

Objects of Desire

A Collection of Short Stories

by

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An Extraordinary Girl

Reg Taylor

She came up to them on the train and asked for a light, and when he told her she was too young to smoke she said, 'I'm fifteen – I'll be sixteen on New Years' Day.'

She was about five feet two and had a sweet face and after she'd borrowed Adriana's lighter she sat down opposite and studied them carefully. Then she was alternately thoughtful and chatty for the rest of the trip.

She took out a bottle of lemonade and asked, 'Have you seen British bottles of pop?' and invited them to take a swig. Then she opened a tin and said, 'Have you tried McVities biscuits...? Help yourself.' After that she gave George two biros and a pencil with her name stamped on it. 'I'm Samantha, like her that used to be on page three in *The Mirror*.' When the drinks trolley came round she bought them all one of the big cans of English beer.

When they had to get out she said, 'Get by yer...I'll get a guard,' and hailed a senior and not all that firm looking servant of British Rail to help with their bags. She was ruthless: 'It'll do him good,' she said.

When they parted she kissed Adriana on both cheeks and held on to George for a little while, her scent overlain with just a hint of B.O. (in the English way? he wondered) before she scurried off, swigging her can.

'I hope she catches her train,' Adriana said. 'Otherwise we might have to adopt her.'

In their next carriage, in a quiet that seemed rather dull, he studied the late autumn landscape passing outside; past its seasonal best but, as he reminded Adriana, 'It's Thomas Hardy country.'

'Oh yeah?'

She had been determinedly unimpressed by anything English from the time they arrived, he knew that. She was only even here to please him. She kept drawing invidious comparisons between London monuments and Italy's. Picking her way through the minefield of English cuisine she recoiled from the sight of an otherwise handsome black lady behind a counter delving deep into salad greenery with bare taloned hands. After they'd been out to eat at an Indian restaurant she encouraged him to be sick after he imagined something was sitting dodgily in his stomach. (The retching took a lot out of him.) She hated the mean spirited dimensions of the hotels' beds and their plumbing; she returned, visibly shaken, from a visit to public toilets. When they were out in the street she said, 'This joint stinks.'

Even after they caught the night ferry to Harwich to go to Holland she insisted on sitting down to dine during the departure and he missed any chance of inhabiting what might have been passing salt marshes with the ghosts of prison hulks. In reprisal he sat up drinking with a fellow passenger until late, and on the train next day spent an age in the toilet considering whether to die or just pass out, until cold air from an open window partially revived him. At the next stop he got off to buy a can of Coca-Cola to help his recovery and then had to run back to the train and spend five minutes tracking down their seats. Adriana had tears of vexation in her eyes when he finally caught up with her. She took him by the shoulders. 'Don't *do* that to me...'

She was always dragging him back from the well secured edges of look-outs and demanding he take her hand in crowds, and searching the placidest of sea surfaces for evidence of rips and other menaces. 'I have to watch you like a hawk,' she believed.

He had been forewarned of Amsterdam and looked for signs of moral decay and sensual abandon in the faces of the broad browed flaxen haired girls cycling about the

city, breasts jostling of innocent necessity in the vigour of their owners' pursuit...but they were not in Amsterdam.

'I really do need to lie down,' he reminded Adriana.

'Just let me breathe a bit first,' she said.

Even though her nephew Claudio had warned them that the Dutch would 'rip even the hairs off your arse,' she was happy just to be back in Europe. When they were having coffee in bed next morning she kissed him emphatically to express her raised spirits.

'Aren't you glad to be out of that awful place?' she said (meaning England.)

'You must be. After all these years with me you have to be a little bit Italian.'

And from the moment they'd landed this time he felt he was; its mingled scents of diesel and coffee and cigarettes and women's perfume were all familiar and welcome to him; while Claudio's apartment, where they always stayed, felt like a second home.

In winter, waking to a hush outside which seemed to encourage the local species of dove's catarrhal wheezing (quite different from its Australian cousins, but just as inane) he'd seen from the balcony the street and the roofs opposite satisfactorily dusted with snow. And in spring he'd watched the neighbours emerging from a kind of dormancy to plant out their veggies in their gardens underneath.

In summer, when each stifling day succeeded another and irritation settled like grit in the greasy air, and everyone who could had fled to the beaches or the mountains, leaving those behind to wear the badge of failure as they went through the discontented motions of their day, he'd seen the beautiful girl working in the bar downstairs push back her hair at ten in the morning to reveal dish cloth sized shallows of sweat under the arms of her blouse.

Now, in autumn, with the great ribbed chalice of plane trees outside unburdened, he found himself looking right into the windows of the homes opposite (some of them, he noticed, in a rather daring break with traditional white, repainted in recent years in crisp lemon yellows and starling's-egg blues) until, one morning, while gazing innocently enough in that direction, he got caught out by a woman's face on the same second floor level staring back at him – before she pulled her curtain closed: making him wonder what past upheavals on this side of the road might have inspired her interest – what stampedes of feet like the ones he heard from the apartment above at times, despite the slippers everyone wore inside.

Because Anna, Claudio's wife, had gone. While Claudio's mostly melancholy running commentary to his aunty about the separation dwelt more in sorrow than in anger on his ex-wife's improvidence, insensitivity, selfishness and so on, it was hard to imagine that the breakdown of their union would have been at all reasonable. And with her leaving, some of the spirit of the house had gone as well.

Before she left, when they all went out together on one of the helter-skelter excursions Claudio had decided on, or just to eat, shushing and nudging each other exaggeratedly on the marbled stairs for the other tenants' sake, they used to pass the florist's shop at the bottom, wondering as ever if its never visible owner had finally succumbed to the exhalations of his heady stock. Then, if they sidestepped the temptations of the *gelateria*, they had a choice between the pizza place over the road, or the bar almost at their feet. It was like almost all of its kind in Italy, whose cosy glows were refuges, romances in the dark. Few of them ever seemed to be really busy, they stayed open for ridiculously long hours; their proprietors, while unfailingly courteous, often seemed to be suffering from terminal depression as a consequence. And yet their never off-puttingly spotless premises remained full of good things, light and

warmth...Cosseted with a drink in any one of them he felt what in a way he was – special – and not just some foreign blow-in off the street.

But on this trip there'd been a lot less fun. Claudio appeared preoccupied, occasionally sunk in a slightly theatrical, non-Australian gloom. On his guest's way to the toilet late at night from the matrimonial bed Claudio had surrendered to them, he'd seen the wakeful flicker of TV from the lounge. Even his brought up-not-to-be-nosy eye was drawn to the kitchen's pile of bills.

Claudio was still tirelessly devoted to his aunt, but he was spending increasingly long periods away from home, returning sometimes after having driven as much as a thousand kilometres in the day, without seeming too enriched. While still insisting on cooking for them ('Tired? No, I'm not tired,' he'd disown, while dicing with infinite precision vegetables into wafers for some dish) there was an air of strain in the house – to which they began to feel prisoners.

One too many cooped up days made up their minds: with no real plans they left an apologetic note and went off in the middle of a cloudburst, almost running, with mingled feelings of relief and guilt.

Steaming exultantly they got on a train, which took them at first through flat fields of grapes and pears and peaches – country, apart from its architecture, very much like his old Riverland home, as he pointed out to Adriana.

'Don't talk to me please about that God forsaken place,' she protested. Their one visit there had not been a success ('Stinking hot...filthy flies...'she kept saying) until they went for dinner at the local club next to their motel. Unpromisingly, there was a Greek wedding going on, they were served up the ruins of its very indifferent feast. 'This is a nightmare,' Adriana was lamenting when the young couple at their table with a baby invited her to have a nurse. She tried to get out of it – 'First they break your

arms and then they break your heart' – but when she gave in and cradled it against her he felt everyone in the room's approving eyes.

When, on their last night in London, they were recommended some pretentious restaurant where the dishes of pasta drowning in a sweet cold sauce were so awful that Adriana left a penny tip, she declared that she'd had enough, but he prevailed upon her to indulge him a little longer, while he was revealing the real reason he'd dragged her all this way.

'I want to see where Dylan Thomas was born,' he said. 'You remember him?'

'You mention so many writers,' she said. 'Which one was he?'

'He...'. He started to explain, but she was indifferent really, and stayed that way until they'd crossed the border into Wales – when she relented under the influence of the countryside.

'Why didn't you bring me here first?' she reproached, 'instead of wasting my time in London. You see the houses – even the sheep...so white and clean...'

When they arrived in Swansea it was drizzling lightly in what he was to discover was the Welsh way, and his feelings of trail blazing were greatly diminished when the man in the local Tourist Office responded to his queries with a slight, tight smile: 'Cwmdonkin Drive...Next question?' But Adriana was impressed when he found the poet's house. She looked from the view of the sea to the For Sale sign outside.

'Why would anyone ever want to leave here?' she conjectured.

'Unless they're sick of people like us gawping,' he suggested. But Adriana was enthused. In the park next door she read out in the over reverent voice she saved for poetry the lines from Fern Hill on the commemorative stone. But then, while she was in

the middle of taking one of her never reliable photos that usually left out part of the subject of it, her camera suddenly got hot and died.

‘The cunt of a thing’s burnt my hands,’ she said, wringing them.

He was disappointed too; the camera was practically new. But then he remembered a shop back in town. ‘They might have a look at it.’

‘Forget it,’ she said, ‘it’s fucked,’ and dropped it in a bin. ‘Come along. We’ll have to report it stolen so I can claim it on insurance.’

He felt uneasy; not sure if it was her ethics or the cold blooded disposal of his recent birthday gift that troubled him more; the incident cast a small shadow over their day on the way back into town that didn’t really lift until they caught the bus to Worms Head the next morning.

He felt better then, knowing that they were on the same road that Thomas and his friends would have taken. The dips the bus coasted down could have been those where the lorry swooped while Thomas and the rest of the boys clung to its roof. The nearest field to Worms Head might well have been the one where Thomas was forced to watch by firelight the awful Brazell sitting with the golden head of the girl he’d stolen from Thomas on his shoulder. The nearby five mile beach, Rhossili Sands, was the challenge Little Cough thought he had to conquer. On the cliff faces he was able to see descendants of the sheep whose ancestors probably reached out with the same perilous, and eventually – surely – mortal greed for a similar illicit treat.

‘They’re like you,’ Adriana said. ‘Only they haven’t got me to save them.’

When they got back to town it was after five. He knew that the city centre had been flattened during the War, and it was a pretend town now you’d have to say, all glass and modish malls with no historical links to anything. Filling up each morning and emptying out at night it was almost deserted at this hour. The Friendly Pub staffed

by Friendly People they went into was almost friendless – he had a never impeded view of an otherwise impeccably elderly gentleman in a dark blue suit with a bright red tie and matching handkerchief sitting near them, painstakingly exploring both orifices of a long proboscis with a daggerishly tipped little finger. ‘I think I lost my appetite,’ Adriana said.

In the end they had a perhaps fitting meal back at their hotel. Each course, delivered and shortly afterwards retrieved by their waiter, was accompanied by a small exhalation of breath and a simultaneous more-in-hope-than expectation, ‘Thank you very mooch...’ benediction from its provider. By the end of the evening, a study in dejection, the man sent them off to bed with a plate of cheese.

Adriana shuddered at the memory of the meal on the way. ‘I thought the smell of roast mutton in the streets on Sundays when I first came to Australia was bad enough.’

His sleep that night was fitful. He woke once to hear a drunk walking down the street below, the sound of his footsteps accompanying a repetitively and disturbingly aired grievance far into the distance. Later he woke and sat up to see a figure regarding him from the end of the bed. It was his own alarming reflection in the mirror, he realised, but he couldn’t sleep after that. ‘That would be those revolting prawns you had,’ Adriana assured him. But he felt they were unwelcome then. In his mind the image in the mirror became squatter, imbued with a near malevolence, as if the subject of their pilgrimage could not abide them there.

As they left next morning, the inconstant but never entirely neglectful sun they’d glimpsed during their stay deserted the town completely, or was over ruled by the wet-eiderdownish clouds squeezing round it. The drizzle to which everyone had been presenting a cheerful face in the street gave way to driving rain. When the train

stopped at a small station in the middle of nowhere the German girl who got out and stumped away under her back pack's teetering burden, was flinching before she'd gone ten yards.

'Poor thing, she looks so lost,' Adriana sighed, though it only reminded him that he'd seen enough of backpackers in all their misery to be determined never to join them.

Their welcome back in Italy was not effusive. Even though his *zia* had stayed in touch with him when she was away, Claudio was still disappointed in them. He had no interest in what he called the rest of the world – Europe – at the best of times (let alone that remote-as-the-moon place called Australia). Once again there was an air of tension in the house which his exotic guest unwittingly helped relieve.

Forgetting which side of the road people drove on, he stepped into the path of a car one night. At the last moment he was able to use the flat of his hands to slip stream off the side of it, and was congratulating himself on his reflexes (still good) when the momentum of the car skipped his feet from under him and spun him back against it before brushing him lightly across the street.

Not so good, he thought, before oblivion took over.

When he came to Adriana was sitting next to his hospital bed, from where she could most easily launch an attack on him it seemed. 'Why do you do such *stupid things...?*' she demanded, with a most unconsoling shake of her head as soon as she saw he was awake. It seemed unkind, especially when she reiterated her complaint to an old bloke and his minder in the bed next to his, so they could shake their heads and growl too. She said, 'They must feel like me, your guardian angel is working overtime,' before she cried, 'What are you *doing* to me?'

The driver of the car who came in then was upset too. ‘I am so sorry *signore*,’ she confessed, ‘but I did not see you until the ultimate moment...’

She looked so beautiful and smelt so nice; he spread his hands in a gesture of absolution. ‘*Non preoccuparla signora*. It was all my fault, really.’

‘I’ll give you “*non preoccuparla*” – Adriana grumbled when the lady had gone – ‘the pair of you nearly gave me a heart attack,’ but a doctor and a nurse came in then and forestalled her, followed soon afterwards by Claudio and then a succession of callers with small gifts and he was thinking it was almost as good as having the measles again, until the anaesthetic started to wear off.

When Adriana rang the bell she dismissed the palliatives on offer – ‘I think he needs something stronger’ – (‘The injection,’ the doctor advised, ‘may make you feel a little elevated’ -). Afterwards, she said, ‘My poor darling, how are you now?’

‘I feel like having a good cry.’

‘Is it so very sore?’

‘No, I’m just so happy.’

He was, really. He hadn’t got off too badly he realised. Apart from a broken wrist all he had was a sprained ankle and some scuff marks here and there. By next morning, when he wasn’t feeling a lot worse than any other relic of some East African military campaign of the late 1800s, they said he could go. In a week he knew he was alright to travel.

But before then, when Adriana brought him in his coffee one morning she sat down on the end of the bed looking uneasy, before making some remarks on the weather outside and then finally getting down to business with a sigh.

‘I had a long talk with Claudio last night before I came to bed,’ she said.

‘Maybe you heard us?’

‘No, no. What about?’

‘Oh, things he wanted to tell me, you know. He hasn’t had it easy, don’t worry... What he really wanted to say though, is he doesn’t want us to leave. Or not just yet.’

‘He never does, does he?’ he mused. Even though he suspected that a part of Claudio would like to have his aunt all to himself, their partings were always tearful as Claudio pressed his bristly cheeks against his without restraint. ‘He should have said something earlier,’ he reminded her. ‘Everything’s set now. We’ve only got till Thursday.’

‘Ah – well, he says he can fix that up. You know, get the airline to put the booking off...’

‘For how long?’

‘Well, till we find out what we want to do.’

‘What is it we’re supposed to want to do?’

‘I think he needs us here,’ she said, ‘that’s the thing. He won’t admit it but he’s lost without Anna, you know. And we’re really all he’s got for now.’

‘Oh...’ Over the years he had never been quite sure what Claudio did for a living – it often sounded like its revelation might be a threat to national security. At the moment though, it seemed to involve the fairly prosaic pursuit of bad debts. He knew that while Claudio was absolutely charming, able to disarm any audience and defrost the defences of any female between the ages of eight and eighty, he was very tall and had perhaps just enough Sicilian menace from his father’s side to put a shiver up most lazy payers’ spines.

‘I’m not going to help him stand over people.’

‘I know: you couldn’t. You wouldn’t have to though. He wants to start up something else. Something to do with tourists, like an agency. He says I could help in the office if I want and you could be a guide. Their second language here is German, you’d be able to translate for English people, Australians even.’

He’d always avoided Australians in Europe, especially the young ones with their endless whinging and obsession with exchange rates. ‘I haven’t come ten thousand miles to catch up on football scores.’

‘It wouldn’t be like that.’

‘What about your kids back home? Have you thought about that?’ he said.

‘What are you going to tell them?’

‘It might make some of them get off their arses and come and see their mother,’ she said, before reproving herself. ‘I know that sounds terrible, but to be honest, Claudio is a better son to me than most of my children –’

‘And you are a better mother,’ he suggested. That was blunt too, but Claudio’s real mother’s – Aurora’s – own maternal instincts seemed to have given up the battle with selfishness long ago. When her son was involved in an accident once and they all wanted to rush to the scene, they had to wait ten minutes while Aurora got her makeup right.

‘It doesn’t have to be forever,’ she coaxed. ‘We can try it just for six months. I think I owe it to myself to see if I want to live here again, that’s all.’

He didn’t know what to say.

‘Just think, in six months your Italian will be perfect.’

‘Will it?’

‘*Ma si, certo.*’ She hugged him with relief. ‘Don’t look so worried, *piccinin*, Claudio thinks the world of you, you know that. He’ll take care of you till you know your way round.’

He heard her talking excitedly in the kitchen with her nephew after that, who sounded elated too. And it was true: Claudio was caring – and masterful – he’d find them a place of their own if they stayed and he’d make allowances for Adriana’s husband. Italians were kind: they’d understand if he was a bit lost at first. And Adriana might be renewed, get back all the things migrants lose or learn to hide; he’d always preferred the Italian version of her anyway, with all its tenderness. While he could avoid becoming one of those voyeurs – tourists – who linger on worlds glimpsed in lighted windows but never really explore them.

Now he could. Sometimes he’d worried that he and Adriana would finish up like the majority of the town’s visitors, German and elderly, who came annually for the supposed benefits of the town’s thermal springs. He’d seen them lolling in their compounds, able like most long standing couples who’ve perfected the art of mutual ignorance, to devote themselves individually to acquiring one more gloss of tan each day, in between the spas, massages, mud baths, and the enormous meals that were the main reason for them coming. Perennial strangers ...and forever alien.

They would never be like them now, he felt sure. Or – though he couldn’t know this, of course – become like those perfect married friends they had back home, who had dedicated their lives to curbing one another’s excesses.

Because long before then Adriana and he would be lost to one another forever.

