some* things for us, my Dad. I remembered the way he slowed when he neared the bridge ‘Not to scare the womenfolk’ he’d said, but now I could see that it wasn’t that easy a task, going through that aperture at pace without touching the sides. So I slowed and took good aim, and pushed at the wall of the bridge with the oar to make sure I didn’t get too close, just as he had done.

Through to the second half of the lake, which was smaller than the first and I wheeled around with my right oar to make the turn around the little island towards the second bridge that would take us back through to the big section once again. The second bridge was identical to the first and I lined it up and took a heave with both oars that sent us gliding confidently through.

‘Well done,’ said Poppy, thrilled. I smiled.

In the middle of the big section I stopped rowing for a moment and becalmed our little boat. Up the hill the tree was there, with a knot in its trunk where the possum lived with his little family. Right by us was the place where the Stick Man had embraced his oblivion and had inadvertently earned his moment of fame. Above us was the sun, still, as if it had always been there and would never move, sustaining and giving life equally to all. I was fifty five years old and the years were running out.

‘It *is* the middle of the day ... still,’ said Poppy, not looking at the sun. I gazed, I think ruefully is the word, into the green brown murky waters of Rymill Lake. Poppy looked back at me with her lips pursed, her eyes blinking with optimism. She then looked into the waters, where my eyes had been a moment before.

‘Poor old, Billy. I think he’s lonely.’

‘I know he’s lonely.’

‘And Larkincestor Matty died lonely too,’ she looked sideways back up at me.

‘And I was almost like them.’

‘And I’m not like them at all,’ she said with finality.

‘Proceed, oarsman,’ said Poppy Larkin softly, gesturing once again with her ice cream. ‘We have places to go and things to do.’

‘Yes, miss,’ I replied, dipping both oars firmly in the water.