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Three Aussie kids on a beach in the eighties; it may be paradise but they're not happy. And soon they have to grow up and leave home.

A story about what no-one wants to see.

Portraits for the Blind



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First publication.

Produced in this pdf format by www.gay-ebooks.com.au

© February 2007



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Lloyd was impelled around the cliff even though he knew what would be going on.

The fat girl was sucking Kevin off. Kevin was just standing there. He saw Lloyd and pushed the fat girl away. She got gracefully to her feet and picked her way with astonishing speed over the jagged rocks towards Lloyd. He subdued an urge to push her as she passed him. As she did she shot him a look which pierced. Though he had known her, Karen, since kindergarten, he had never realised that she had such a sense of self. She was no longer fat Karen, one of the Barkers who were respectable and pathetic, she was someone who knew her rights and what could be done. 'She must be growing up,' Lloyd thought then worried that she was more grown up than him. 'You oughtn't to let her do that,' he shouted to Kevin, 'she's ...' He didn't know what. 'She's a fat cow.'

'Shut up,' Kevin said, coming towards him, 'someone will hear you. Her brother's here.'

'Where?' Lloyd said, looking around.

'Not here, dickhead, on beach, probably.'

‘He’s not,’ Lloyd said, ‘and what could he do about it? He never comes to the beach, he’s got to work, they’re poor, their dad’s an alcoholic or something.’

‘Come on,’ Kevin said and pushed Lloyd in the direction of the beach.

The push assuaged Kevin, it was the usual gentle pressure which left flutters of warmth. Once when they were having an argument that was almost a fight, Kevin had pushed his chest and the flutters had spread past the feel of Kevin’s hands and covered his whole chest and had lasted long after Kevin had turned and rushed away. They were mates again the next day. ‘Kevin’s here,’ Lloyd’s mother had called in the morning. Lloyd listened as she went on, ‘He’ll be playing one of those games you boys are wasting your lives on. If his father knew he’d go mad, he’s supposed to mow the front lawn. I can’t get either of them to do anything, his sister’s upstairs on the phone.’ Lloyd had stopped playing and waited then pretended to play as Kevin had come into the t v room and said, ‘Hi. I’ll help you mow lawn if you like then we can have a go on bikes, if you like. I have to be back by lunch.’

Kevin was an only child. His parents owned the bottle shop. They were Russian and said to be very strict, that they only sent Kevin to Saint Augustine’s because there was no Orthodox church anywhere in the area.

‘I’m going to tell your parents,’ Lloyd said.

Kevin stopped abruptly. He dug a foot into the sand. ‘Why? You do and we can’t be mates any more.’ His voice was deep and clear and still had traces of a Russian accent. You could tell he wasn’t an Aussie.

‘No,’ Lloyd’s mother, Mrs Mooney had said, ‘he’s too good. All you local kids are spoilt, it’s disgusting.’

‘Well you spoilt us,’ Renee had said, ‘we can’t help it.’

‘You’d better help it or I’m going to tell your father you spent two hours on the phone again yesterday.’

Renee had rushed from the room and the house echoed with the slamming of her door.

‘It’s wrong, you’re too young to have sex. She’s a slut.’

‘Is not sex,’ Kevin said and looked at his foot buried in the sand.

Lloyd looked in triumph along the beach. Karen Barker was picking up her things and leaving the group. He saw her walking away from them, ignoring the faces turned towards her departing figure, yelling after her.

‘Karen Barker left,’ Melanie Hopkins yelled to them as they approached.

When they had settled another of the girls said, ‘What happened?’

‘Nothing,’ Kevin said, ‘we talk. She ask me to school dance, maybe.’

‘Oooh, don’t go with her, she’s weird, none of the girls like her.’

‘Except that pathetic Rosie Vachetti.’

‘They’re lemons.’

‘Hey! Where are you going mate?’ Nobbo Rolinson called.

Kevin was walking away. Lloyd saw that his head was drooping.

‘What’s going down, mate?’ Nobbo asked him. ‘These chicks were just getting to know Kev.’

‘My dad says they charge too much for their wine, he can get it cheaper – much – near where he works.’

‘Your dad’s a dickhead,’ Lloyd said, ‘everyone’s got to make a living.’

‘Mr Barker doesn’t. Mum said all the money was hers and he wasted it.’

They looked towards the Barker house which nestled behind

some trees in isolation on the headland. Fat Karen was making her way up the steep path that lead from the Barker house to the beach.