Something About Religion

Reg Taylor

One winter's night as we were leaving choir practice the light hanging from the peak of the church went out and made everyone jump. The nearby red gums stood out in the dark and we could hear small waves scuffed up by the wind sneaking under the river's bank. When a branch of the bare cedar tree fishtailed its way down the porch roof the ladies gasped – and clutched one another seriously when one of the men teased, 'How'd it be if that escaped prisoner was around?' There'd been news on the wireless that night of a notorious fugitive heading South Australia's way: Renmark was just about the first port of call – he could be lurking in the reeds right now, or even have penetrated the church itself and be breathing hard in the vestry behind a row of cassocks.

I should say something at the start about religion.

Until we were seven or eight it was left to Mum to oversee our correspondence lessons in it and we had to wait till we moved to Renmark before we could go to church, or at least the Sunday school version of it. The Reverend Hopgood rarely put his nose into those classes himself – probably wisely, since he had no kids of his own and no idea how to handle other people's – and so it was another year or two before we graduated to services in the church itself.

It wasn't very inspiring when we did. The Rector seemed to spend most of the time trying to sound agreeable – once he just got up and took out a newspaper clipping (illustrating some moral better than he thought he could perhaps) and read it out before stepping down again. The discovery that he'd been a fighter pilot during the War, that should have inspired hero worship in us kids, actually diminished the conflict in our eyes: he often looked unsure of his surroundings and struggled to put a name to faces he

had to know. We could imagine parachutes from our side's planes sprinkling the sky like thistledown in his wake. His hair was still divided from a central parting and slicked down in the old RAAF style, but his moustache had been trimmed back to a tuft that gave him a pouting, bird like look; you half expected to see a drop or two to be shaken free when he raised his head from the Communion chalice. It wasn't very becoming.

Mum always had a soft spot for Old Hoppy, as he was called. She said he'd had a bad time during the War, and she made excuses for what happened when he was driving out among the fruit blocks on the Sixty Foot one day. He stopped when he saw a bundle of clothes floating in a channel that turned out to belong to a little kid. Every year a toddler or two used to wander away from whoever was supposed to be looking after them and get drowned like that. It nearly happened to me. It couldn't have made much of an impression when the parents came running up not long after and found him in tears and dabbing at their dead kid's face with a hanky; but the thing was, when Hoppy got home, his wife, instead of waiting to hear what happened and showing some sympathy, just got stuck straight into him about the state of his clothes. 'How am I ever supposed to get these *clean!*' she's supposed to have gone, and then she went right off her trolley.

Dad always reckoned she was a bit of a nerve case anyway, sometimes when she went with Hoppy on his parish calls she wouldn't even go inside; she'd just sit out in the car looking straight ahead. It was no big surprise when Hoppy took some office job in the Church back in Town not long after – so his wife could be nearer her family he said – and even Mum had to admit that the Minister that replaced him was a breath of fresh air.

He turned up with a fully fledged family and a Dalmatian dog. His two littlest kids were like hens who've just been let out of cages at first – the country was too much for them and they hung around the front of the Manse with the sixteen year old foster girl they had looking after them for quite a while. But the minister's wife got straight into her parish duties, often with her eldest, fourteen or so, daughter in tow, who used to stand behind her mother when she paid calls with her hands on her hips, like a veterinary assistant keeping an eye on a cow.

'I don't think this new man will stand any nonsense,' Mum said; nonsense being her word for the general lack of enthusiasm that had hung over the church in Old Hoppy's time. To begin with I don't think my brother Richard or I cared much either way: church, once we'd got used to it, was a kind of torture we didn't expect to be relieved – while for his part the Reverend Coughlan (or Old Coggsie as he soon got called) didn't seem too thrilled to make our acquaintance either. He had a school teacherly aloofness about him, which didn't particularly worry us since we were so used to the real thing, but he could be quite bristly too; like the time the foster girl interrupted church with a message one day and he just about jumped down her throat, and sometimes when he raised his head in church his horn rim glasses glittered under the lights in a slightly scary way. He was High Church too, according to our sister Anne, which meant he was a stickler for ceremony, and his sermons didn't beat about the bush: 'We must examine our lives in the light of the Commandments...' he'd remind the congregation, while his gaze took on everyone in church.

To be fair once the service was over he was more human. The Communion wine might have helped: any left over was supposed to be shared between the minister and any adult males he felt the need to call upon, but he used to take on all the responsibility himself and down the remains in two or three swigs. In place of Old Hoppy's

diffidently extended hand he'd engage people quite vigorously after that, doing away with formality with a heel rocking inclination of his head towards the ladies and even a clap here and there on the backs of the blokes.

He was quietly ruthless in the way he went about reviving the church choir too, edging towards retirement a couple of old boys who were having trouble with their bladders or their teeth, and recruiting new members by keeping his own musical ear open for anyone in the congregation who could sing. In this way Mum and Anne got involved and largely took over from the more elderly swoopers and gear changers who'd held sway for years. They used to come home simmering from choir practice, which we didn't mind – but then they decided that Richard and I had to be involved too – which was intolerable. It was bad enough having to sit through church every Sunday, counting down the pages left in the Prayer Book and willing it to be over with, while getting ready to dig Dad in the ribs if he tried to join in the singing; we treasured those two evenings a week when Mum and Ann were out and we could roam the streets for an hour or two and break into houses still deserted from the '56 Flood. But from the first night of choir practice we were converts, with a little direction we soon learned to take on any musical hurdle put in our paths; from the moment we put on our cassocks on Sundays we became part of a select and jealous band.

I liked to think that Dad, stoically grunting his responses on his own in church, would have taken some pride in his sons' contributions and felt less inclined to join in himself. But then his whole attitude to religion often seemed ambivalent. When an acquaintance kept nagging him to attend a service of some ratbag sect, for example, he gave in eventually, and after taking a seat among the faithful promptly went to sleep. I don't think he ever looked too deeply into the Divine, or was troubled by a spiritual crisis or the thoughts of Retribution that used to wake me at dawn sometimes during the

week as the bell for Morning Prayer sounded, wishing I could put off the day. He was impressed by Billy Graham's call to order, but I couldn't ever imagine him attending one of his Crusades unless it was to do a rough head count. He saw the church almost in sporting us-against-them terms, while saving a genuine hostility for the Catholics who competed with us Anglicans for the lion's share of the town's spiritual spoils.

In the loose pecking order of denominations the Lutherans hardly rated in Renmark, but just over the River in Loxton you could hardly move for German names. When Karen first turned up halfway through Grade Six, I almost wondered if she was some kind of refugee from over there. She had a German surname alright (and it turned out her father was the new Pastor) but there was definitely nothing Krautish about her. Loxton's raw boned footballers used to fill us with foreboding when they took the field, but she was small and demure looking with a crown of blonde hair and she had a grown up air that gave real grown ups the confidence to dump responsibilities on her.

That could be misleading though. While she was sitting in class with her arms folded and her feet tucked under her she might look like Grace Kelly in High Noon, but it was different when she was making a dive for the ball on the netball court or screaming for someone to pass it to her. She'd do just about anything for a dare too – though, to be honest, it sometimes seemed like she could get away with just about anything.

Teachers hardly ever told her off. I know being good at school work helped: when she came in late and said, 'I'm sorry Miss Combey, but I really wanted to finish this –' while she was handing over some project that you knew would be the best in the class, if only because – and not only because – it was coming up against the efforts of kids whose idea of illustrating the Swiss Dairy Industry was to stick in a picture of a couple of tins of Carnation milk, what was the teacher likely to say?

But there was something else about her that seemed to make even grown ups wary of rubbing her up the wrong way. One of the girls in class lived in a shack out on the flats at Paringa with a father who had three cows and a TPI pension and called himself a dairy farmer, and she used to come to school smelling of cow shit and get picked on until Karen stuck up for her one day. ‘Leave her *alone!*’ she screamed in some fatso’s face and that was the finish of that.

Since she was so tough, it made the time she got sick with something mysterious and kept away from school for weeks disturbing. At that time the headmaster had decided to top up assemblies with weekly marching lessons, perhaps to make up for any weakening effects from the dancing classes the deputy headmistress initiated. I used to think of Karen with sympathy, and some envy too, since I enjoyed being sick so much myself, lying in bed at her home near the school; spared the indignity of being involved herself (though I think that even if she’d been well she’d have found some way of getting out of it) and laying down her copy of *Little Women* or a *Girls’ Own Annual* as the music’s braying drifted across; immune to it but in some way still appreciative of my concern. The day she came back to school I brimmed with anticipation – that some little tell-tale couldn’t wait to explode: ‘He’ – me – she sarcastically hissed as we filed into class – ‘is *so* glad to see you again. He just couldn’t *wait*...’ I felt myself reddening, waiting for the axe that always fell at times like that to fall. But all Karen said was, ‘I know’ – without even breaking stride, and with just enough stress on the first word to wipe the smirk of the little smarty’s face.

After that we were said to be ‘going’ with one another – even though we never actually went anywhere: you weren’t allowed. Once we got as far as meeting up at the pictures, which was risky enough, sitting with just the aisle between us. At half time I bought her a Hi-Top which she nibbled lady-likely, but afterwards we had to sit through

a really bad choice for a Saturday matinee while a couple of hundred other kids around us booed and whistled and stamped their feet so hard whole rows of seats rocked. When we met up outside in the hard afternoon light that always gave me a headache, I apologised, 'Pretty weak wasn't it?' but she insisted, 'I always like Audrey Hepburn,' before she and her friend hurried home to meet one of them's aunty. So the afternoon wasn't a success.

But we had other opportunities: on Guy Fawkes' night we got involved in a game of chasey on the Paringa Oval carried out just out of reach of parents' eyes and in the glow of bonfires and fireworks that finished with her struggling in my arms. She looked elated then. At school you had to be more careful; one day when we were trailing the rest on some excursion near the school Miss Combey looked back and said drily, 'The rest of us will just wait while Mum and Dad catch up.' You wouldn't want to get caught holding hands. We had to make do with sitting across the corner of the sandpit at lunchtime while Karen had a book out and we talked about what we were going to be when we grew up.

I used to look for her every day when I came in.

One day in early December the whole school went to the pool in town. It was really only done as a way of filling in time after the exams, but the headmaster still made sure it was all organised. We got split up into teams so supporters could cheer on their instant heroes plugging up and down the pool. I ran out of steam in a relay and finished up having to dog paddle the last ten yards, but that was better than some weakies who had to be hauled out bawling after they panicked in the six foot end. Karen, on the other hand, had a note from home excusing her and her Speedos from even getting wet. It was unseasonably cool, the tail end of some system from up north

had overshadowed the event with drizzle and cloud. She was candid: ‘When I got up this morning I thought, There’s no way I’m going in today.’ She was never a great pool person anyway, only going in on really hot days and then she’d hardly get her hair wet as she did a crossing or two in breast stroke before she got out and tucked her bathers back under her and put a towel over her shoulders. Frowning in the direction of the pool she tactfully avoided mentioning my efforts, but she looked restless. ‘What shall we *do...*?’ she sighed.

‘We’re not allowed out of here,’ I reminded her.

‘Oh pooh – who’d know?’ She got up and pivoted on one hip. ‘Show us your church. You’re always talking about it.’

It was only just down the street once you got away from the pool and I’d boasted I knew where the back door key was – ‘I can go in whenever I like’ – even though I’d actually only used it once when I helped Mum change the flowers. We had to make a show of splitting up in the park outside, but once we were in the clear Karen hooked my arm in hers and scrunched up alongside. ‘*See ...*’ she teased. ‘We’re just out for a stroll...bad luck I left my high heels home.’ She stayed chirpy until we got close and had to sneak round the river side of the building. Then she quietened down a bit: ‘You sure there’ll be no one there?’ she whispered

But once we were inside she perked up again. ‘Gorgeous...’ she said staggily when she saw the altar laid out in purple for Advent, and when I pointed to the stalls where the choir sat she said, ‘I bet you look sweet.’ Then she looked at the door down the end of the aisle. ‘What’s through there?’

‘Not much.’ I started to explain about the vestry but she was already heading that way on tip toe. She looked back and raised her eyebrows at the door before she slipped through it, but then she showed up again just a few seconds later and just about

ran back with the floorboards bounding. ‘*Come on!*’ she hissed and as we were scrambling back outside she said, ‘There was someone *there!*’ in my ear.

I was stuck to the key. ‘Who?’

‘I don’t know – a man – with glasses.’

‘Did he see you?’

‘I don’t think so – there was a big girl in there with him.’

‘What were they doing?’

She almost choked, ‘*You* know ...’

I didn’t really. There was a girl in class who used to spend half her time with the boys, probably because the other girls didn’t want her, and one day she smirked to us, ‘You always know when Mum and Dad are *doing* it – you can hear their bed squeaking...’ But she was the sort of girl who’d have parents like that. When I looked back from seeing if the coast was clear behind us Karen had just about left me for dead. The last thing she threw over her shoulder was, ‘What’d you have to take me in *there* for?’ and by the time I got back to the pool she was over with her team and pretending to be interested in what was happening. The next day at school she was still stand-offish and so I gave her the same treatment, and we didn’t speak to each other for the last couple of weeks of term.

The day of our break up party Miss Combey was unwrapping her presents when she asked for a volunteer to cover up some sick someone had left on the steps outside. I’d just managed to make it back with a bucket load of sand from the sandpit, and dump it in front of the kid who was still sitting there with his head between his knees, when Karen came out.

‘Yuk.’ She gave the mess a wide berth, but she followed me to the troughs in the shelter shed and stood behind me while I was washing my hands. I dragged it out and she got sick of it eventually. She said, ‘Guess what?’

‘What?’

‘I won’t be here next year.’

‘Why not?’

‘We’re going to live in Loxton. Dad’s been made pastor of the big church over there. So...’

I turned around. ‘Well that shouldn’t worry you too much’ – I felt like letting her have it – ‘what’d you have to blame me for what happened in church... how was I supposed to know?’

She shrugged ‘Oh...’ and looked around as if she was worried some big-ears might be nearby. ‘You want to know something else?’

‘What?’

She twisted on the spot. ‘It was... because of something that happened when I was little, that’s why ...’

‘What?’

‘Oh...’ She made out she was trying to be patient: ‘It was when we were at the other church in Nuri – there was a man there one day, a friend of Dad’s when there was no church on; I was just playing out the front and he asked me to let him in...he made out he wanted me to show him something...’

‘So?’

She looked over towards the classroom. ‘Well, when we got inside he – he touched me, you know – and showed me his thing...That’s all.’ She turned back; her

fists closed on her chest and her eyes wet. ‘He made me promise not to tell, so don’t you either.’

I wasn’t going to. I didn’t even want to know anything about anyone interfering with girls.

‘Anyhow,’ she said, ‘I don’t have to wait till the bell goes. Mum’s picking me up early to go shopping in Hambours. Old Combey said I could go.’ She took a small step that brought her right up to me. ‘I’m not worried about the other kids. Only you.’ I was shocked by the soft feel of her lips; all our relatives were cheek peckers who left you feeling like you’d been rubbed in violets. She just smelt of skin.

‘See you,’ she said. ‘Mum’s come.’

Sometimes over the holidays I imagined things like Karen’s father changing his mind and moving back to Renmark, or Karen giving her parents such a hard time that they’d let her come and board with someone or something. But really I knew it wouldn’t happen. Loxton was more than ten miles away; you had to catch the punt to get there... In the new year we actually did make a trip over there when Mum was in some concert they put on at Easter in the Lutheran church. It was a massive joint after what we’d been used to; a monument to German pioneers so they said; quarried out of local limestone with an upstairs organ and it took four or five hundred people to fill it. Even if Karen had made it – and I think her mother went more for things like ‘The Sound of Music’ – she’d have been lost in that crowd. Then when the footy season started we went there again with some other kids to see Renmark get done by Loxton (as usual) and that only reminded me that even if she followed the football she’d probably have been a Loxton barracker by that time. I knew from us moving around that loyalties didn’t last long.

And then we had our Confirmation coming up. Twice a week Richard and I had to go after school with half a dozen other kids to classes in church. You weren't allowed to muck around – when we were being shown how to line up for Communion and someone dinged their head on the rail the Reverend Coughlan reminded us: 'This is a solemn business.' One day he asked if any of us would like to be altar boys when we finished. It didn't look bad fun, you just had to stand out the front and pass the minister things and look a bit devout. Then Dad surprised us by telling us what his Confirmation was like: 'I got a feeling, almost like an electric shock, passing down from the Bishop's hands,' he said. That gave us something to look forward to.

But before then the Rector got up in church one day and told everyone right out of the blue that he was leaving. Dad was philosophical, he said, 'Oh well, they must have needed him to fill the breach somewhere,' but he couldn't take to his successor at all. It was almost as if the Church authorities had decided we'd been spoilt and needed to be put on a blander diet for a while. It was hard to think of anyone ever referring to the new minister as Old whatever-his-name-was. He had a short-back-and-sides hair cut and a broad blank face that made it obvious he didn't know half the names of the congregation and wasn't particularly interested in finding out: he seemed more worried about how much went into the plate. His services were all carried out in a monotone too since he couldn't sing, and he took so little interest in things musical that even diehards like Mum and Anne got fed up in the end. There were parts in the service when old Coggie said things like, 'Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden...' that got to people, even if they weren't sure what travail meant. In one of the new man's sermons he even tried explaining away some of the New Testament miracles: 'When Jesus said to the fishermen, "Cast your nets here," mightn't we ask whether his eye was

just taken by a school of fish ...?' he suggested, his own eye wandering from one side of the church to the other. It was enough to make people ask why they bothered coming.

One of the things Dad said he liked about old Coggsie was that he was a man's man. Even if the monthly meetings of the men's group he started finished up with nothing more than a collective clearing of charred throats before the minister's wife came home and flung open every window in the house, Dad never missed one. They went by the wayside too. It was hard to imagine the new minister providing any kind of leadership. 'Give old Coggsie his due,' Dad said, 'when that girl they were fostering got herself in the family way – messing about with some coot – he showed her the door quick smart.' I had a picture of the girl being given her marching orders by the minister, with his wife and kids giving her the glare from behind him, but she'd never been much more than a top heavy presence round the church anyway, with a vacant sort of look that Mum thought might have been adenoidal.

Something more serious happened at about that time anyway. Richard's voice and then mine broke and that was the end of our involvement in any choir. We had to go back and join Dad in the body of the church. And then at our Confirmation in November in the stifling church all I felt under the Archbishop's touch was a trickle of sweat easing its way down the pools massing under my new nylon shirt.

We decided to worry about the school holidays after that.

I don't know if it was especially hot that year but we seemed to be always swimming, right up till the last week before school started when we went with Mum when she was visiting Babies' Clinics and had a dip every day in a different town.

Some of the places had proper pools and some didn't. Loxton didn't, but there was a fenced off part on the river for little kids and a diving board on the edge of it for

people who felt like trying their luck in the main stream, and once you got used to the musty taste and not being able to see when you were under, the river was never that bad.

We only went in for half an hour or so on the day we were there because there was a matinee on at the pictures, so we missed what happened after we left. We were sitting waiting in the car at the hospital while Mum was inside collecting something when an ambulance came screaming up the drive and three or four grown ups jumped out of it and ran right past. You could tell from their panicky look and the colour of the kid's face they were carrying that it was too late though. She still had her bathers on.

It wasn't the first time Richard and I had been around something like that. Once, just after we'd started school, a new teacher got a bit cocky trying to swim Katarapto Creek – the headmaster was in tears at school the next morning when he got up and told us about it, which seemed funny to us since he would only have known him about a week – and once some kid drowned on one of the sandbars near Renmark on the weekend. His older brother still came to school the next day, but he wandered round looking lost till someone got him involved in a game at lunchtime.

It was like that on the way home. We had to wait for the news on the radio next morning to hear what happened, and later on in the week for the *Murray Pioneer* to bring the whole story out. The drowning made the front page because it was local but also because of the way the girl was supposed to have died. It praised her up, saying that even though she wasn't a strong swimmer when some kid dived off the big board and got himself into trouble she'd gone straight in – and then got dragged under herself before anyone else got around to doing anything. The other kid still got saved, but it took more than a quarter of an hour before they managed to fish her out. There was

stuff in there about her being an exemplary student; active in sport, popular with her classmates – those who didn't get on the wrong side of her I'll bet – and a photo.

You could still tell who it was alright, but even if it had only been a year or so since I'd seen her, she looked different; her face was longer and had a sort of watchful expression. It might have just been the way the picture was taken of course and I don't even really know why it's come to me now instead of the one I knew – like it wanted to take over. At the time though it did seem to help. It distanced her, and still does, while making me wonder too how much more she might have changed if she'd lived. I know there are some things that don't alter in people; that they can only dress up or put aside, especially after things happen to them like poor old Hoppy during the War when, according to Mum, his best pal's plane went up in flames on the ground while he could only stand by. Thinking of that photo though, I wonder if it might have been the last chance for the old Karen – sitting there with her first crop of pimples maybe – to just dive in when that kid sang out.

You can make too much of things. After Mum fished me out of Lake Bonney she said, 'God couldn't have been quite ready for you,' which for years I thought meant I'd been saved for something special. Now I know that if I had drowned that day the sun wouldn't even have blinked.

I still think of Karen sometimes though, if only for when her 'I know' shut that other kid up at school. It was like she had a secret, a nice one, that she wasn't going to let anyone spoil. It's sad to think that after all that we could have both been at the river at the same time that day and not known about it, or known each other – think of that. But I'm glad I wasn't still in that crowd when she was so forsaken.

As I get older I find myself being attracted to ever taller and less accessible women. I'm not sure what that means but it doesn't sound too healthy.

I lay a lot of the blame for it, though, on Miss Hunt.

On my first unhappy day at school it was her who told me to go outside and play before the real business of the day began. I'd only just made it round the first corner when I came up against a group of black faces and ran back to the lesser horrors of her room. I remember Mum scolding us at home sometimes by saying that our sleep-out looked like a 'blacks' camp,' or that we were getting around like 'black fellows,' but they were the first Aboriginals I'd seen.

For a while after that I thought Miss Hunt might have had something to do with there being none of them in our class. She had so much authority. When she walked across the yard she dragged a train of kids behind her all wanting something from her. She didn't need seem to need anyone; she used chop up kindling for our class room fire by herself and she could hammer nails into things. She was good at sport too; one day she brought her own baseball bat into school and belted the best pitches the big kids could serve up to her all over the yard. I think she was good looking as well, though probably not what people would call pretty. I suspect the headmaster mightn't have altogether approved of her. She had a taste for large rings and other showy jewellery and she was fond of gestures that made her earrings swing and when she bent down low over us she had to sometimes tuck her jangly necklaces down the front of her dress until she straightened.

I brought her in some red roses I'd nicked on the way to school one day and she commemorated the gift on the black board in the first written phrase I can recall. While

still applying punishment with the full vigour of her arm she favoured me shamelessly from then on; she got me to read out loud to the other, dumber kids and sometimes she gave me things when the others had gone. Once I got through a whole block of ‘Nigger Boy’ liquorice on my own on the way home.

It was a shame that I outgrew her; distancing myself in games of Red Rover and other masculine pursuits in the yard once I left her class. I think she missed me; once she came into our Grade Two classroom next to hers and made some unflattering remark about the kids she had that year, but when I went into Grade Three we were on the other side of the quadrangle and I only used to see her from a distance.

Then we left the school altogether.

On the last day, while I was just waiting for my sister to pump up the tyres on her bike so she could donkey me home, some little dobber caught up with us. ‘Miss Hunt wants to see you,’ he smirked. General and specific guilts came to mind – leaks over the toilet wall, coloured pencils hooked from some kid’s desk – or worse, and I thought buried for good, indiscretions. I trailed along nursing apprehension – and rebellion too – surely, I thought, she’d left it too late to give me the ruler one last time. She called and I went into a room full of the usual late afternoon paste of chalk and ink sopped blotting paper and left over warmth from small bodies. Direct as ever she got up from her chair:

‘I hear you’re leaving us?’ she said.

‘Yes, Miss Hunt,’ I dutifully replied while some small inner voice was suggesting, And there’s nothing you can do about it. ‘We’re going to Western Australia,’ I said. That place separated from us only by the Bight, from whose attentions we were already steeling ourselves.

‘Ah,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘all that way?’ and followed it up with something even I could tell wasn’t immediately threatening. ‘Well, if you ever come back don’t forget to come and see us will you?’ And she bent – and not to hand out some last minute chastisement but to hold me against her. I felt the lavish imprint of one of lipstick’s brighter shades, and her scented arms all round me... and nearly swooned.

And then, after all that, we didn’t go, or not to Western Australia. At the final hurdle, while we kids were staying with an aunt in Adelaide, we got news that Dad was sick (with what we weren’t told) and that we’d be moving back to the River and staying with our grandparents for a while.

At our first meeting – which sounds odd since we’d lived so few, admittedly carless, miles apart till then – Grandma must have been in her late sixties I suppose. She had a slight and bony figure, with no chest or any of the other normal maternal padding under her layers of drab clothing, and her less than five feet might have supplied an inverted addition to her store of grievances. She had a fierce, beaky head, unsmiling in the few family photos she failed to get out of being in; dark, supposedly haunted by Spanish antecedents, skin, and straight hair yanked back anyhow under a hat she was never without.

Her house was dark, even with the trellised grape vines surrounding it bare, and had heavy curtains drawn across the windows and open doorways. In its social centre, the sitting room, there were old and prickly arm chairs of the kind people generally prefer not to settle back into, along with a fireplace embellished by a fireguard featuring a Spanish galleon, and another almost invariable ornament at its side, Grandpa. He was an invalid who passed his time there in a brown, or more properly morose study, sheltering none too successfully under his stockman’s hat – the last vestige of his outback youth – and behind a grey, nicotine fringed drooping moustache from his

wife's sporadic sniping. He was almost mute, which meant certainly we kids never spoke to him, though he would periodically waylay us from his fine weather station on the veranda and send us to buy packets of tobacco from the shop, enlisting our discretion with a wordless wink and a bribe of threepence or so. If Grandma found out about the excursion she would scold us and threaten to confiscate his contraband, and he would grunt an objection before lapsing back into a bronchial reverie, from which he only really emerged to die. In his youth he'd been a champion buck-jump rider but after a horse rolled on him he'd been left with a legacy of ailments, from whose nocturnal agonies he sought relief by alternately rolling on the floor and lashing his kids with a stockwhip. The only tears at his funeral were Grandma's, and they were half resentful. As if he'd had some say in things.

Dad had no good memories of the string of one horse and even one house towns he'd lived in when he was young, but I think it was the visits he made to his grandfather's station up north that left the gloomiest impression on him.

It summed up everything he hated about the Bush. The homestead, somewhere out of Oodnadatta, was set in a stony but not totally unoccupied waste: one day he came outside in time to see a man crawling from the desert to lap up the washing water that his grandmother had just thrown out. Another time, one of the stock men came across a buckboard bogged in the sand and its owners perished nearby. He was still hawking and spitting when he got back. '*Stink...!*' he said. 'I couldn't get near 'em.'

There was almost nothing for Dad to do there, and no other kids to play with. In the only pilgrimage his grandfather ever made to Adelaide he embarrassed his city relatives by standing up at a picture theatre during a Western and flourishing his hat in the face of the screen's stampeding beasts, but normally he was a man of great reserve. When Dad was invited to go and 'talk to your grandfather' one day, he spent an hour in

almost total silence under the baking sun watching the old man go through the painstaking motions of patching up some ancient harness.

Like most kids pressed into such situations by their parents, I don't suppose Dad ever really understood why he was there, or knew that, while hungering like most discontented people after things whose possession would still have dissatisfied her, one of the sources of Grandma's bitterness was the conviction that her father-in-law had abandoned her. When Grandpa's brother died, quite young, the patronage of his Aboriginal widow and children had been taken over by the old man with what Grandma saw as an excess of compassion. The children – 'half castes' as she pointed out – were not only adopted but shamelessly spoilt according to her... sent to boarding schools in Adelaide and given all sorts of opportunities, while her own children were left out in the cold. Poor Dad was a kind of last ditch – and, as it turned out, unavailing – sacrificial lamb, since he managed to establish no sort of relationship at all with his grandfather during those dreary stays.

While our history books used to assure us that Aboriginals were fast dying out and would soon fade from the map (in a way reminiscent of, but with less of the sadness of the disappearance of buffalo from the American prairies, say), Grandma wasn't reassured. In the time we were living with her she clucked her way through weeks of a 'Blue Hills' story line on the wireless that involved the proposed marriage between a boy and a girlfriend with faint but undeniable claims to Aboriginal heritage. Mum and the rest of us might have sighed with relief when the best medical authorities of the day were eventually able to reassure the protagonists that there was no chance of a 'throw back' staining the young couple's future, but Grandma wasn't convinced. When we drove into town at Berri she would turn her head from the sight of Aboriginals gathered

at dusk on the riverside lawns near circles of cannas, as if they were the advance guards of some greater insurgence.

She would have been appalled by the invasion we had of them in Grade Three at Winkie after the Gerard Mission school closed. One morning, and without notice, its entire student population and their spindly legged desks turned up on the back of a truck, all clinging on as best they could. Their looks of bemusement matched ours. Half of them had no shoes, or just sandshoes with no socks, one or two even had just the uppers and no soles under them according to my brother, suggesting that their adoption was a kind of salute to white society's expectations. It was winter and frosty, but the kids were stoics: once they and their battered desks were made room for in the school, they squatted quietly behind them, finding some comfort in their desks' familiarity I suppose and in the classroom stove's novel warmth.

I don't think they were very good scholars. I remember seeing some of them relieving the tedium of class by picking at scabs and occasionally nibbling the proceeds. They all seemed to have runny noses and small deltas of snot at the foot of them that their constant sniffing never reduced. I think most of us just saw them as poorer versions of ourselves though; the day a fight started in the yard and the abo kid got called a boong, and Miss Hunt dragged the white kid off to wash his mouth out with soap, wasn't normal.

Her class was bulging that year with their extra numbers; two or three desks even had to be squeezed out the door and as soon as it warmed up she kept her windows wide open. Sometimes I saw her from a distance with two or three of the Aboriginal kids in tow, making sure they didn't miss out on their morning cocoa, or getting the girls involved in games. One day she got up at a Mother's meeting and asked whether something could be done to make sure the black kids got some lunch.

Grandma would have thought that was going way too far.

After Grandpa died we moved to Renmark, and not long after that she sold her house and followed us, which sounds funny. But, while having once lived with her it seemed like we had to acknowledge the debt forever, she actually did a circuit of all her scions for the rest of her life, fastening herself on them with an air of injury from her last port of call and a sense of entitlement to the next, until she was more or, sometimes less than, subtly disengaged.

Her arrivals were preceded by a truck-full of see-sawing furniture and rollicking pots, and somewhere in the mix her bristling complement of cats and birds, and Bobby, a reeking, coarse haired, peevish terrier that no one had ever been known to pat. It would be wrong to say we kept moving to escape her, there were usually other, untidier reasons, but it did happen more than once. She was tenacious though. When Dad gave away the small fruit block we had outside of Renmark, for example, and left Grandma stranded, she just plonked herself and her caravan on the property of a neighbour, Col Kubank. Poor old Col had enough on his plate already you would have thought – on top of the stigma of having a half caste lady for a girlfriend he had a brother who'd got himself into serious strife with the local Scouts. The brother got heat stroke picking grapes one day and – mercifully perhaps – perished, but Grandma would have been harder to shift: it was months before we came home from school one day and found a pile of pot plants in the drive and Dad ruefully surveying them. 'I couldn't stand the thought of Colin and that *woman* together any longer,' Grandma said.

She had a horror of any kind of intimacy – I never saw her kiss any of her children – and its representations: late in life she bought a television and I remember her recoiling in horror from the sight of Clark Gable embracing some apparently

compliant actress on its screen. I tried to jolly her out of it (not from any position of strength) by saying, ‘Oh come on Grandma, Grandpa must have kissed you in his time...’ and being firmly rebuked, ‘Yes, but never on the *mouth!*’ The image I always had of my grandparents’ wedding was melancholy enough, as, in the unblinking heat of day no doubt, they set off on a coach from some God forsaken place after the ceremony, without the suspicion that to the young couple’s natural reservations as they began life’s journey together, might have been added Grandpa’s less than sanguine expectations of the rewards in store for him.

While Dad and his brother Jack both referred to their mother in dispassionate passing as ‘the old bitch,’ Dad was more patient. He got silly when he drank but Uncle Jack turned nasty. Invariably. At the height of some row once he threw some loose change at his mother’s feet: ‘There’s five bob you witch,’ he shouted, ‘go and buy yourself a broom!’ Another time up on top of his fruit block at Cooltong where Grandma had planted herself and her caravan, he took an axe after he’d been in the pub all day and danced along the length of garden hose supplying water to her quarters, severing it multiply in an attempt to terminate her stay.

I can only speculate on what effect the sceptical twist of her lips might have had on any aspirations of her kids when they were young, and whether the threat of recalling them was one of the tools she used on them later on. If she was less demanding of her daughter, our Aunty Jean, it might be because mothers have less to blackmail daughters with, and Aunty Jean’s inheritance by marriage of a certain level of material comfort helped remove her from the orbit of her mother’s purview.

The puritan in Dad made some disapproving allusion to Aunty Jean once, something along the lines of: ‘There always seemed to be a heap of blokes hanging around her when she was young,’ (‘as if she’d been a bit of a moll,’ as my brother

inferred) when it might just have been a measure of her attractiveness. She was still striking when we knew her, with the family's dark skin and with longish features almost always relieved by a hint of mocking, and yet inclusive, amusement on her lips.

Maybe because she was less sensitive than her brothers she was immune to most of the irritants of country life that gnawed at them. She dealt with the Berri snobs' disapproval of her taste in dress and accessories by caricaturing them mercilessly in private and ignoring them entirely when she was out. She was probably too much for Uncle Charlie, her husband, a squat and often bemused figure, whose voice supplied a gravelly and mostly disregarded descant to his wife's shriller tones. Her extravagance seemed to see each new outfit or car she appeared in succeeding the sale of another slice of their properties, until the house and decades of junk and most of the descendants of the original livestock were squeezed into a few acres of weed besieged fruit trees.

It said something for Aunt Jean's sangfroid that neither she nor her children or the succession of school teachers and boy-and-girl friends they brought home with them were the slightest bit embarrassed by their surroundings. Her cooking helped of course: Grandma's staple confection was a yellow, tending-to-biscuity square sponge, bonded with a thin layer of raspberry jam and topped with almost no icing at all. She cherished her failures too, nursing and prolonging the lives of stony scones and other flock-textured concoctions, while Aunt Jean threw her disappointments to the chooks without ceremony, and scooped up another half dozen eggs for a fresh sortie in the kitchen. It must have grated with local rivals when she carried off prizes in shows with offerings that had spent at least part of their gestation in the company of boxed baby chickens and orphaned lambs. At parties, piled onto tables with the same carelessness of the hillocks of un-ironed clothes her kids had to burrow through to find something to

wear to school in the mornings, her feathery confections seemed tethered only by the fillings uniting them.

Sometimes Uncle Charlie seemed doomed to pay the price for being chosen from the ruck of livelier suitors. He remained a stoic supporter of his wife though, passing on with rumbling pride her culinary triumphs, especially when, after making a clean sweep of the Berri show one year, she won the local chapter of some cooking contest run by a women's magazine and then their national 'Bake-off' too. Her photo appeared in the magazine, looking slightly sheepish, if probably privately amused. The story that went with it disarmed 'The egg and I' associations of its subject by reminding its readers that Ma Kettle had been an excellent cook. It led to Aunty Jean being invited to write a weekly column in the magazine. She scoffed at the idea of offering not just cooking but general household hints – 'What would I know about bloody housekeeping!' she guffawed, while accepting the 'Ask Aunty Jean' retainer and begrudged elevation to local celebrity. Until – and right out of the blue – one of her youngest boys, a twin, got sick with leukaemia when there was no real treatment for it. They kept him going for a year or so with transfusions that left him looking deceptively rosy for a while, but I remember seeing him at the Area High School one day, sitting on his own waiting for the bus after he'd been allowed to play sport, with the sweat dried on his face and looking utterly self absorbed and grey and spent.

After that Aunty Jean lost all her spark for a while, as if whatever journey she'd been on was one she had no interest in resuming. She became distant and brooding, prone to interrupting her own silences embarrassingly: once, after we'd been to see her she looked to Dad for reassurance about the direction her little boy's body would be facing (of all things) – 'so I'll know when I visit him' – and Dad had to cut her off, 'Now, now, no more of that, Jean...' Sometimes I'd envied her kids: she used to give

full on smacking kisses to them with the same gusto as the clouts she handed out. Our own mother was much more sparing of both. Now she accused herself of being ever neglectful, even if poor old Uncle Charlie had to bear the brunt of her guilt. Dad was there one day after she'd heard that an insecticide they'd used might have had something to do with her boy getting sick, and found Uncle Charlie half buried in the clouds of powder she had him sweeping out of the shed.

I rang her up years later and when I asked her how she was she showed something of her old spirit: 'Oh...not bad for an old chook, I suppose.' But she didn't put up much of a fight at the end.

I'm sure Grandma took no pleasure in her grandson's early death, but she might have seen it as a kind of judgment on Aunty Jean's profligacy – or what she called 'waste.' Her own much more frugal resources and passions were saved for her pets and the gardens she established, nibbled insidiously from the hearts of properties wherever she went. Her last one at the Old Folks' Home in Loxton was an unhappy attempt at salvage; a small strip of earth pirated from the authority's buffalo-lawn master plan and supported a mere handful of annuals. Her mood had settled into a kind of sullen taciturnity by then, as if she had one too many grievances on her plate. When we visited her once and my brother conventionally enquired, looking at the made up bed of the woman she shared the room with, 'How's old Mrs So-and-so these days?' Grandma's reply was even less imaginative: 'Dead.'