‘They haven’t even got a fence.’

They all stared at the house, silenced by respect. Karen had vanished amongst the gnarled trees which tried to protect it.

Lloyd turned his attention to Kevin who was now on the road. He felt sad and worried.

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about!’ he snarled at Kat Trenergy, ‘my dad says they’ve got good wine.’

She gave the other girls an amused glance but they were stony so she said, ‘I didn’t mean ... It’s just easier for my dad to get it near where he works.’

Lloyd got up and walked away from them. Then Nobbo was beside him, ‘Stupid bitches,’ he said. ‘Did Roshanev screw the Barker bitch?’

‘Fuck off! No. That’s wrong.’

Nobbo laughed. ‘I bet he did. It’s not wrong. Don’t worry, I won’t tell Brother Leo.’

That night Lloyd had a nightmare and his mother and father came into his room.

‘Is someone sucking you off, sex?’ he said in his turmoil.

His mother ushered his father out of the room. When she could see that Lloyd was awake and O K she left herself. ‘He’s just had too much sun, Hugh. Don’t worry him about it, you’ll just upset him more,’ she said to her husband in bed.

‘Dad thinks you got sucked off by some old pervert, he nearly called the police.’ Renee laughed. ‘What did you say?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Well you must of because he was still going ballistic when he went to work. He’s going to take you to Doctor Karpinsky to

see if you've still got your cherry or if you've got VD or something. Have you?'

'Nope.'

'I hate people who get VD, erugh.'

'I heard that Renee,' their mother called from the kitchen. She came in. 'I wish they wouldn't teach you these things, you can't handle it. I don't know what's come over those nuns.' She turned to her son, 'You better stay away from that beach till you've had a chance to talk to your father. He's very worried. You shouldn't be lying around in the sun all day in any case, you know that, with your skin. And I'll be keeping a stricter eye on you too, Renee. Who knows what you kids get up to, you have far too much freedom. At your age I had a job. These holidays are far too long, you'd be much better at school.'

'I don't learn anything at that stupid school, I want to go to ballet full time like Chelsea.'

'Chelsea ... that was the name of the pony I won on at the Show, he was a roan.'

'We know, Mum,' Lloyd said.

Renee's door slammed.



A symphony attenuated itself through the Barker house. As she made her way to the kitchen, Karen took a breath and wondered if her home smelled bad to strangers. The symphony strengthened as she approached it. Her father was sitting with his ear poised towards the old set which sat on the laminex kitchen table. Her father smiled at her and put his finger to his lips. So she was as quiet as she could be cutting a thick slice of bread and putting on the kettle. She could see her mother hanging out clothes. They looked old and pathetic – her

brother's shorts, her slack underwear, a threadbare shirt, her mother's cotton frock. Several of the pillow cases were so thin they were almost dry already. Her mother picked up the basket and was heading back. Karen hurried to butter the bread and consider what she would put on it. By the time she had made the tea she knew she could no longer resist the golden syrup.

'How was the beach, dear?' her mother asked.

'Shhh,' her father sussurated.

Mrs Barker got the tea cups down. She watched her daughter ladle the golden syrup onto the bread. 'I got that for the gingerbread men.' And observed while Karen took bites from the bread. 'Your cousins love them. You can help me decorate them, they're rather labour intensive.'

They all drank tea and listened to the symphony.

'What was it?' Mrs Barker asked her husband.

'Shostakovich. The Leningrad. He wrote it during the siege. The Germans wouldn't let them have any ... They were besieged and starving and freezing but the orchestra – a diminished orchestra played it. I would give anything to have been there.'

'Are you sure?'

Mr Barker considered this.

'You're about to have your lunch,' Mrs Barker said to Karen.

'No,' Mr Barker said.

'Well you should be careful what you say, Karen might be doing Russian history one day and she might say that in class – mislead everyone.'

'Oh god,' said Karen and got up.

'Where are you going young lady?'

'To my room.'

‘This is synchronicity - Russian. I was in the bottle shop getting the sherry for the Christmas cake which should have been made a fortnight ago and that Mrs Roshanev was in a state because she couldn’t understand the phone so I said to her you would be interested in helping out because you have a clear telephone manner – thanks to our training – and she said you could come around and she would talk to you this afternoon at two-thirty. And then you can help me crop the photos – I’m going to use that lovely one I took of the house using the tele lens, the one with the sun just touching the top of the ti tree.’