Eventually she was confined with other alternately pettish and solicitous geriatrics in the Glenside asylum in Adelaide, and only left there after her death. At the crematorium her coffin stalled briefly before almost skipping out of sight, provoking a few smirks among the congregation who otherwise hadn't had a lot to smile at. There'd been none of the reminiscing during the service that people go in for now; one son,

Uncle Jack, didn't even make it, having overdone a claim for attention a few years earlier by swigging down a bottle of weed killer in front of his family, and I doubt if his surviving brother and sister felt like sharing anything from the family history that hadn't already been aired.

It must have been when I was about twelve that I started to notice people's colour more. Until then, since our family tactfully avoided mentioning our own Aunt Ruby's background, I never really noticed how dark she was, for example, while Grandma dodged mentioning her at all. One of the few times she acknowledged her niece's existence was when she was shuffling through the few family photos she had and came on an old studio portrait of her brother-in-law's kids. They were all done up for the occasion of course but Grandma still wasn't impressed; 'It doesn't matter what you do,' she said, 'the tar brush still shows through.'

On the first warm day of spring or summer Dad would often strip down to his singlet – and no further – to work in the garden, and by the end of the day be deeply tanned. It seemed strange and rather wonderful to us when we were little, especially when Dad explained it by displaying the deep blue veins on his inner unchastened arms, while hinting at kinship with Spanish royalty and other possibilities so much more beguiling than those offered up by a cousin years later, when he tried tracing our fathers' family tree. His findings made me faintly uneasy. 'Apparently this mob were all into droving,' he explained. 'In the end you just run out of leads.' Conjuring up images of carelessly sown, and not even shown the courtesy of recording, seeds.

It took me a while to recognise that some of Uncle Charlie's relatives, the Auntie Dulcie's and Mary's were unusually dark too. Their voices on their own should have been enough to warn me before that, but until then I hadn't felt uncomfortable with them at all. I can imagine Grandma seething though when they and their families

descended in raucous numbers when she was at Aunty Jean's, and her heading for the sanctuary of her caravan.

It doesn't surprise me now that some of Uncle Charlie's nephews from his side finished up playing A grade football. At Winkie School we'd been a bit in awe of the Aboriginal kids— one day when a group of us were walking up the back of the school oval and a cluster of parrots settled in the pepper trees lining it, one of the black kids picked up a rock and dropped one cold. None of us could ever hit one.

And they could fight. When we were young, boxing was big and at Renmark we used to go to the fights on a ring set up on the oval next door on Friday nights. Most of the bouts were pretty hectic, with the referee having to adjudicate on finer points of law when tiring fighters cast aside finesse, but in the three or four round bouts the Aboriginals stood out, especially early. They were almost untouchable as they scuffed bare footedly across the resin coated canvas. With each slap of their gloves on their flummoxed opponents you'd hear their often double-barrelled hiss of expelled air, accompanied by a nasally pitched and almost non verbal exhortation – 'it 'im Unna –' from their off stage seconds as the points piled up. The trouble was that if the bouts weren't over early the black fighters almost always ran out of steam, and finished up floundering with their heads buried behind their gloves while they were being pummelled at will by white opponents; showing that flair isn't everything and stamina usually is.

One young local Aboriginal stood out from the rest though. He was one of the Kites, and he came back to the River to give an exhibition bout one night after he'd won the Golden Gloves title. He was tall and slim with fine features and light coppery skin and couldn't have been better looking really if he'd been white. While deftly blocking and eluding his exasperated opponent during the four rounds, he handed out just enough

of a lesson in precision to ensure the crowd was impressed, while resisting any temptation to sit the other party on their arse. It was a real eye opener, according to *The Murray Pioneer*, and showed what Aboriginals could do if they got and took the chance.

Later on Ron turned professional and fought for the Australian title and when he came back from that he got involved with local Aboriginal kids. That would have been when Miss Hunt met him. She must have had a real bee in her bonnet, because she actually left the Public school system after a while and went to work for Aboriginal Affairs. I was about twelve and had been to three or four other schools since Winkie, but of course I remembered her when I saw their wedding photo in *The Pioneer*. Everyone knew Ron had plenty going for him but even so it still looked like Miss Hunt might have been worried about being left on the shelf. (People probably would have said she only had herself to blame for that too; she'd have been like our Aunty Jean: too much for most blokes.)

Grandma would have shuddered if she'd known.

I left out that at her last appearance at some family get together after we'd been in Adelaide for a year or two, she threw out a plaintive hint that she'd be happy to move in with us – 'I wouldn't take up much room' – and was firmly, and finally rebuffed. Dad's horizons had shrunk; he was infatuated with the city; he wasn't drinking, she had nothing to blackmail him with, and he spent his last years there in a more or less contented state I like to think, with whatever baggage he carried round with him from the past unloaded, if not actually buried for good.

I'm sure it's not what women have in mind, but maybe all men are ruined by them anyway, especially by those early in life, whose affection or lack of it leaves expectations or gulfs behind that can never be filled. I know Miss Hunt spoilt me for

good. She could have hardly resisted the image in those old school photos of course, without ever knowing what it masked – the already confirmed thief and arsonist. Families are more or less bound to smooth over things like that; I'm not sure if she could. In the end I'm glad I left the Winkie school before she had time to be disappointed – though in a way you could say she let me down herself later on.

I don't know much of what happened after her marriage finished, though Grandma would have been warmed to a state of at least tepid vindication by the story in the paper a few years later (when they used to write up all these things) recording that Miss Hunt's ex-husband had been proved to be 'so affected by alcohol or a drug as to be incapable of handling' – the vehicle that he'd ploughed into a tree. I don't think Ronnie was ever quite at ease with being so well known; even in his glory days I remember seeing pictures of him getting into the ring with a half bemused grin on his face while all the yahooing was going on around him, as if he wasn't quite sure if he'd pulled the right rein. Mum used to say when her job took her out to the Mission to see the babies there, that the mothers she felt sorriest for were the ones who tried to do the right thing; there were so many others trying to drag them down. Perhaps that was part of Ron's problem too: his hangers on. And perhaps he just never fitted in. Years later at the Show here in Town I saw him or someone a lot like him standing with their arms folded, trying to look cocky out the front of a Boxing Tent. If it was him he must have been going bad.

Miss Hunt stayed on in the Riverland, at least while we were there, I know, and kept her head up I'm sure. I think she went back to teaching Primary school again (once bitten, twice shy). I saw her in the street in Berri when I was about sixteen, not long before we left the River for good. She was looking a bit more compact by then, but somehow – if you know what I mean – reduced. I don't like to think of her aging and

losing her old confidence – though on the other hand she could have been one of those that bristle and chafe and become compensatingly and uncharmingly and irrelevantly autocratic as they get older, when they should really be showing some grace. The outrageous, the extravagant, maybe even the courageous like Miss Hunt – in the end even they lose their spark.

I don't know why I keep looking for someone like her to hold me close against her heart.

Mr Downward – not that anyone knew him as that – took us for Geography in Third Year High. He must have been in his late thirties I suppose, near middle aged, and tall and gangly, but otherwise unexceptional looking until you saw the freakish conk he had that gave him his nickname, The Nose.

It stuck out like a garden trowel; beating him by moments into classes, kids liked to swear. It was confronting; it seemed uncalled for. It was something that only someone born with a De-Gaulle-sized ego or other natural advantages could hope to have overcome, and his self consciousness showed in the way he half screened his face with his hands at times when he was sitting at his desk and in the fitful way he looked round it at the world.

Back then, on top of not being well paid, teachers had to accept a posting anywhere for the first three years after they graduated. Some of them, dumped in places like the Riverland, had breakdowns before they even got warmed up and fled back to the City. Others clung on till they'd done their time and were free. Others just stayed, perhaps because they were always going to. They played sport for one of the local clubs, or took up sketching or something and often, while still enjoying their modest cachet of professional superiority, wound up not very different from their native kin.

I think The Nose belonged to a final, fringe dwelling group; those lacking the means or will to escape who just hung on over the years without ever really settling in, while becoming, as each year's crop of incurious students succeeded another, more disenchanted versions of their original selves.

I never saw him at the football and he didn't appear to have any other social affiliations (there were no Rotary or Toc-H badges on show). At school I don't

remember seeing him conferring seriously with other staff, or enjoying any of their stagy sotto voce asides. I don't think he was close mates with any of them and the year someone involved with the art work on the school magazine had the nifty idea of adorning its back cover with the teachers' academic credentials along with their signatures, The Nose's cribbed claim to a couple of other honours on top of the routine Dip Ed probably wouldn't have helped endear him to them either.

I only saw him out with his wife once, and I doubt if she would have been a great social ice breaker. When she showed up at a school function it looked like it was under sufferance and she just about bit his head off at one stage when he was making introductions. Her own nose was a short and pudgy article and she wore her hair tied back in a way that seemed designed to drag whatever life her face had out of it. If most couples gravitate towards each other when they realise the sort of person they'd really like to be with is out of reach, I wonder how much sooner and lower The Nose and his wife had to set their sights.

Sometimes I pictured him in the house they had on one of the shallow ridges outside Barmera, pushing aside his marking after tea to gaze over those plodding fruit blocks; questing the air for some relief from the reek of grumbling tractors and glutting fruit, while seeking refuge in a flagon's slumping tide.

That's only conjecture, of course. But there was no doubt about the antipathy that existed between him and the kids. Once, in the annual school magazine, somebody satirised the old English car that he used to drive, in a poem beginning:

'Have you seen the Morris Oxford
Of colour deathly grey
That wends its way from Barmera
At a certain time each day...'

One year, the Leaving kids having their break-up tried to manhandle the vehicle through the narrow gate onto the tennis court. It was too much for them and they left it stranded on the lawn outside, but The Nose didn't even acknowledge its change of status when he found it there after school; that was the thing, just flung himself behind the wheel and drove it joltingly away. He did himself absolutely no favours in that area. He didn't care whether the kids liked him or not.

He was no sort of performer in the classroom either, even if his progress across the blackboard when he was writing up notes was weirdly compelling. Stabbing so hard with the chalk that pieces kept snapping off and finding the dead centre of the bin as he disposed of them, he'd tack away until most of the surface was covered, when he'd turn around with a look of distaste before moving to one side of the platform and fixing his gaze above our heads.

Then he'd start being sarcastic. Glancing back at the board we couldn't avoid any longer while he was jouncing around the change in one of his two or three pairs of strides, he'd say things like, 'Now – if it's not asking too much – would *anyone* have *any* idea where' – such-and-such was, or what it meant, confident that no one did or cared much, before he went on to explain what we were supposed to know with a big show of weariness. His dark eyes would crinkle, but never in mirth: it was more mordant. When he told someone off his mouth curled in a way that wasn't very pleasant – or effective either. It was as though, once his gaze shirked the issue dividing it, the whole class got a share of a rebuke – which, since there was no intellectual jealousy there – no one found particularly wounding.

The day I was on the end of some individual attention from him came as a surprise. But perhaps it was always going to happen. Living on the edge of a desert, infatuated with our mother's memories of her Adelaide Hills' childhood, we lived for

pilgrimages to town and the leafier suburbs her family all occupied. Back up on the River we turned clouds at dusk into ranges like the ones that teased the horizon on the way to Adelaide, before finally shouldering around us in what we thought were their impressive selves. Me being able to list most of the world's wetter cities and real mountains and rivers from early on at school was really just a consequence then, a kind of quirk, not really any more impressive than some collector's ability to expiate on the background of beer cans they've spent twenty years emptying.

But one day it had an effect. One afternoon some test or project I'd tweaked up came back littered not just with ticks – The Nose only ever crossed and ticked – but with a comment, 'Good work,' buried at the bottom. I wondered what that effort had cost him. Then, at the end of the period, I got an even bigger shock when he put himself at risk of being swept away by the tide of kids heading for the door by standing up and indicating that I had to stay. I wondered then if someone had died.

Once we were on our own though he just picked up the paper again by a top corner and sat down with it. 'See your mark?' he grunted.

I had.

'Surprised?' He ran a finger down one page and turned it over as if there was a chance he might have gone overboard, his lips moving once or twice before he roused himself. 'Surprised,' he said.

I murmured something self deprecating, that he interrupted:

'Hear you're a bit of a class clown, that right?'

'Not really sir.' I could hardly tell him that much as everyone hated school there were days when our class went home worn out from laughing when he wasn't around. I couldn't take all the credit.

“Life is earnest, life is real,” He snorted. ‘All that crap ...’ His mouth betrayed the grimmest hint of a grin. ‘Maybe you better work out which side you’re on.’

I nodded.

‘D’you know – you heard of (some-medal-or other)?’ he asked.

‘Not really sir.’ Not at all actually.

‘You could win it, you know that?’

I did now.

He pushed the test back like he was sick of it, and made a sour ‘pah’ sound...

‘Anything to get out of this.’

I’d always known I would. I just wasn’t sure how. His comments touched something in me though – vanity of course – but more than that: it was one of those moments when you feel as if you’ve found some direction in your life, been shown a door. Enthralled, aloof as any head prefect or Rural Youth of the Year, I distanced myself from asphalt politics and scuffles from that afternoon; I studied. (There wasn’t a lot of competition: the Librarian couldn’t work out why I was always borrowing books.)

The Nose never initiated another conversation, or referred to the honours I looked like garnishing again. But I felt or imagined his support. By his standards his written comments on my work were almost effusive at times, encouraging me to dwell on a future straight out of one of the English-public-school yarns we were brought up on: long tabled, ivy clad and indolent; with me as the prematurely creaky catechist accompanied by a sort of tea gowned cross between Matron and the headmaster’s daughter.

Who wouldn’t even breathe the way Vera Lukic and Chrissie Mansell did.

Among their peers the two girls were almost alone in being able to defy the censorship of school uniforms designed to deflect the lascivious; enveloping girls in a

welter of ruches, tucks and pleats that most of them tried to compensate for by hitching up their skirts as high as they could. Vera and Chrissie left nothing to chance anyway. Above their own strong brown legs and white, calf length socks they left a daring top button or two of their blouses undone as well, while glaring round them affrontedly at the attention it got. Perennially haughty, they wore their hair teased up in a then fashionable manner requiring constant comb ups and circumvented the school's prohibition of nail polish by exploiting a translucent version of it which demanded their frequent inspection. Beyond the odd smirk they shared with one another, they seemed to engage in no other social intercourse; the closest they got to acknowledging their own humanity being in really warm weather when from time to time they shook powder down the fronts of their blouses and patted it well down afterwards, surrounding themselves in small scented clouds.

Somehow, while disdaining en masse the males surrounding them, they reserved a special antipathy for The Nose. Perhaps because he ignored them so completely, to the extent of relying on radar apparently when he did a tour of the class room to avoid their out flung legs. Eyes down though, sprawling in their seats to ease some imaginary cramp or real boredom, they waited for the moment to huffily restore an article of clothing to its rightful place as if they'd detected him eyeing the deficiency. Idly tracing the flesh of their throats, drawing thumbs and ring fingers together to meet at the junction of their blouses; daring him as they sucked speculatively on bios with sly upward glances, to reprimand them, have a go – they... had all the answers.

Perhaps, to be fair, they were really only using him as target practice for bigger and later game, as part of an exercise. But one day they took things too far. In a sluggish first period after lunch when The Nose was scooping up half hearted offerings

of homework, he reached Vera's desk...and was vouchsafed nothing. She said nothing either when he held out his hand.

When he demanded, 'Where's your work?' she made a face:

'Haven't done it.'

'Why not?'

'No time,' she shrugged, encouraging her friend Chrissie to have a smirk while The Nose was giving a couple of good sized nods.

'No time eh?' he said. 'Well, I tell you what young lady, you'll make time tonight then. How about that? And you can have it on my desk in the staff room at eight in the morning. How does that sound?'

She snorted. 'I won't be doing it *tonight*...'

'Why not?'

She raised an incredulous brow. 'Because I've got *other* things to do.'

He bent down. 'You're what – you've got what?'

She breathed in and spelt it out: 'Other-things-to-do...'

Confronted, he started stammering, 'You – well, look, you'll' –

She'd had enough, she dismissed him: 'Drop off.'

The next thing he had her out of her seat and started dragging her out the front, desks and bags bucking and being booted aside on the way, and when he got her there, and while she was still squawking, bent her over the desk, and gave her half a dozen decent whacks across the arse. She looked like she'd been put under the tap when he let her up. The Nose was panting himself, but he had enough energy left to huff – 'Now get out!' at her. She found her hanky and started jerking sobs into it as she was heading for the door, and once she was outside we could see her through the window getting a bit of a gallop up as she headed for the girls' toilet, putting her hand back on her bum once or

twice as if to check everything was still there. It was dead quiet in the room till Chrissie made a move to get up to go to her mate, and then The Nose let her have it too:

“And you can stay there till I tell you to go, you slut!”

Sensation...

Funny things happen in school if you're there long enough. Most of them used to get hushed up, but this one couldn't. Chrissie's mother was on the phone next day sticking up for her daughter and when Vera's parents came in to see the headmaster, Slimy Jack, they reckoned you could hear Vera's old man halfway across the yard. Something had to be done and it was: they put Vera in another class. Afterwards, left to glower alone on the stage the girls had shared, you'd have to say Chrissie languished. She sulked seriously and withdrew even more from the herd, and sat round shouldered, elbows on her desk, self consciously couching her old assets. One of the kids claimed to have actually tweaked one of her boobs in a hit and run raid outside Tape's news agency one night, and escaped with nothing worse than the mouthful of abuse she hurled after him down the street. She was a lot less Olympian. I lent her my rubber one day.

I don't think The Nose got into strife himself over it, though he might have had some explaining to do and it seemed to affect him. He was more distant, brows beetling and lips more privately pursed; his gaze less inclined to engage anyone, particularly Chrissie or the area she used to occupy with her friend, as if they were both reminders of a scene he didn't want to revisit. His comments vanished from my work too, the ticks seemed fainter, half hearted, as if I'd had something to do with what happened. There were no more hints of an understanding between us; it was as if, having been caught out once, he wasn't going to let his guard down again.

I gave the studying away then. I'm not quite sure why. Maybe because it was like one of those conversations you're having with someone that gets interrupted and doesn't seem worth going on with. Perhaps it would have happened anyway once the novelty wore off; it was that kind of school: there was always something going on.

At the end of the year they had the annual grudge match between the staff and the students' cricket teams. It was supposed to be good clean fun, but wasn't: the sports teachers used the occasion to show they still had what it takes and the kids to show they hadn't. It was the one day of the year when the gentlemen's agreement that the school's fastest bowler wouldn't come off more than half a dozen paces on the dodgy malthoid pitch, didn't apply. It was open slather. Somehow, maybe by nagging the sports teachers, who might have been happy enough to gang up on him anyhow, the kids managed to get The Nose inveigled into playing. I don't know why he gave in but when he came out to bat (in whites, if you mind) a real chirrup went round the ground. He'd even been conned into coming in when the ball was new. His request for some sort of poofy guard only added to the anticipation. The wicket keeper smirked and gave himself an extra yard; 'Slag' Sontag measured out his full run and trod water at the top of it while he was wind milling his arms, and then...he let it rip.

His first ball just missed its target, The Nose almost toppling on the wicket while one part of him was tracking the ball like a periscope and a chorus of 'nearly lost it' went round the field. The next one almost chopped him off at the ankles; the third one he somehow managed to take a step down the wicket and meet, and the next one got hammered into the gaping leg side crowd. After that things got nasty. If The Nose's innings had betrayed just a hint of vengeance bent belting it might have been forgivable. It was the disdainful way he cut, lofted, laced and even patted fireballs back down the wicket that really hurt. Slag Sontag dropped his bundle completely and

finished up coming in to bowl like a rocking horse; the kid that was going to be the next Richie Benaud faked an injury after an over and a half. By the time The Nose retired, tucking his bat under his arm as he marched off in the field-marshal way that Greg Chappell made his own later on, the humiliation was general and complete.

If there'd ever been any chance of some sort of understanding being reached between The Nose and the school it went out the window then. Nobody wanted to know him.

And, as things turned out, they didn't have to, or not for much longer. During the holidays he had an accident after he'd been socialising (for want of a better word) at the Cobdogla RSL one night. Since he hadn't been to any war, its Besser-Block premises must have just been somewhere reasonably discreet to go to dodge the Barmera pub's six o'clock swill, and where, if he didn't pass the time glooming on his own in a corner, the worst he would have had to put up with would have been some half cut member droning on about his military past. A bigger risk you run in those sorts of places, I think, is in developing a standby sort of persona while you're there that eventually takes over from the real thing. That's what country life is good at. It could have been after he was involved in some late night, broad brushed, even ribald exchange (leading to the grudging endorsement of his companions: 'Not a *bad* sort of bloke when he forgets about the dictionary he's swallowed –') that he took the wheel of his car in an atypically amiable frame of mind. I don't know. Since there were no blood tests or breathalyzers then to add to accident victims' embarrassment he *might* have been quite blamelessly and relatively soberly navigating the bypass road to Barmera. But in any case after he was confronted by the lights of an upcoming semi there's no doubt he made a mistake that even the trusty Morris couldn't rectify; it ran off the road

and skidded and tipped and his right arm was pinned and torn off on the side of the road.

Spared an inquisition, at least, The Nose had the rest of the holidays to recover and be fitted with a prosthesis before he eventually went back to school. But he never did. While he was convalescing he underwent some sort of crisis, possibly religious, with some nut getting in his ear in hospital when he was at a low ebb; though he might just have decided, with the chickens not only coming home to roost, but elbowing each other for a place to perch, that enough was enough. Doubly disabled, as well as surrounded with fresh gossip and facing the prospect of going back to a marriage that could have never been too thrilling and a job that he always disliked, what was a middle aged man in his position going to do?

Well, in his case he cleared out, to use a phrase belonging to a time in Australia when you could do that, clear out, go bush, fit yourself up with a new identity if you felt like it and start life again. It was an expression our grandma used to use, particularly when she was in an Old Folks' Home. Her nighty-clad excursions never took her much further than the end of the street, but The Nose's departure was much more emphatic.

There were no kids at least for him to be blackmailed with, but his departure still caused a stir. His wife, if she was given the option of coming, must have said a firm no thanks when he took a position on some Mission in Arnhem Land (of all places) before leaving, literally, everything behind. When his wife packed up herself not long after and moved to Town, it included piles of her husband's collection of opera recordings from the early 1900s; old 78s, that a kid at school, whose father was a second hand dealer, reckoned he and his sister used for Frisbees. 'The old man didn't care,' he said, quoting some of the artists: 'Frieda Lieder – Lotte Lehmann – what a lotta shit.'

I don't know if The Nose thought he was going to make a difference where he was going or just wanted to get as far away as he could. Someone said it was an old leper colony that he picked out; his disability wouldn't have seemed so profound there, that's one thing, and the Mission was 'dry' too (even if his records would have got nice and mildewy) and that might have saved him from finishing up in the perpetually half cut state that Territorians traditionally enjoyed. I have this gloomy image of him stuck on the banks of some stagnant waterway with a coterie of gloating crocodiles to stare back at all day, though his posting could have been to somewhere more elevated, even elevating. Since I didn't ever attend any school reunion though, where you get the chance of catching up on gossip I never heard anything of him – or almost anyone else from there – again.

Distance, if it doesn't lend charm, at least helps you be more charitable. When I think of The Nose's two tormentors in our class, I can concede now that they were not only probably trying their wings but making the most of the opportunity to do it.

Vera, who had dark Mediterranean skin and was possibly the more voluptuous of the two girls might well have gone to fat once she left school, if only because her body had nowhere else to go. Certainly I never saw her later on adorning a shed calendar or in ads for the sort of swim suits she was already qualified to fill. And I used to wonder whether Chrissie, who was taller, and shaded Vera when it came to her legs, mightn't have just lapsed into what she was always meant to be once she got puberty over with: a big, broad shouldered, even affable country girl, driving a tractor around on a fruit property in between bringing up her kids.

She still took no prisoners on the netball court at school, but when I cannoned into her in the yard one day when we were in Leaving she didn't make much of a fuss; just shrugged me off and straightened herself up. 'S'right,' she said.

I don't know why the news from someone I knew that he'd called into a garage in the City years ago and recognised her there in a pair of overalls ('A crook old size she was, too') disappointed me so much. It was hardly fair; she'd have been a good forty by then for one thing, and it was her husband's business anyway, so it was no real disgrace. It's just one of the problems with peaking so early, I guess, is that it makes it hard to keep up the pace.

Beautiful Ettie

Reg Taylor

In the first photo of her, sitting on the end of a line up of kindergarten kids, she looks about sixteen, and seems to be shying away from the camera, probably because she's got the sun in her eyes.

But in the next one she's grinning right into the lens. It's a family portrait taken in 1904 and it shows her father doing his best to look patriarchal, while everyone else in the picture is – really – acting up. Even Jenny Lane, Ettie's mother (the one Mary Gilmore disapproved of) looks like she's in the middle of delivering some light hearted reproof to her brood or fielding some cheek from one of them. Ettie has her long blonde hair combed back from her slightly squarish face. Her lips are parted over her straight even teeth. It could have been taken yesterday.

But then, she almost disappears from the book on New Australia. It's not surprising of course, even if she was good looking she's really only in there at all because of her family connections. There were other, much more important players in that adventure who deserved attention.

Like Harry Taylor.

After he came back from Paraguay he settled in Renmark eventually. By the time we moved there he'd passed on, of course – he died in 1932 – but his only child, Gilmore, was still running his father's newspaper. It must have been prosperous enough, though Gilmore emanated, in the self effacing way of the 50s, a buttoned up diffidence in his charcoal-grey suits and dark ties. We rented the house he owned next door to his, but I don't remember that he ever spoke to us kids as he walked past enthralled in pipe smoke on his way to work. I can't recall that his wife ever talked to us either, though our sister reckoned that she had a la-di-dah way about her that her accent didn't quite match.

For a while we must have looked like ideal tenants anyway. Mum and Dad were invited to accompany their landlords to a performance of the G&S Society one night, and had 'supper' back at their place afterwards. Dad, who'd been a runner in his youth, offered to give Gilmore's eldest athlete son a rub down on his training nights and that might have had led to him being offered a job proof reading at the newspaper.

By that time the crusading days of *The Pioneer* were well behind it; it was cautious and folksy in tone, and most people only bought it to catch up on local gossip and sport. It's hard not to imagine that time would have passed there unhurriedly, except perhaps for Thursdays when the paper came out when there might have been a bit of a scramble. It left Dad not overly fatigued on weekends to set about restoring the garden that had been wiped out in the '56 Flood, and the first year we were there he won prizes with his flowers in the local Show.

Whatever was left of Gilmore's father's zeal seems to have been channelled into the safe waters of patronage of things like it. I'm not sure if Gilmore competed himself; that might have represented a conflict of interests and while his father's garden was said to be a veritable jungle, Gilmore's own was unambitiously orderly. Never suggestive of the passion that went into enthusiasts' cabbage sized dahlias and chrysanthemums that lolled under the weight of their own heads while they were jostling for judges' attention in the Show, it enjoyed the services of a putative gardener, old Cubby Curren, who turned up in his carpet slippers once or twice a week and spent most of his time pushing a desultory wheelbarrow from one hideaway to another in the yard.

The building they held the Show in was only a glorified shed with uncertain floors and the atmosphere of the '56 Flood was still in it, a back-water mustiness and tide marks on the walls. But when the Show was on everyone went, if only to catch up on the offerings of the areas' two professional rose growers who took pride of place. If

they competed against each other I'm sure it would have been done in the most gentlemanly manner, but I don't think they bothered. There were people like the doctor's wife, who turned up every year with armfuls of gladdies and practically bared her teeth at the opposition, but those men were both too busy winning prizes interstate and even overseas, and seemed happy just to exhibit their sumptuous blooms for amateurs to swoon over.

One of the growers was in the process of overtaking his old man's fruit property, but by stealth, and the day we visited it his garden was still in its infancy. After an hour or so a mob of us kids had exhausted its possibilities and turned our attention to a game that finished with me snapping a small flowering cherry tree off at waist height while I was in the process of breaking my own arm as well.

The others had to get rid of the evidence first before they could tell anyone and I had to wait in hospital for ages for the doctor to come. It was his afternoon off and when he did show up he didn't look too happy about it being interrupted. I'd passed the time being urged by everyone including Mum to be brave when the bones were nearly sticking out of my skin, and he didn't seem too worried either; just looked the offending limb over sourly and grunted, 'Suppose we better do something ...' After an hour or two's healthful skiing at Lake Bonney followed by a slightly less healthful hour or two at the Yacht Club, he might not have been in the fittest of states for the job. In any case, after three or four days they realised they'd have to reset it.

One of the nurses, Dawn, wasn't just alone in consoling me before that happened, but game enough to front Matron and tell her something was wrong when she saw me crying on her night shift. Everyone else thought I was weak. One evening she brought me in a heap of comics and lollies. It was enough to make me fall in love

with her – unfairly, I know – though I still think she could have let me down more gently later on...

When I saw her at the pool for the first time in her bathers she reminded me of her more famous swimming namesake, but she was flirting with some bloke her own age who had a Mohawk haircut – of all things – and didn't even seem to know me without my cast. They were play-fighting up on top of the high board and while I was hoping they'd both fall off and die, I did a racing dive that took me across the Pool in two or three strokes while I ignored her completely. The next time I saw her there she was with someone else, and after that, of course, I didn't see her again.

We used to think the Taylors' house was grand, but it wasn't really; that wouldn't have been the Taylor style – it was left to the doctor's and dentist's houses to present really adequate expressions of sufficiency in the town. We used to skirt the dentist's on our way into the Pool because of its associations with his assaults on our teeth, but there was something about the doctor's home that made us want to linger. It stood on a good half acre of land, which left room not just for the garden his wife spent most of her time in, but a proper grass tennis court as well. The court had a brush fence on the road side; I suppose because if there'd been railings the envious might have been tempted to stick their noses against them. I read once that a curiosity for what's happening behind other people's doors is often the starting point for Peeping-Tom's solitary careers, but though we could hear the *chkk-chkk-chkk* of their big sprinkler playing inside their fence on hot days, we only ever wondered what was going on behind it.

I used to imagine, and that was all, the doctor and his wife on Sunday mornings, deck chaired outside under their trellis of wisteria, in the brief gap before the sun got

really stern, with *The Pioneer* spread out in front of them perhaps while they were dissecting some local gaucherie in it, before going on to drawl out an invite on the telephone, to the dentist perhaps, or someone else in their restricted social set for a late afternoon's hit up on the court. It was a world I looked forward to entering.

But before that could happen Dad lost his job at the paper. He had a forensic approach to language and might have assumed the added licence of excising any journalistic lapses he met in the course of duty, and that could have upset Gilmore, whose urbanity, unlike his father's, was not perpetual, apparently. I don't know if it was because he was unhappy – with himself, maybe, for being an only and lesser version of his father – or with his kids, none of whom looked like turning out to be Rhodes' Scholars – or with his wife's lack of dedication to smoothing out her vowels, even. And while he was the titular head of *The Pioneer* he could have been frustrated there too, because he really had no say in what went into it once he'd surrendered the reins to Art Whitmore, who knew he could print whatever he liked as long as the paper kept selling.

Once Dad finished up there, denying him – and by right of inheritance in country towns any of his children – the chance to play a part in the paper's history, we did start to drift to the social outer, I now realise. Gilmore's eldest son, Wesley, declining further massages with Dad's own liniment, continued his jogging night after unattended night on the oval next door to us, the sight or sound of his heavy tread confirming his rejection of Dad's assistance; while his father, in his matutinal march past our place, seemed ever more absorbed in rumination.

Dad's sense of superiority to most of his fellows up the River was normally subtly expressed; the interpolation of a rarely, or never-at-all heard now 'Old boy,' into his speech, for example, having the effect of effortlessly patronising its subject. But disappointments like the one at the paper often made him just sound tired.

I don't know when he started drinking. I can remember the first suppressed confrontation we heard between Mum and Dad in the kitchen one night; with Mum's accusatory tones and Dad's would-be huffy response. We'd never heard them argue. I'm not sure if he started sipping sneakily and gradually or got right into it; it might have been going on for a while before Mum forced herself to acknowledge alcohol's tell-tale whiffs (to which I'm still attuned on other people's breaths) and well before he first came home half shickered. He might have started when he was still at *The Pioneer* - and Gilmore's tolerance for grog was even less than his temperate forbear's.

Sometimes it's hard to know who's better at hiding things in families. For years I haven't even gone near the memory of a night, well down the track, when we were mucking around outside with Gilmore's youngest son, Saul. He was sprawling out of breath in the buffalo grass that had taken over what used to be a garden bed when he felt something under his bum and fished around till he dug out an empty brandy bottle (a Renmano's). Its discovery led to another's. He kept casting wider in a treasure hunt that finished with about a dozen empties in the drive. When Dad pulled in there at night with the Vanguard he must have lobbed them there one by one, with tender care or a drunk's sangfroid. Young Saul could appreciate the situation's absurdity. 'Here's *one*...and here's *another* one,' he kept saying. In only one sense did we have the advantage over him: even if he was half aware of what his discoveries meant, he had no way of knowing just how humiliating it was for us.

You couldn't put him in jail for that, of course. I met him again many years later in the Renmark pub when he looked what he'd turned out to be: a businessman, amiably and urbanely disposed to the world and my part in his part of it. He suggested we lunch together the next time I was in town and though I'd been in the bar all afternoon I managed to mouth some reciprocal civility. This time the advantage he had was

complete, but when I called in at his home a lot more years later I was armed with the knowledge that he was ill. His wife who answered the door was friendly. She apologised for his absence. Sick as he was, she said, he'd gone on some car rally in the name of a charitable cause. Was it, I wondered, one of those last gasp, flung in the face of doom protests, or just the sort of thing that his never complaining grandfather would have done? I know it's unkind, but sometimes it seems as if one of the most reliable satisfactions in life comes from outliving people who've injured you. For a moment I felt free, as I had at the rose garden earlier that day too, when I couldn't even work out where the original garden had been, let alone that poor flowering tree.

When we were kids our sins were mostly like those in that garden, expedient and minor and part of a habit we expected to grow out of. But later on, I started to wonder if adults weren't all actually play acting half the time, practising deceits in the name of honesty, denying or pretending to deny themselves things that they were hungering after. I wondered, and I wonder now, how many relationships are even really proof against that thief in the night, some other's charm.

Or something less than it.

My image of the doctor and his wife languidly sampling their summer Sundays got a shock when he turned up to see me in hospital bad tempered and smelling of grog. It went out the window altogether when it came out a few years later that he'd been knocking off (as the expression went then) half the nurses at the hospital. It was hushed up at the time but he still had to resign his position at the hospital and they said his wife was out of the place with every stick of furniture she could lay her hands on before his stethoscope had a chance to get cold.

I don't know if Dawn, the nurse, was one of the 'notches' on the doctor's belt. She could have been. After that rough around the edges character I saw her with at the

pool that day she started going out with Disher Wellman, who'd made himself famous for being kicked out of primary school in Grade Seven when the headmaster caught him sniffing petrol in the groundsman's shed. I don't think he even bothered with high school. He was drinking in the pub and taking bets for an S.P. bookie by the time he was seventeen. People reckoned he wouldn't work in an iron lung, but by the time he was nineteen he was driving round in a '56 Ford Customline with a fox tail aerial. He used to boast that he'd wind it up to a hundred and twenty (and that was miles an hour) on the downhill stretch to the punt on the Loxton to Berri road. Those Customlines used to float like a bowl of custard, people said, and when he hit a flat spot on one of the bridges on the final stretch they reckoned she'd bottom out and then just about take off altogether. I think there were two or three of them across creeks in that last half mile before you got to the River and one night Disher must have miscounted when he and Dawn were coming back from the drive-In at Loxton, because he didn't hit the skids until just before he got to where the punt would have been if he'd been able to pull up for it in time. He took off alright. The story that went round after they fished the car out of the drink was that most of the top half of Dawn's gear was missing when they found her too. So perhaps she wasn't such a nice girl after all.

There was never any scandal attached to Harry Taylor, that was one thing. He was a father figure his staff trusted and revered, as he paddled round the office in summer in his tussore-silk suit and sandshoes. It's hard to read his account of the early days at Cosme, and the dreams he had for it and the people there and not think you've missed out on something in your life. Mary Gilmore said he was the most forgiving person she had ever met. People who knew him later remembered the energy he put into Renmark's newspaper and the town, his selflessness, his Christian dedication to causes. The picture of him in the book on Paraguay, taken when he was twenty, is not actually

all that flattering, but that only shows how we can all be prisoners of our looks, and later photos caught the twinkle in his eye. To be honest, when all the ingredients must have been there, I really don't understand why Renmark didn't turn him into another right wing Billy Lane. Unless it was because he truly believed in the importance of being good.

He met the lady that he married after he got back to Australia and I've seen a picture of the family home at Renmark showing a female figure that might have been his partner's at the front gate. The lady is too far from the camera to make out much detail, but there's enough that's angular about her to suggest that she was no Ettie.

Harry was never actually accused of doing a bolt from Paraguay, though the reasons given for him leaving seem vague. But with the girl Ettie I think it would always have been on the cards. Even if her family had stayed, once she was grown up she'd have been one of those with enough sense to realise she could do better elsewhere with her looks. That's how it usually works.