Digby Barker loped in, began to cut a slice of bread.

‘You what? I am not. I’m too young to work in a bottle shop, you have to be eighteen.’

‘You will only be answering the phone and helping out a little. It’s your Christian duty.’

‘No!’ Karen Barker began to cry because she knew she would have to go.

‘That was pretty good,’ her brother said to her, ‘I didn’t know you had it in you – ‘you what?’. That’s good.’

‘You’re not even a Christian! First you send me to a Catholic school and then ... Tell her Dad. You don’t understand, I can’t go! He’s in my class.’

‘You are going. You are not hanging around all these holidays doing nothing, you said you were going to print some nice cards for me and instead you’re down on that beach. It was alright in my day, we didn’t know about skin cancer.’

‘Or sex,’ Digby said.

Karen looked at her brother in horror and rushed from the room as her father said, ‘It was the best we could do. They seemed to be offering a good education, I didn’t see any nuns when I ... ‘



Karen ignored Kevin as she entered the Roshanev's liquor shop. Her mother had made her wear a white blouse and her denim skirt and her school shoes. Her hair was parted on the side. 'Very smart,' her mother had said after inspecting her, 'that pink lipstick your aunt gave you is just right, she always had an instinct for these things, it just falls off my face.'

'Hello, Mrs Rosahanev, my mother ...' Mrs Roshanev obviously had no idea what she was there for.

Kevin was staring at her. He looked appalled. A little emboldened by this, she explained her presence.

'Yes! Yes! Your mother very nice lady. We see, we see if you take order on phone.'

The phone rang. Mrs Roshanev indicated she should answer. She did and took an order for a couple of slabs of V B and a bottle of coke to be delivered to a unit nearby.

'Yes,' Mrs Roshanev said after examining her clearly printed order form, 'you work in morning, Kiril help me in afternoon. You know Kiril?'

Karen looked around for Mr Roshanev but found Kevin.

Kevin said something in Russian which included 'Kevin'.

'I know him from school,' Karen said.

'Your mother very nice, lady,' Mrs Roshanev said a few mornings later. 'She is intellectual?'

'No,' Karen replied, 'she's a photographer.'

'Ah photography! She is artist.'

'I think she was but she's not any more. She works for Mr Timmins. She does studio and weddings and things, he's moved into video.'

‘I want you in and looking nice, both of you, tomorrow afternoon. I’ve invited the Roshanevs for drinks.’

‘Oh god.’

‘Really? Why?’

Her husband also looked at Mrs Barker in curiosity and wonder.

‘They are all alone, probably. I imagine they are refugees, it’s our duty. Doesn’t the boy go to school with you?’

‘What do you need me for?’ Digby said.

‘You can help entertain the boy, if necessary. European children tend to know how to behave. It’s just for a drink, you can show him your rooms. Karen can show him her prints, you can talk to him about cars if he’s that sort of boy.’

‘Karen can discuss *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* with him.’

‘You can play games with him.’ Karen turned from her brother’s grin at the possible implications of this and onto her mother, ‘As if it’s not bad enough having to work with him, you have to go and ask ... I can’t believe this. You’re taking over my life.’

‘She probably wants you to marry him, one less mouth to feed. What are they – Croats or something? You’ll probably like their food. It’ll be your job to kill the chickens and the pig. Just get it between your knees and cut its throat.’

She glared at her brother. She was sure he didn’t know anything but the thought that he might frightened her. How could she have been so mad? What if her parents found out? She had just been showing off in front of Melanie Hopkins and Kat Trenerry. She had only done that once before and that was with her cousin’s neighbour. They had all been playing this card game and things had got silly. What if Kevin told people like that Lloyd Mooney who would tell his stupid sister and it would be all over school and the suburb. She determined to

blackmail Kevil – ‘Kevil’, that’s what she would know him as. She would ask her father if she could transfer to the state high. But then she would miss Rosie. If only she had gone round to practise the trio with Rosie instead of going to the beach.

Kevil stood behind his parents. Mrs Roshanev was dressed spectacularly.

‘Goodness,’ Mrs Barker said, ‘don’t you look splendid. It’s just for a drink.’

Mr Barker stepped forward, introduced himself to Mr Roshanev, bowed to Mrs Roshanev and kissed her hand. Then spoke Russian.

Both the Roshanevs burst into streams.

‘Nyet,’ said Mr Barker, ‘I only learn from studying *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.’