There is just one last indirect reference to her in the New Australia book. The author, Gavin Souter, tracked down her widower in the 1960s in Coogee – of all places. He was eighty-something by then and diminutive and fairly well clapped out, and his half disparaging attitude towards Cosme and his own part in it didn't make him sound like a victim of what they used to call the 'Paraguayan claw,' which was supposed to have plucked at its survivors wherever they went.

I don't know if his wife was prey to those sentiments, and whether she gazed out over the water (assuming she had a view of it and wasn't stuck in the middle of her own red sea of bungalows) and mooned over those excitement filled days on 'The Royal Tar;' or if she was haunted by memories of other orange blossom scented days, as Taylor was said to have been among Renmark's orchards. Or whether this strong and

capable looking girl was even fulfilled back in Australia. I'm not suggesting she'd ever have been attracted to any of those indigenous specimens of manhood she met in South America, but her husband, at least in his octogenarian manifestation, didn't seem to correspond to any of the 'tall, straight and manly' prototypes that William Lane's prose dwelt on. She might, and to her cost, have been initially seduced by some devil-may-care young buck, who subsequently lapsed into a dull-as-ditchwater boor once he had her and dedicated the rest of his life to spoiling her fun. If he did, and thinking about what might have been, did her ever narrowing lips become set in that common to middle aged women expression of displeasure?

I have an even more extreme image (unfounded I know) of her dropping her bundle completely, and becoming one of those shapeless habitu  of the Ladies Lounge, illicitly sipping her way through most of the housekeeping with her suburban cronies, before stumbling home with whatever shopping she had enough money left to scrounge up – while clinging defiantly to the promise of an outhouse cache, in which all her griefs could be offloaded for the day. Slipshod, slovenly, sluttish even (our language lost so much when we disowned those terms of moral disapprobation, didn't it) is that how she wound up her days? I know I have no reason to suspect so, other than that her memory, like nearly all of those grown ups in that silly Cosme game, has got no better spokesman.

The past won't be patronised. Sometimes I think – no, I know – that I've made too much of Harry Taylor. When I go on about him I can feel people's attention drifting, in much the same way as his audiences' were supposed to do when he had a bee in his bonnet. Once you get over nostalgia, the past starts to look pretty bland. And what was he, really, but some middle aged dabbler, a bush town liberal, unequal to going on with the one real adventure he had, who then spent the rest of his life talking

about it, or buried in just so much of his mountainous home library as would allow him to periodically emerge from it and bore his readers to tears? I ask how he could delude himself that Renmark was even close to being the socialist colony he claimed, and, after all he'd done for it, how was he commemorated there anyway? With a no-through road, a since demolished grandstand, a riverside garden that some landscaper has recently brutalised beyond belief...

And Ettie, beautiful Ettie? Well, there is just one more snap of her in that book that I'd forgotten about, or held back, till now. She's smiling of course, while squeezing the sulky face of some motherless kid against hers, as if she'd just threatened him with adoption. Her hair is falling loosely around her. I've been tip-toeing round it, but it's no good trying to avoid the fact any longer that, all other things being equal, and wherever their paths crossed, she'd always have been too good for Harry. He was never what you'd call a good sort. Or going on to sentimentalise about whether she missed the chance to be one of history's better known brides. Or if he lost the opportunity to marry someone who might have got him to write something half decent. It's just not on.

One of Harry's best mates, Mary Gilmore, was quite frankly appalled by the behaviour of Ettie's mother, by the way. She complained to a friend in Australia that the lady thought nothing of going on swimming parties with men who wore little more than pouched belts, while herself stripping off in full view of other women and children. 'But enough of such disgusting things,' she said in a letter, before turning to more wholesome ones. So, if nothing more, or less, who was Jenny Lane's daughter while we're at it, but a girl as bold as her mother most probably, and as pretty, with her mother's white even teeth? It seems a shame after only just scratching the surface to lose sight of her, but if history could be so careless with her, there's not much point in

us being concerned. She's not here anymore, that's all that counts and she will never
grace Cosme or anywhere else again.

The Harlot of our Dreams

Reg Taylor

When a girl in the train compartment I was sharing on the way over to Sydney allowed a complete stranger to stretch out and rest his head in her lap it seemed prophetic. But the first few days in the city were a lot less liberating than I'd hoped.

In my cockroach-rampant but in no other way bohemian attic in Surry Hills I slept restlessly on a pillow inlaid in tiny springs, and woke with their brand imprinted on my cheeks. At two in the morning, too scared or lazy to face the three flights of stairs and whoever of the other fractious inmates might be blocking them, I pissed with wispy bravado out of the dormer window. Beneath the haze of light over nearby Kings Cross the traffic churned indifferently on. In its own way it could almost have been happening to me back home.

But on the first Sunday I was waylaid in a nearby street by a much older man. His, 'Son, can you tell me the way to the nearest church?' followed up by, 'Would you care to accompany me there?' was confronting. I wasn't to know that it was just his, Roy's, way of auditioning young people he'd decided to adopt. Once I'd responded favourably to both requests, he set about giving me a tour of Kings Cross that included most of its historical features: 'There's more men been murdered there,' he said, for example, gesturing carelessly to some steps leading off William Street, 'than anywhere else in Australia,' before confiding that he himself had only just been released from gaol after a quarter of a century, as he put it, for the same offence. There was nothing in my new guide to suggest that he might immediately re-offend however. An intense figure, with a meticulously sculpted quiff of white hair, it was with almost evangelical zeal that he prised me out of the place I was in ('you'll finish up garrotted there, there's

nothing surer,') and before nightfall had me installed in the nearby suburbs with Barry, his married son.

Barry was a petty criminal – reformed – with a reputation out of all proportion to his stature. He was only about five foot three and his nickname, 'The Bear,' had nursery toy connotations which, 'when you see that top lip curl,' as his father warned, invoked less cuddly comparisons. He had a befittingly gruff and growly voice and a squarish head tilted forward in advance of his purposeful stride, with scarring that lent his knitted brows the uneven conformation of an ex-boxer or rugby scrummer. He had small, short nailed hands, with a right forefinger, golden brown with nicotine and concertinaed from some past conflict, which took the eye as he occupied it to emphasise some point; restlessly tracing a line above his own eyes, or joining his hand to scrub his face to erase tiredness or tension or – as he went through a sort of a checklist like a batsman fresh to the crease – scratch everything else including his balls. He had a tendency to speak conspiratorially or cryptically out of the side of his mouth, 'He *is* a hard man ...' he'd say, in disposing of some hoodlum's pretensions, 'I *don't* think –' or 'They talk about honour among thieves ...there's *not much*...'

Sometimes he despaired of me ('*No, mate,*' he'd wearily disclaim some naïve offering of mine) but he couldn't help being protective: once, after I returned home late at night after some minor scuffle in a pub he examined my face intently for enough evidence to justify going back there. He was tactile, with a habit of leaning in close to his audience and touching them lightly; of not so much intruding into other people's space as including them in his. His humour was typically sardonic. While parodying the belligerence of some would-be tough he said, 'I told him, "If it comes to fisticuffs I think I'd give you a very bad hiding, so I think we'd best be friends."' But he had a sense of fun too and an infectious giggle and a smile, highlighted, as men's teeth often

used to be, by an artfully placed gold filling that illuminated his whole face. He was the most charming person I have ever met.

But, I was a problem. While Barry was considering a number of business openings at the time, the insertion of a laborious pun on his new son-in-law's surname, Kable, at his recent wedding ('Let's hope there's an anchor on the end of it,') probably only hinted at the apprehension his upper middle class father-in-law felt about the union. Barry's quite a bit younger wife, Tina, was expecting a baby too, and they already had another lodger in residence (Eric, an endearing but downmarket version of Barry, in whom it would be fair to say the fires of ambition burned low). So Barry's motives for attempting to help me get a life of my own were ambivalent. We waited for an hour at a legendary meeting spot in Sydney one night for a cocktail waitress he'd teed up to – never – appear. While he joked about our embarrassment – 'They'd be taking bets on the other corner us being posted' - (stood up) at the conclusion of our tryst he said, 'I feel like going round to that Sheila's place with a bottle of champagne and breaking it over her head.' So he wasn't happy.

More soberly, as we walked past a department store on our way to the train, he speculated, 'Maybe if you were frocked up a bit better ...' his eye taken by a jacket in the window. I knew he still enjoyed the adrenalin rush of petty theft; in his hey-day he'd wheeled entire racks of suits out of such emporium's front doors: 'If you credited people with intelligence you wouldn't steal,' he advised me. Though now he generally restricted himself to tucking the odd carton of cigarettes away in supermarkets, a few days later he presented me with the jacket...

It *was* a little long. ('I don't think you'll be going back there for a fitting,' he suggested), but when I wore it to the Erko pub the following Friday night, shooting

back the sleeves whenever it was opportune, I was conscious of the distinction it lent me.

I doubt if Erskineville, even now, would have been overtaken by gentrification. It was a genuine slum then, full of sagging fences and sinister lanes and weighed down by an air of defeat which on weekends it briefly defied. Its pub had the classic Sydney décor, with head high blood-and-spew proof tiles, along with those beer advertisements which are collectors' items now (as in the bronzed Chesty Bond type lifesaver emerging from the surf to mouth – ignoring the bevy of adoring female bathers in the background – ‘And now for a KB!’ which was always a favourite of mine). Indifferent to any paisley-coated 60s generation's assault on the status quo, it had a parlance all its own and Al Jolson numbers on its jukebox that its teenagers paid to hear; although on this night, out in the lounge, musical pride of place was devoted to a pianist doggedly thumping his way through a medley of similar old standards above the din.

At one point an elderly lady was pressed to get up and accompany him, and at some other point another customer, without waiting to be invited, joined her in a rousing rendition of ‘Side by Side.’ At its conclusion though, they had some disagreement that was probably not musical and she began to rain blows on him in the ineffectual way most women do. Ever the gentleman he retreated, but then returned to argue his case; she knocked him half way through a glass door and the manager, in a unilateral judgment coming down heavily on the side of his licensed premises, hurled the male half of the duo into the street.

Barry smirked. ‘He don't know how lucky he is; she's poisoned about three blokes,’ before looking round more soberly – ‘she's a rough old show – you want to watch your kick’ – and then going on to reprove his own circumspection: ‘They're just having a good time – there'll be a party after.’ (Which he could not join – his own

drinking days were behind him; nursing his Clayton's now he might be amused by the fervour round him, but his patience wasn't inexhaustible.)

A little way off three girls – two blondes and a redhead – at a table occasionally glanced our way. 'The one with the red hair's Eric's' – Barry said.

'So eyes off,' Eric pretended to warn.

Barry went over. 'They want to meet you.' My choice of words at the introduction might have been unfortunate: 'How do you do?' The two blondes simply ignored me and turned their heads in opposite directions, while the redhead dismissed me with a flat, 'G'day,' while staring into a future that had already erased me from it.

Humiliation, I know thy name, I thought. Knowing I'd go to no party. Ever. But then the warning ten o'clock bell started, Eric leapt to his feet – 'Get some bottles' – everyone began giving him orders and money: he demanded assistance. Barry was torn. Countermanding, 'Perhaps you better not...' with, 'It's just a sing-song...they'll all get drunk. You might win a heart ...' while Eric's, 'You right? We've got some sheilas lined up' – settled things.

Bearing my share of bona fide beer I made part of the small crowd unloaded from taxis at a house a few streets away. Eric's apologetic, 'Sorry there's so many Jean,' was received less than warmly by the lady who answered the door: '*You're* always welcome here Eric,' she pointed out, but once we were inside and everyone had a drink and somewhere to sit, the atmosphere changed. Halfway through a very tall and really pissed man's rendition of 'Danny Boy' I noticed the smaller of the two blonde girls smiling at me in quite a friendly way – until she was distracted by the hostess and her daughter leaving the room.

Her face tilted: 'What are they talkin' about out there?'

‘Forget it, forget it...’ Eric the peacemaker cautioned, but as if in response the hostess’s daughter came back and after some very brief conversational to-and-froing along the lines of, ‘What’s wrong with youse?’ ‘Nothin’, why, what’s wrong with youse?’ the householder got to the point – ‘Why don’t you just get out of here you sluts!’ the two girls got told. Stubbies in hand they flew to each other’s defence; gentlemen rose, blows were threatened, the china cabinet and its treasures rocked. A keen disciple of the 60s Peace movement I counselled calm, ‘Keep it cool, keep it cool...’ before the two girls were put out, or decided to put themselves out, and then, when I was halfway out the door and apologising to the hostess, deciding to fight their way back in.

The lady clawed across my shoulder. ‘We don’t want you prostitutes here’ –

‘Oh, “*prostitutes*” – the only way you get a quid is by takin’ someone round the back lane you cock sucking old bitch ...’

Somehow, the confrontation ran out of steam, and resettling my jacket I found myself alongside the smaller of the two sisters as we decamped. She, Theresa, was quite cheerful now it was over, I noticed, like a bird after some minor territorial squabble, stirred but not shaken at all. She insisted on taking over the bottles I was nursing until a few streets later at a tiny front aged terrace house she scampered off down to the end of its narrow backyard with the rest of the girls (‘to kill some grass’) before leading us all into the small kitchen-cum-lounge of her home. The room held a table and chairs, an old lounge chair or two, a wood stove to defray the room’s Spartan-ness, and it was overseen by fairly Spartan if not downright bleak looking women herself, who listened almost without comment to her daughters’ account of their evening. She, Merle, had a Fagin-like quality, if only in the attentive but largely unemotional way in which she received their news, relaxing just enough to impart a certain relish to her own

explanation for the absence of a friend of the girls who'd been picked up by the police that afternoon – 'She'll probably be cooling her heels in Silverwater right now,' she phlegmatically inferred. 'That won't hurt her at all.'

One by one, and despite the pills the girls shared round, everyone, including Eric and his girlfriend, dropped off eventually, leaving Theresa and me alone. With just the simmering kettle for company she started to relax as we drew our chairs closer to the stove. I realised that what had seemed pinched and wary in her features was really gamin; my gaucheness falling away for once, I talked. Eventually she confessed, 'You're different...the way you talk. We thought you was a cat at first.' She sighed disgustedly. 'Most of these cunts round here just want to push you over. They'll give you up – give you a backhander for the fun of it. Like, I don't mind if it's for a reason – I know I've got a mouth –'

'Blokes can't just go round handing out backhanders,' I protested.

She shrugged, 'I've worn one or two in my time.'

I examined her features; mercifully unmarked. 'It's a beautiful face too, Theresa.'

'Jeeze...' she grimaced, 'don't go getting sweet on me. I got two fucking kids upstairs.'

'I bet they're beautiful too.'

'They got their moments...' Gazing into the fire she eased her denim jacket off in the warmth. Pert breasted, yes, flat tummied, I could see. I thought, since I loved her, that I was entitled to say, 'You've got a great figure too.'

She laughed, a bit grimly. 'You wouldn't say that if you saw the knife scars in my guts.'

I realised then that she and the other girls were victims of an environment I had to get her out of - if I'd been older I might have realised it would be best to worry about that later. Meanwhile, our chairs shuffling closer to the fire till they were almost touching, our shoulders almost absent-mindedly touched. I put an arm round her waist and she turned towards me, smiling, almost guiltily, 'It's not that bad,' easing her T-shirt free from the top of her jeans ...

There was a creak on the top of the stairs; and the face of some nondescript toddler showed itself.

She straightened, tucking herself in. 'Jesus Darren, get back to bed...' It was only an interruption, almost straight after it though someone else came downstairs looking for a Bex, and then Eric made a ruefully ragged appearance in the kitchen. And stayed. I hadn't realised till then that these predestined moments don't always stay faithful. The pills were wearing off - I started to jitter in my seat - and somewhere between six and seven in the morning I lost Theresa.

A girl can't wait forever.

Barry was immediately encouraging when I told him, 'That little Theresa, eh? Not a bad looking sort.' Then, consoling: 'If you're not a caveman they don't want to know you around there.' And later more realistic: 'Think she might be a bit rich for you. Bit of a *gunny's moll* ... a very heavy fucking hoodlum her boyfriend is... well he thinks so. Runs around settin' fire to empty houses.' For now his resources were defeated. 'How was old Merle?'

'Oh ... alright I suppose.'

Barry's wife, Tina, had been attending closely. When Barry said, 'Little Reg might have won a heart in the Haunted House,' she suggested, 'Perhaps he better go

back and make sure.’ But months later when Theresa’s real boyfriend got shot there in the kitchen – dying, so the papers variously exulted, in a pool of blood or in his wife Theresa’s arms – I knew I’d been out of my league.

Some time during our evening together even I’d thought she was over doing things when she disposed of another ex-acquaintance with an, ‘Oh well, you live by the sword, you die by the sword,’ valediction. Win, whom I met not long after, wouldn’t have been anywhere near as charitable.

She was a tall, glib and garrulous girl, and disdainful of many things including, I think, me. While guilty of gargling the odd heart-starter to help her face work in the mornings, she confessed, the prettiest girl in any school photo she might have been in was still striking. In her thirties, she had an oval face under a no-nonsense fringe, and a flagship bosom that she might reasonably have been apprehensive was the focus of my attentions. We met when Barry, after a stint with the Painters and Dockers at Garden Island that left him out on his feet at night – with ennui I think – started selling things again in pubs and needed a driver (since he had no hope of getting his own licence back). Like so many entrepreneurs or artists, I don’t think he really wanted to work, or at least he had too much intelligence topped up by the experience of prison libraries not to chafe under the yoke wage slaves wore. He was a natural salesman too. His manner was diffident, sympathetic, un-intrusive – and tinged on the day I first went with him with just a little touch of reverence, in honour of the small gold crucifixes he was selling. It was a Friday night and the first front bar we went to was packed, but business looked slow; after about half an hour Barry re-emerged from the pack looking grim: ‘Let’s get out of here.’

I offered my sympathies once we were outside, ‘No good?’

He shrugged, ‘Oh, not bad...’

‘How many did you sell?’

‘About ninety,’ he growled, relaxing. “‘No good,” he says...It’s Friday night – they’ve had five or six schooners – you mention their little daughters to them, they get all sentimental...’

‘Are they real gold?’

‘Nah... and they know they’re not. Long as they don’t think they’re shit – you insult them and their missus then – too dear and you frighten them off – they know their kids are only going to rip ‘em off their necks and lose ‘em in a day or two.’

Win’s relationship with Barry went back a long way. (Tina used to make the odd waspish reference to it but apparently it was only ever professional.) The first time I met her we spent the day with Barry in a tour of pubs selling toys. Stuffed animals were winners – the bigger the better, the gooier the eyes. We strayed with them from the grimier pubs to half decent working areas – Petersham, Lewisham, Canterbury. ‘I used to knock about here when I was fifteen,’ Barry explained. Most of the identities we ran into had pre-criminal memories of him – in one pub, where the photo of an under age Rugby League premierships side still hung, Barry introduced me to some of his old team mates who were touchingly pleased to see him again.

It was the world he could have had. It was late Saturday afternoon and there was the proper atmosphere of warmth and camaraderie in the front bar, and the toy trains we brought in were an innocent and engaging diversion. Big on colour and movement they whistled, puffed, heeled on apparent curves, and flashed lights in two or three colours. Barry’s modus was so simple: he found space among the crowd to set one down on the floor, and stand back from it, half abashed, charmed despite his own maturer instincts. ‘A mate of mine got stuck with a heap of these,’ he explained, palms uplifted in the face of the alleged friend’s improvidence, ‘I said I’d try to help him ...I feel like a nice flip,

but what can you do? They're cheap enough, that's one thing.' Cheap enough and among friends enough who were sentimental enough to want to help out – I stopped counting how many of them found a place under arms, or in a temporary and safe terminus between their new owners' feet.

Outside the pub as dusk gathered I watched one chugging stoutly along the footpath into the shadows, with attendant kids dancing over and around it, while someone else was disappearing with his boxed trophy down the street. 'Peace offering...' Barry smirked. 'How do you reckon they'll go – they've been in the pub all afternoon – their dinner's burnt to a crisp; they're thinking this'll smooth things over. Friggin' thing'll finish in about a million pieces before the night's out.' He knew his clientele.

Somehow, much later in the evening, Win finished up back at the room I'd moved into. Mercifully for both of us, I suspect, she had the bed while I made do with a pillow on the uncarpeted floor, and we both woke, too few hours later, innocently if awfully hung over and shy as any couple who'd just shared a one-night stand, before parting, for good as I thought, at the door of her cab.

But then, after I got a job down near the harbour, I used to see her quite often on my way home in the Goldfish Bowl at the top of William Street. She was always affable enough without seeming overjoyed by the sight of me, or ever referring to our first meeting again. Right arm crooked in the classic 'V' pose with an eternally smouldering B&H at the end of it, she had an air of hauteur that nothing she ever drank diminished, or that she'd allow her tip-tilted profile to betray. She was persistently blunt – when someone in the group she was at the centre of was dithering over what they'd have to drink once, she said, 'Well if you don't fucking know I'm sure I don't fucking either' - and most unsentimental. When I mentioned Erskineville to her on

another occasion she cringed, ‘Erskineville! Jesus...’ before involving her audience: ‘You want to hear those old tarts there, praising up their husbands: “He’s a good man,” they say, “he brings home his pay on Friday nights” - she’s got a black eye and bruises – “a *good-man*.” Hey? They’ve got three kids – one’s out the Bay, one’s in a Boys’ Home and the other one’s a moll ...And, “We’ve done our best,” they say, “we’ve-done-our-best!”’ I never really saw her with anyone in particular, though she was quite candid about one or two bad choices in partners she’d made. One of them – ‘This Ernie,’ she said, ‘took me home to meet his mum, Myrtle, one night. She’s done up like the Twenties – rosebud mouth, lots of rouge and stuff on her cheeks, frizzed up hair... When he introduced me I thought, Shit, what is it? The first thing she said was, “I bet you’re going to say I’m more like Ernie’s sister than his mother. Everyone says that.” I said, “That’s the last fucking thing that entered my head.”’

Once, when I expressed concern about a drunk who nudged our table before he was tipped out, she said, ‘A good horse never stumbles, and a good mug never tumbles.’ And, in a rare moment of weakness, after about three hours in my company one night, she touched me lightly on the arm and said, ‘We’re stayers not players, aren’t we mate?’ and winked confidently. But then her mood changed and she said, ‘There’s an old saying, “Nurse a mug and he’ll die on your shoulder.”’

And she said, ‘I’m not your fucking mother.’

I still saw Barry after I moved out of his house and I noticed changes. He’d always been a model of forbearance when I was boarding with him; I remember him shaking his head more in sorrow than anger at Eric’s shamefaced arrival at seven o’clock on a Sunday morning after he’d spent the night flaked out on the train at some distant terminus, and he refused to be provoked by his father (‘I regret *nothing*,’ Roy

snarled in his presence when he was far gone one night which, if you knew what he'd deprived his son of, was unforgiveable.) He became a lot less forgiving himself. Cynically, he worked a con on a publican that involved the publican advancing a heap of money that never reached a warehouse to pay for stock that never reached the pub. Meeting Tina might have been an epiphany in Barry's life, but custom staled it; Tina started to look disenchanted as the age and social differences dividing them sank in. Barry doted on their two kids but his marriage had descended to the, 'You got yourself a nice mug when you fastened onto me,' level of bi-play. He had taken, just taken, to drinking beer again too, in sevens – about the size of a butcher – and in moderate quantities, but Win cut all ties with him after he started that. 'In drink,' she cautioned me, 'Barry's a beast.'

One day, after who knows what provocation, he came home to find the house empty. For good. I spent a night with him as he stewed over the loss ('I'm doin' it tough mate,' he conceded). Most of his offerings descended to the querulous as the night wore on, though he still found some grim humour in his wife's parting gift, a visit from Callan Park lunatic asylum attendants ('rat catchers' as they were called), who made their intentions to escort him back to the hospital obvious. There was a stand off: 'I told them, "Don't bother tryin' to come the heavies – if I don't want to go there's no chance of you taking me,"' before he went, unshackled. At the institution he was interviewed at length by a female psychiatrist, concealing nothing of his domestic trials, and the meeting concluded with the lady's considered blessing: 'You're too noble, I'm afraid.' So he still had the charm.

I can't even start to think what it would be like to be kneecapped in that way. Some time later, trying to trace his kids, he confronted his father-in-law in the middle of a dinner party, and got involved in an all-in brawl. He only got locked up for the night

over that, but later on I got a letter from him, apologising for the letterhead, from Long Bay where he was being held for something more serious. And then I didn't see him for a year or so until he turned up one night where I was staying. I could hardly recognise the person I used to go swimming with at Brighton Le Sands. The paunch he had didn't go with his height or the suit and whatever he was trying to pass himself off as in it. He still managed to hold my gaze when I handed over some money and say something like, 'I won't forget this mate.' But he did of course.

Not long after that he was shot at, and wounded slightly. His father was philosophical: 'He's done the wrong thing by someone, you can bet on that...' but then after visiting him in hospital where he was convalescing he couldn't help adding in a note of regret dressed up in a rhetorical flourish, 'Physically, Barry's recovered, but the spark is gone I fear, and the rip-and-tear of the Bear departed.'

But that was premature. When Barry came good he used his contacts with the Painters and Dockers to find himself some sinecure a safe distance from Sydney on the Melbourne wharfs. Even if his timing wasn't perfect – at that time the Waterfront was involved in a power struggle that saw half a dozen of its members bumped off over a period of twelve months – there was no reason for him to be involved. And for their part the Melbourne public seemed to enjoy the vicarious thrill of 'gangland violence' – it gave them something to compete with Sydney with - until the small son of one the Wharfies' members was shot dead along with his father in a Moonee Valley pub and the conflict had to be taken seriously.

From where I was though, the eventual police choice of a culprit was incredible. 'I'm a shoplifter, not a murderer,' Barry himself protested when he was woken up one morning, with about half a dozen guns pointed at his head, as he said. The case against him built momentum though, especially when the prosecution came up with a

confession it was claimed Barry had volunteered to another crim when he was on Remand. ‘They promised him they’d break his charge down to manslaughter - he’d be out in two to three years – that’s the system they use - I give myself an ice cream’s chance in hell for a while.’ In the finish, and in the best courtroom tradition, it was only the last minute alibi of a ‘casual’ acquaintance that saved him. ‘It was stinking hot in court,’ Barry rued, ‘but I had to keep my jacket on the whole time in case someone saw the tattoo’ – and he showed me his forearm imprinted with its more-than-a-casual girlfriend’s faded name...

I was diffident about seeing him – or them, again, actually, since the trial had apparently reignited the couple’s old relationship – though I needn’t have worried when I was summoned to their flat in Bondi, which was as far as Barry’s efforts to escape publicity had taken him. The table was littered with the ruins of an indifferent feast along with six or seven empty long necks, and Barry’s friend and saviour, Julie, turned out to be a short and tending towards pudgy girl with eyebrows relying heavily on pencil to reinforce them, and she was weighed down by an air of grievance. Her opening line to me, ‘Have you got fifteen dollars? I want my fare back to Melbourne,’ was a fair example of the sniping she kept up for most of the evening. Barry, on the other hand, was slimmer than he’d been for years, the publicity seemed almost to have renewed him. Clearly enjoying his small case of notoriety he went through the trial at length, eyes crinkling, rapping the table for emphasis occasionally, and ignoring most of his companion’s interjections. At one point she butted in – ‘You want to hear how I was a moll Reg? It’s the only story I’ve got – it’s as good as his’ – but it was Barry’s moment, and later on, even she relented enough to admit, ‘Barry saved me once, I’ll say that.’

‘Did he?’

‘Yeah – ‘

Barry grunted, but then he acted out the drama for my benefit: ‘Oh - I come into this joint where she’s sitting with about five toughs. One of them I knew a bit said, “You wanna meet the sheila I’ve got workin’ for me – she’s the best mug I’ve ever had in tow – “ I went ‘whack!’ and knocked him off his chair. I’ve grabbed her’ - he mimed his cave-man act – ‘and we took off ... We lived on Bonox for about a week –‘

Julie said, ‘I was terrified of him –‘

‘Were you?’

‘My fucking oath I was.’ She said, ‘Barry taught me something though – he changed my life – he...’ she used a parable: ‘like if you and I was alone, if Barry went out, I wouldn’t do anything even if I wanted to. I can’t explain it – it’s just something you’ve gotta live by...’

Barry cut in, ‘What she means is, you gotta be true to yourself –‘

I nodded.

She said, ‘He’s a good listener...’

‘Yeah, yeah, he is - ‘ Barry nodded impatiently.

‘He’s something you’ll never be anyway,’ she declared, ‘he’s a fucking gentleman.’

‘Hey’ – Barry turned on her; ‘I love this man; do you understand that? I never loved *you* – I felt sorry for you.’

They’d had a big day and I made allowances, but after what must have been about a week taken up with scenes like the one that followed Barry’s last remark, Julie was left in the lurch. Dumped in the street she rang me asking for help with her fare and the money for a hotel room. While she was booking in and lying to reception about her lack of luggage I noticed her sickly sweetness from two or three days-old sweat. ‘I

couldn't even have a shower in the dump I was in last night,' she explained, 'you're a fucking lifesaver.' I'd brought her in a couple of T-shirts and a pair of pants, and she said, 'Don't worry, I'll make it up to you.'

I hung around awkwardly near the outside door while she was having a shower, but she was quite at ease when she came out wrapped in a towel. 'Get us a drink from the fridge will you sweetie? I feel like a bit of a toast.'

'I wonder where Barry is?'

'Fuck knows. In jail I hope.' She ran her tongue under her top lip. 'Thank Christ I finally got to clean my teeth.' She raised her glass carelessly and winked, 'What are we doing tonight then darls? Got any plans?'

Before I left Sydney ('the harlot of our dreams' as I saw it described once by some callow young poet) for good, I did a sort of tour of old haunts and ran into Win in one of them. She acknowledged me without (typically) seeming too thrilled. 'Been somewhere?'

'No, just on my way there, actually.' I hadn't seen her for quite a while and time hadn't been too kind to her. Her eyebrows were plucked, and her hair's fringe crudely cut, she was dry skinned and lined. She must have been nearly forty. About all she had left of her looks was her bust about which she seemed dismissive too. 'I'm sick of people telling me what bras I should wear – what I should do to my hair – what perfume I should use...As far as I'm concerned when I've had a shower I just want to smell like a woman.'

For the first time since I'd known her she got a bit untidy; she reacted almost hostilely to some conversational query I made about a friend she was with: 'How long have I known her? About fifteen years – that long enough for you?' She was sullenly

preoccupied; she kept shifting on her stool to get comfortable and tucking and retucking in her blouse. When she was off-stage for a moment her friend half apologised:

‘She’s not goin’ too good... Jack-the-Dancer, that’s what she’s scared of, you see.’

I avoided the subject when Win came back, but she disposed of it herself eventually: ‘If there’s something in there they may as well get it out.’ She looked vaguely irritated by my offer of a lift. ‘No, I’m right,’ and hardly acknowledged me when I told her I was going. ‘Yeah? Oh well, I’ll see you round.’

After Barry left Sydney for parts unknown I was never troubled – and that’s probably the best word – by him again. My phone number, tucked away in his wallet, would have paid the price somewhere along the line for his nomadic habits, or just because he put off ringing for too long. At the time a part of me (the part that wasn’t relieved he was out of my life) thought, unpleasant though the scene with the girl Julie must have been when they busted up, that it might have represented his need to make a complete break, even if it was an incandescent sort of fracture, with his past. But, from the newspaper story I came across again the other day, that had to wait a while. His photo, among decades of papers, took up the entire front page of a Sydney tabloid a few years after we last met, with the single banner headline underneath, UNDERWORLD FIGURE NEAR DEATH.

It’s never failed to make an impression on visitors, which was why I kept it, though I’m not sure if it ever would have cut much ice with Win. ‘Underworld,’ she used to scoff, while she was sitting at the centre of a group who all had some criminal history, ‘where is it, this *Underworld*?’ She was unsentimental almost to the end ...The letter I got from her out of the blue was forgivable, under the circumstances.

She was in a hospice, she started off by telling me, ‘Funny, next month I’m supposed to front court for defrauding the Dole Office – I only really did it to make sure I’d have enough put away for the funeral and for a few drinks for the crowd from the Goldfish Bowl. Somehow I think the jack that’s pinched me’s going to be disappointed.’ She half apologised for contacting me, ‘A bit of paper old Roy gave me with your address on it fell out of my purse the other day (there’s not much else in it I’ll give you the tip). If you’re wondering why I’m writing, don’t worry, it’s just the stuff they’ve been giving me. I’ve been thinking though – get yourself organised Win, there’s one that won’t be here for the funeral and you always seemed to have a bit of time for me. (You wouldn’t if you saw me now.) That was a bad blue anyhow. You see, just because I wasn’t bad looking and had half decent tits you used to hang around like you wanted to save me or something, when what you really needed was a naughty I guess. Women can’t stand that. Or this one couldn’t. Anyhow, you and almost everyone else would have missed out. Even then booze meant more to me than sex. You see, you get into a lifestyle (I’m starting to sound like one of those tarts from the Erko now) where, after you’ve had a few blokes – none of them much good to be honest – you learn how to defend yourself and then you spend most of your time doing it. And that’s what I’ve done. And now just because I’m feeling a bit loopy I’m trying to undo some of it. Bit late eh? Still, I just wanted you to know that I thought you weren’t a bad kid, even if I didn’t show it. Just don’t try so hard to play Jesus Christ in future that’s all, and if it’ll make you feel any better say a prayer for me, eh? Best wishes from your friend, Win.’

Barry’s father Roy said to me once, speaking of women of his own time, ‘If you were to catch them in their moment you’d think, “Why didn’t I meet them twenty years earlier?” They all finish up crook though, with cancers and that.’ He didn’t exactly

escape unscathed himself, dying in a Salvation Army refuge in the end from causes related to someone pushing him down a flight of stairs. Then there was Win of course, along with Theresa no doubt, and Julie (some time after she went to jail for perjuring herself at Barry's trial). And Barry – who at least got his chance to go out with all guns blazing – and didn't, quite. All victims of poor lifestyle choices – as they say – and worn out well before the end ...and reminders of how much less most of us are than the people we expected to become.

A Happy Ending

Reg Taylor

Some things don't change; you could tell you were in the country just from the crowd outside the church; feel the constriction inside jackets that men would like to be without, and within women's own confinements, as they moved a little proppily, like cattle on uncertain ground.

There were no such reservations with Fay though. She came straight up, an unambivalent force as always; '*Hullo* darling, lovely to see you again –' she exclaimed with a kind of fond condescension, before giving one of her full on open mouth – *mwah* – kisses and standing back to examine the effect.

She didn't look too grief stricken. 'Don't worry, the old man could be hard,' she told me once and I'd heard the story about the time her father brought an end to a teenage birthday party she was having by storming out of the bedroom when he'd had enough of the row and yanking the radiogram cord in half. But old Max was a legend for things like that. He was tough. When I ran some fencing wire into my leg at his place one day he picked me up and put me over his shoulder with about as much effort as if I'd been a small rolled up rug. I liked him for his dry as dust humour, for the way he could get up in the middle of the night and head off with his fishing gear and spend two or three hours in silent communion with the river before coming home and going off to work. He had those qualities of strength and emotional reticence that women are supposed to look for in men and then find maddening.

As it turned out, once we were inside the stifling church the racket of a pedestal fan actually drowned out most of what the minister had to say about him; it was a relief, really, for people to get out in the open air at the cemetery afterwards and sort themselves out and see who they could recognise from the past, and what sort of wrecks some of them had become. At one point there was a disturbance at the graveside when

some grey headed old bloke stumbled on the verge. Someone joked, 'That one's already taken, Johnny' – and it was only then I realised that it was an ex-stalwart of the Barmera-Monash footy club and automatic selection in the Upper Murray sides from the old days. No one else seemed too worried though. 'Just needs a bit of a sit down,' someone said, 'he'll come good.'

He did too, back at the footy club afterwards where the almost festive air was a reminder that dying is often the most gracious thing people ever do. I knew my own ship was pretty well sunk from the time Davy, Fay's husband, took my arm on the way in and I didn't even dither before joining him for a beer, as if it was going to be an appetiser for the spread laid out rather than a first strike substitute for it for the day.

I'd seen him at the church of course, with his retreating widows' peaks on a bullet-Irish head, dressed in a pair of average looking slacks and lumpy shoes. There'd never been too much of him; now he looked wasted; it made the hours we spent – or wasted as well, if you like – on karate when we were in our twenties look a long way off now. Davy used to tease, 'Oh, you *want* to go a round or two for a pound or two, do ye pal?' before our sparring that never really degenerated into anything spiteful started. (The instructor had warned us, 'The best of friends can become the best of enemies,' but we accepted the odd kick in the balls with good grace.) Somewhere along the line though, probably in the years when he and Fay were up in Darwin and we lost touch, I can see he's crossed the line into territory where the Irish eyes and accent aren't enough anymore. But they're all he's got. He's still using the same lines: 'There we was, two against a thousand...by God we give them two a thrashin' ...' before he starts on some fatuous anecdote that has my face locked in a grimace until Mrs Campion, old Max's widow, came to my rescue.

I'd seen her before as well; arriving as the service was about to start and holding things up more with her hen-like dipping and clucking from one group of mourners to the next. I knew her near lateness wouldn't have been due to wanting to make some last minute entrance either, or from her being prostrate with grief until half an hour before the ceremony. When she calls out, 'Come over here darling,' from the table she's the garrulous centre of, 'it's time we had a yarn,' it's clear she's quite enjoying this get together. She never had much time for brooding and all those years of old Max's forbearance probably did wear thin in the end.