The Roshanevs looked puzzled.

Mr Barker led them into the living room.

Mrs Roshanev dismissed the furniture and began to utter little high pitched squeals at the view.

‘It’s better in the morning. You must come for coffee next time. Please sit down.’

Kevil looked pretty spectacular himself. His hair was arranged and he was wearing a very good shirt – white with red squiggles stitched on it. Karen noticed Digby taking him in. Mrs Barker began to push the drinks tray around. ‘Would you like sherry Mrs Roshanev, I’ve only got sweet, I’m afraid and you both must be experts. Trevor will get your husband a beer – that’s what the men drink in summer, and winter.’

‘Put that away!’ Mr Barker commanded, arresting the tumultuous room.

He vanished towards the kitchen.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Barker, ‘I wonder what he’s up to. Karen,

go and see what your father is up to.’

Karen was too frightened to move. She stared at the Roshanevs. Her mother glared at her. ‘Karen loves working in your sh – establishment,’ she said to the Roshanevs, ‘it is so good for her. I think children should have jobs, they don’t do enough to help as it is. Does your son – ’

Mrs Roshanev had a little tremor and, in the high pitched voice she used for certain customers, began to introduce her son but Mr Barker reappeared with a tarnished silver tray on which sat a frosted bottle of vodka surrounded by frosted glasses. The Barkers stared at this phenomenon with much more astonishment than the Roshanevs. The glasses were like little wine glasses.

‘I didn’t know whether you had lemon with it and salt, so I brought that in too, though I suspect not.’ He twisted the top off the bottle and poured some into a glass and handed it to Mrs Roshanev.

Soon everyone had a glass. Digby’s was a tumbler from the kitchen.

‘Not for the children, dear,’ Mrs Barker suggested. But her husband had poured them a token only.

‘Now what is the term?’

‘Bottoms up,’ Mr Roshanev said.

And the adults laughed and except for Mrs Barker tossed their drinks back. ‘Oh I shall get paralytic but what the hell,’ she said then tossed hers back.

Mrs Roshanev tinkled a laugh and performed a flurry of clapping.

Having so imbibed, Mrs Barker rose and began to offer the tiny sandwiches which were her speciality.

The Roshanevs made appreciative noises.

Kevil looked as frozen as Karen. Digby tried to pour himself a

decent vodka but his mother saw and ordered them into the kitchen to get a soft drink. ‘Then you can show Kevin your print table. And you can play the clarinet for us, later. Does Kiril play a musical instrument?’

He did not but he drew and painted, went to special classes every Saturday.

‘My Karen is not a bad drawer. Digby is more technical.’

The adults tossed back another vodka.

The children fled to the kitchen.

Digby poured them all a coke. ‘Good to meet you mate. Gotta go out now and see a man about a dog.’

‘What?’ Karen exclaimed, ‘You can’t leave me alone ... You’re supposed to talk about cars.’

‘Know anything about cars, mate?’

Kevil shrugged.

‘Done,’ said Digby and left.

Karen and Kevil stared at one another and threw their gazes apart.

‘You don’t say anything to anyone?’ Kevil growled hollowly.

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘Good.’

‘What about Lloyd Mooney, did he see?’

‘I fix.’

‘Good.’

Just as the silence was making their situation irrevocable Karen found inspiration, ‘Um, you draw?’

That Kevil nodded.

‘Do you do prints?’

‘We do at college.’

‘Um where is it?’

Kevil told her. Then made the effort to say, ‘I go on Saturday morning, teachers very good.’

‘Oh. Good. Do you want to come and see where I do my silk screening?’

Kevil followed her to a large room. They could hear their parents laughing and their voices murmuring, Mrs Roshanev’s squealing.

Karen showed Kevil the long table where she worked on her prints. An easel stood in a corner, some of her mother’s photographs were pegged along a line. A huge moon rose from behind the cliff where they had gone for their interrupted tryst.

‘It’s like rose quartz,’ Karen said.

‘Rose quartz?’

‘You know, like pink jade.’

‘Pink. Yes. Now turning gold – quartz, yes, like quartz.’

From the exclamations coming from the living room, they knew their parents had seen it too. Mrs Roshanev was whimpering like a bat. Kevil grimaced at Karen. He looked at Mrs Barker’s commercial shots. Came back and flicked through some prints Karen had done. ‘Is good,’ he said, holding one up. It was a design based on a plant she had discovered growing near the bottom of the lawn which ended in the steep climb down to the beach.