From the time my brother and I first met her through her son in our early teens she'd been like that: bustlingly hospitable and larger than life. It's not the sort of thing you're supposed to say these days but sometimes I wonder how many bright women of her generation who didn't have the chance to get an education would have lost some of their spark if they had. When one of her girls brought home a most unsuitable boyfriend once, she picked up a frying pan during an argument that developed in the kitchen and dinged him and any designs he had on her daughter on the head. 'That settled *his* bloody hash,' she delighted in telling people.

Entering the company of her side of the family for the first time *could* be a bit daunting though, even for the well intentioned – competition to hold the floor was fierce when they were together – but my brother and I relished the chance to air a second tier, more relaxed version of ourselves when we were among them. At the frequent shows they had or took us to, there was always a string of non threatening aunts and other maternal figures to take us under their wings and make sure we didn't turn out to be absolute social clod hoppers. Their firm and assured embraces, hands pressed lightly into the smalls of our backs, were like skippers at the tillers of slightly flighty craft when they got us up, and might have been designed to prepare us for

younger and riskier propositions – like Mrs Campion’s own grown up daughters – later on.

Fay especially. She was years older than us and tall and good looking and had a sexiness that her mandatory first marriage hadn’t managed to quash. She refused to take herself too seriously: when she hammed it up at parties with her version of ‘Hey Big Spender,’ with all Shirley Bassey’s shimmying overkill, she was sending herself up really, but up close she was still so firm and yielding that I always worried about embarrassing myself when she got me to dance.

According to her mum she’d been a problem child, prone to outbursts and tantrums, an original widgie who’d hung around with the ‘Kilburn Killers’ in her teens and even managed to get herself institutionalised for a while. I had seen her face distorted within a frame of swinging hair once or twice, but that side of her was at odds with the Fay I’d mostly known who could be the voice of reason over coffee at her kitchen table. (She hardly touched alcohol since the night she downed a couple of glasses of bubbly at some celebration and spent the next three days in bed. ‘Crook!’ she said. ‘Every time I lifted my head off the pillow I didn’t know whether I was going to spew, fart or shit myself.’) Her normal public mood always seemed elevated enough anyway, her remarks a scatter gunned mix of candour, mockery and innuendo that left audiences flinching in her wake.

Occasionally, maybe as an unwitting way of redressing the balance, she’d lapse into fits of melodramatic and implacable-while-they-last-ed gloom. (She took a job in a massage parlour once – I can imagine the air of bravado she would have adopted for it – even if she didn’t get past the first customer: ‘This old Greek guy came in. He was fat and floppy and disgusting. I took one look and walked out.’) And then, after she and Davy came back from Darwin and she invested everything she had in a shop selling her

own handcrafts and went broke, she decided to get even by exploiting the family's supposed Aboriginal heritage. ('Apparently it's there if you go back far enough on the old man's side,' her brother conceded, though her son Seamus stood out to a degree with his blonde hair at indigenous Youth camps.)

As it turned out he was among the teenagers who kept lurching up and over me and half out of their shirtsleeves all afternoon to be introduced. They were without exception respectful. There was no need for Davy's heavily meaningful, 'Don't worry about *this* man,' to some protégé of his, 'he's done it all,' as if I had some sort of reputation for anything to precede me. Even if everyone was on their best behaviour it was enough just to be acknowledged by them: whatever had happened I knew I was still at least part of the sum of their assumptions.

I remembered the story old Max told me once about some itinerant – a fruit picker I imagine – who launched himself into the shallows of the lake just in front of the Club one day and began to swim towards the far shore, five or six k's off. It was a Sunday, there was a crowd on the beach. 'Everyone expected him to stop after a while,' Max said, 'but he just kept going and going ... till he disappeared. Went under and never came up. No one knew who he was, where he came from, nothing...' It sounded like a metaphor for the solitary, unidentified life.

For the rest of the afternoon the often-implicated-in-tragedies lake crinkled innocuously outside in the heat, while inside, in the souging air conditioning, the atmosphere settled into the pattern of the best Australian barbecues where time seems not to pass at all until some married couple spoils things by arguing. I noticed that my brother and Fay's, who fell out over something years ago and were circling each other warily at the grave, were gradually edging closer at the bar until they were convivially engaged (so that was alright) and then at about six the minister, who'd been having

drinks bought for him all afternoon, declared his obligation to make one or two parish house calls before the day was out, as well as his intention to drive himself to them. Heroically declining all further hospitality, ‘No, no, that must be my fourth beer,’ he said (provoking just repressed expressions of incredulity around him, implying, ‘*Four...? Try fourteen!*’). No one was going to say anything that might ruffle the placid waters of his state, though. As the afternoon wore on, from the dignity attending his solemn offices and uncertainty at his introduction to the company, he had relaxed; from behind spectacles his face had taken on a damp, almost Pickwickian benignity. As each fresh foaming glass replaced its predecessor he looked about him, eyes widening in pleased surprise as if some divine agent might have been involved in its consignment, and an air of melancholy resignation attended him as he pushed the last drained glass aside. But he recovered. A stumble or two on the way out expressed nothing more than an overflow of non secular goodwill, while he was bestowing a general salute and individual pat here and there on anyone who might just possibly be, or ever consider becoming a parishioner, until he turned from a final valedictory wave to smack smartly into one the glass doors.

‘Gone for all fuckin’ money,’ Davy said.

He wasn’t travelling too well himself by that time, I’d noticed. As the day wore on I’d sensed a change in his mood; a subduedness in his jokey manner, a more speculative, probing edge to his remarks. After I made some mildly flattering remark in defence of Fay’s departure to the Poky room he gave me what used to be called an old fashioned look.

‘I’m not sure you don’t fancy my missus a bit yourself pal...Ah?’ he suggested and teasingly pursued the theme with a string of knowing nods and winks before

pretending to play the part of outraged husband while managing to just sound peevisish:

‘To think I took you into my home all those years ago, treated you like a brother...’

When I offered up the self deprecating clincher, ‘The only time I ever got close to making a pass at Fay she said, ‘Piss off you little bastard,’ it revived his bonhomie. ‘No, I know you’re alright mate –’ he said, allowing both of us, in the pause that followed to have a muse, stranded somewhere in between recalling some comradely incident from our past that didn’t immediately come to mind and trying to retrieve the threads of our conversation.

We were interrupted by Mrs Campion’s departure – ‘don’t leave it so long next time you boys –’ and shortly after Fay swept up, all bustle and bags: ‘I’ve had enough of those things – come on — you’ve got no car, I’ll make you a coffee at home and run you back to your motel later...’

Our progress across the car park was dominated by her. ‘I had a blue over there with Argus’ (her know-it-all first husband) she pointed out. ‘It was a Saturday night. It had been pissing down with rain all day and I was all done up to go to the cabaret in a new fur coat and he pushed me over in it in the mud. I sat there bawling my eyes out, I don’t know what I felt sorrier for, me or the fur coat.’ But back at hers and Davy’s place it was clear the evening was past its best. His toasted sandwich left to die on the plate, an ever more sardonic smirk settled like glue on his face, until he got up abruptly and stalked unsteadily out of the room.

I waited a while. ‘Is he coming back?’

‘No. Good isn’t he?’ she said, expressionlessly and then shook her head. ‘I may as well drive you back unless you want to sit here and listen to him snoring all night.’

On the short journey I said conventionally, 'It was good to see everyone again,' but she was quite unsentimental: 'Yeah well, make the most of it. It'll probably take another funeral before it happens again.'

'But nearly everyone's still up here,' I said. And it was true. It didn't matter where they went, the kids and nephews and nieces all seemed to have gravitated back to the River.

'Yeah but half of them aren't talking,' she said, and I remembered in the old days how someone was always getting upset and refusing to accept the currency of someone else's company for a while – 'No, that's it, he can get stuffed, finished!' – until Mrs Champion smoothed things over. But she'd been in full control then. Then I reminded Fay of how, when she and Davy first moved up the River from Adelaide, to escape creditors I suppose, and they were buried in some dump at the bottom of a fruit block, how she could still outlandishly proclaim, 'There's *something* about this country living...'

She laughed at the memory, but then looked at me more keenly. 'What did you bring that up for?'

'I don't know, it's just because I'm on my own now, I suppose....'

'You're not thinking of moving back here are you?'

'Well there'd be some cheap fruit blocks around at the moment wouldn't there?'

'Yeah, and if you want a life of unremitting toil for very little reward, go ahead and buy one.' She was indignant. 'Don't even think about it. It's not a very nice place up here anymore with all the drugs and unemployment. I think that suits Davy because he doesn't have to feel so bad about not being industrious. But then he's only got one interest in life these days anyway – drinking.' I hoped then that she wasn't going to settle into one of those diatribes that partners in failed marriages take turns to do, but I

knew she probably would. ‘You know, I wouldn’t mind him refusing to work anymore if he’d just do something about the house. He started those renovations about three years ago and they’re still not finished. There’s shit everywhere...’

I made a sympathetic noise. Davy had enlarged the kitchen, there were all new cupboards and benches in place, but nothing had been finished off; there were joins showing in the ceiling; it all looked makeshift. But then Davy had always been slack – Fay would have laughed it off once.

‘What he’s done doesn’t look too bad,’ I said diplomatically.

‘So it bloody well should. He’s supposed to be a tradesman. He just also happens to be a drunken bum. He’s opening his first beer by nine o’clock in the morning – you can imagine what he’s like by tea time, either passed out or looking for an argument...’

We pulled up soon after that and went through the business of exchanging a peck. There didn’t seem a lot more to say, until, on the short trek from the car park to the units, while I was thinking about next morning’s hangover, I turned back to see her still standing in front of the car lights, looking oddly pensive. I wondered if there was some article of etiquette I’d overlooked, until she called out in a sort of stifled shriek, ‘Do you remember which bloody unit they put you in?’ and when that returned me to the task of studying the key that didn’t seem to carry any clues, it gave her the chance to play the resourceful female taking charge. ‘Hang on,’ she sang out with exaggerated weariness, ‘I’ll switch the motor off’ – and when she caught up, while still making quite comforting, ‘I don’t know ...you’re bloody hopeless aren’t you –’ noises, the small bubble of apprehension that something in her manner aroused was not quite lost.

She demanded the key and managed to locate some numeral scratched on it. ‘Here we are, second from the end I reckon. It might be the same one I booked into

once when Argus and I had a fight. They still had flock mattresses in them then. What have they got now?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t fucking know much do you – didn’t you try it out? Or do I have to do that for you too?’ She was starting to gabble; it didn’t matter, it was actually reassuring. It gave us something in common. When she was next to me at the door our thighs touched for a second without either of us immediately respecting the space that was supposed to divide us, or me feeling like I had to say something facetious. It didn’t stop her: after a dab or two at the lock she said, ‘There that wasn’t so hard, was it? Boom, boom...’ but it was the last bit of self mocking chaff she had to offer. As I feigned – and that’s all it was – moving in ahead of her, her right hand tinglingly enclosed my waist within its clinking mate for a moment. She felt the air conditioning management had switched on. ‘Fuck, it’s freezing in here, think you’ll be warm enough?’ and gave a short yelping laugh that had a bit of everything including maybe ruefulness in it before she turned to me.

Her kissing was just a hungrier extension of her normal practice – that escalated. She yanked at my shirt – ‘you can suit yourself about the socks...’ and then took over completely. Afterwards, sharing her weight between me and an elbow, any self consciousness she might have felt took second place to frankness. ‘Jeeze, I needed that,’ she said, before straightening up. I felt her breasts dimpling in the air conditioning. ‘Sorry,’ she said, ‘but I’ve got to put something on.’ She started rummaging in her handbag. ‘If I light up a cigarette it’ll set off some alarm no doubt. We’d have half Barmera in here. They’d die of collective fucking heart failure.’ In deference to small town morality she pulled on her slacks and put her blouse round her shoulders before she opened the door.

‘Fuck, I’m getting a bit old for this,’ she sighed, but outlined in the doorway, one arm crooked, she was a reminder of what aids to elegance cigarettes used to be.

‘You’ve still got your figure Fay,’ I complimented her.

‘Have I darling? Some sheila said to me the other day, “If you took your bra off you’d go booing – booing...” I said, “Pigs bloody arse.”’ She hesitated before she added with the smallest hint of vulnerability, ‘Bit much for you, was I?’

‘No, no.’ I didn’t like to say that considering the amount of time I’d spent fantasising about her when I was a teenager I felt a bit short changed.

She laughed. ‘Always the gentleman. Fucking near raped you didn’t I? God knows when Davy and I last had sex. Doesn’t show though, does it? Much.’

I felt a flicker of remorse – or apprehension. ‘What about Davy?’

‘Stuff Davy. Shall I tell you something? For years when he’s got pissed he’s accused me of having a thing for you. I used to say to him, ““For fuck’s sake, it’d be like having sex with my little brother.”’

‘Well was it?’

‘How would I bloody know. That’s not the point. Now he’s got something to be paranoid about.’ She buttoned up her blouse with an air of finality. I’d been trying to remind myself that nothing bad or particularly earth shattering had happened but she didn’t seem to need to. Perched cross legged on the end of the bed she was quite relaxed; we could have been back in her kitchen almost, talking like we used to years ago, till something outside distracted her.

She jumped up and put her head out the door. ‘What the fuck’s that?’ I could hear loud male voices, interspersed with a female shriek or two, and then a metallic thumping noise coming from across the car park. ‘Jesus, you can’t even have a screw in peace in this place,’ she protested. ‘My car’s parked over there too. What’s goin’ on

there -?' she sang out. 'See, bloody kids, they're having a fight right next to my car –' she looked at me ' – You doing something?'

'Give us a chance.' I was grabbing at clothes. She looked like she was going to charge over there herself half dressed. 'God, that's not young Seamus with them – it bloody is – what's he doin' here? I hope to Christ he hasn't seen us – Seamus!'

'He will have now.'

Fay's laugh had a touch of hysteria. 'This is all your fault you know. Christ, here they come.'

When the young man and his girl got closer I could see that, apart from a disarranged collar, Fay's son was intact. It was his girl, or at least her personality that seemed to have suffered most since I'd met her earlier in the day. In an accent, which like some indigenous Eliza Doolittle's had slipped alarmingly, she was chiding her partner on the way over. Seamus didn't look all that surprised by his mother's presence or his father's absence, but Fay launched into an interrogation before he had a chance to say anything anyway.

'What was all that about?'

Seamus seemed abashed. 'Oh, that guy was in the pub; he reckoned I wasn't black.'

'Of course you are. You didn't have to bash his head against my car to prove it though.'

'I never knew it was yours. He tried to snot me on the way out... I only did it a couple of times.'

His girlfriend sneered. 'You weak as piss. You should have kept going.'

Fay was clucking while Seamus dreamily surveyed the room – till something took his eye.

‘What’s your bra doin’ in your handbag Mum?’

‘Nothing. I felt itchy in it – here’s your father....*David!*’

Anxiety boiled over me as Davy approached, but he seemed oblivious to it. Remarkably, he had revived; eyes alight, with an air of hilarity that had always been one of his most engaging, if slightly worrying qualities, he announced himself: ‘Did you buggers think you could party on without me?’

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’ Fay demanded.

‘I had a bit of a kip didn’t I, and then I thought, I’m not stayin’ home here on me own.’ He turned to me: ‘I have a bottle of Jameson’s here pal, get us a couple of glasses out of that fridge.’

Fay wasn’t letting go: ‘How the fuck’d you get in here? And you’re all covered in shit too.’ He was, he was red with dust.

‘I took a bit of a short cut through the cemetery to get here, didn’t I.’

‘You look like you’ve been buried in it you stupid bastard.’

‘I couldn’t help it.’ He was irrepressible. ‘It was fuckin’ pitch black. I took a tumble down a hole. It’s a wonder I never lost me whisky.’

‘What, down a grave?’ I asked. (Old Max’s?)

‘I suppose it was. I didn’t hang around to make sure. It wasn’t a very pleasant experience I can tell you.’ He was sloshing out the scotch, before adding waspishly, ‘Anyhow, if it was, at least I can say I’ve visited his grave. It’ll be a long while before any of his family does.’

‘Oh don’t fucking start, Davy.’ Fay turned to me. ‘He accused me of neglecting the old man when he was in the nursing home you know. Well I did. He got really nasty

after he had his stroke. I couldn't hack it. I reckon the only reason him and Davy still got on was because they're both miserable bastards.'

'He was a good man I tell you' – Davy protested.

'Oh good man, my arse,' she said to me. 'Do you know what he did to me when I was a teenager? And this is just one thing. He caught me and a boyfriend having a knee trembler out the front one night. Well my boyfriend was having it; I was only about fifteen – I don't think I really knew what was going on. He got off lightly; the old man just gave him a clout – the poor little bugger's ears are probably still ringing – but he dragged me inside and pulled my pants down and laid into me with his belt. I've still got the marks. It's a wonder it never put me off sex for life...'

She snorted, but there was something in her laugh that reminded me of when she got up to sing up parties, huffing her way through songs: she couldn't really sing, there'd been almost a note of appeal in her voice that I hadn't thought about before.

Davy was certainly and serenely immune to any problems Fay might have for the moment anyway. Diverted by the news that his son had been in a scrap, he said to me, 'Pity we wasn't there eh, pal? We'd have shown him the old one-two...Never mind about the three-fucking four.' Even if it was only while the bottle lasted any threat of his earlier near-rancour had gone. As the level inched lower he kept raising toasts to past, and to be honest not all that singular experiences we'd shared: ('Do ye remember the time when we ...?') When Seamus's girlfriend interrupted her sulky sniping at her boyfriend long enough to get up and have a brief chuck in the toilet bowl no one seemed to think it even worthy of comment.

I'd been thinking of the needs people have that are so often unfulfilled, but Fay's eyes after all that were back on Davy by that time, with a look of bemusement on her face as if he was still a creature of some interest to her. I knew I'd outgrown them

then. I had nothing in common anymore, if I ever did, with their catch-as-catch-can existence, the way they made their lives up as they went along. Their lack of any moral centre really.

Even old Max seemed tainted now. Unfairly, maybe. 'It's not the fall that kills you, it's the sudden stop,' he said when he was describing the tumble he'd taken from one of the quarries outside Adelaide once that was supposed to have crippled him for life, before he threw away any aids at all after a month or two and went back to work. He would have held out uncomplainingly I'm sure in his last illness, while his lungs were filling up with fluid or whatever it is when you have pneumonia, treading water at least if not still striking out, like that other poor guy at the lake that showed his hand.

It reminded me of what a poor struggle I'd put up when I went under there that time. Before I got dragged out I watched more or less passively as the sun bobbed from view. As if I'd always known it was just a matter of time before the waters would crowd around.