‘Thank you. What do you depict?’

‘Nothing. Everything,’ Kevil replied, ‘I try to draw figure, still life, everything, chiaroscuro, my teachers say we must practise drawing, drawing, drawing. But most I like painting.’

‘Water colours?’

‘Water colours, acrylic, oils I like best. Expensive, my father protest.’

‘Oh. Do you want to be an artist?’

‘Of course but ... is very difficult. So I have to do good at school.’

‘Well.’

‘Do well at school.’

‘So do I.’

‘Where is your brother?’

They were both startled and wondered how long Mrs Barker had been observing them.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well find him please. Your parents are staying for dinner. Digby can get the barbecue started. We’ll do the fish I have frozen and some chops. Is he in his room? I asked him to ... ’

‘I will start barbecue,’ Kevil said. ‘You show me,’ he said to Karen.

‘Get Digby to do it,’ Mrs Barker said as she left them.

‘Do you know how to do it?’

‘No. Maybe. I watch my uncle.’

‘How hard can it be.’

‘How hard can it be’ – I like that, very good idiom.’

‘Yes. Come on. Mum will kill Digby.’

She led him out to the barbecue. As soon as they had it going Digby appeared and took over.

Her mother came in to say good night to Karen. ‘Well that was a success. Your father has genius, of course, that’s why I married him no matter what they say. You’ll be lucky to find anyone half as good.’

‘I’ll start looking tomorrow,’ Karen said.



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‘Your dick looks huge,’ Lloyd said, ‘have you got an erection?’

Kevin nodded and grinned.

‘What girl gave you that?’

‘No girl.’

Back in his room with Kevin he couldn’t help himself, ‘Show me,’ he ordered.

Kevin’s dick was thick and cigar shaped, beautifully tapered. Lloyd grabbed it and laughed then started moving the foreskin back and forth. Kevin sighed. Lloyd continued. After a while Kevin pushed his hand away and undid Lloyd’s board shorts, took out his dick and did the same. Lloyd looked at Kevin’s dick – a transparent pearl shone at its end, he wiped it off with his finger. Kevin took Lloyd’s finger and moved it to his mouth; Lloyd tasted.

Karen took her clarinet from her mouth, ‘Let’s go on a diet,’ she said to Rosie Vachetti.

Rosie took her violin from under her chin. ‘What sort?’

‘A macro one,’ Karen replied. She had just read that Madonna was always on one.

‘Alright,’ Rosie said, ‘what do you have to do?’

The told Mrs Vachetti they couldn’t really practise any more without Ms Toogood playing the piano part so they were going to the library to look up something they had to do for next year at school.

Mrs Vachetti said she would come and pick Rosie up at five-thirty.

Karen ran into Kevin walking home from the library. He had been released from the store and was going to his Tae Kwan Do class. ‘You ought to come, is good.’

‘It’s good.’

‘It’s good.’

‘I’m not eating that,’ she said of the food her mother put on the table, ‘I’m going macrobiotic. With Rosie.’

Her mother ignored her and continued serving the food.

‘I think it’s not a bad idea that you should consider losing some weight,’ her father said. ‘Perhaps some exercise routine?’

‘Dad, can I do Tae Kwan Do?’

‘Don’t let her Dad, she’ll bash me up.’

‘You are to take her,’ Mrs Barker said. ‘She can pay for it with the money she is earning. The exercise will do her good.’

Rosie ended up in hospital. ‘Mum made the doctor put me in hospital. I just fainted. The nurse told me there’s nothing wrong with me. It was because I wouldn’t eat this cannelloni she made, you should have seen it, it was covered with cheese.’

They both shuddered.

Karen returned to school six kilos lighter and with a new interest – she had taken to Tae Kwon Do.

She felt a push in her back.

‘You made her end up in hospital.’

‘And everyone says you’ve got anorexia.’

It was Kat Trenerry and Melanie Hopkins.

‘Don’t touch me again,’ Karen said to Kat. ‘Come on Rosie, we’ve got to practise.’

The push came again. She swung around and got a grip on Kat and shook her around a bit. To her surprise Kat went down in a screaming heap. ‘Er! No! Don’t kick me, I’ve just had my braces tightened.’

As she and Rosie walked off she heard Melanie say, ‘That’s

assault, you should tell Ms Gittings or report her to Brother Leo.'

'We'll be in trouble,' Rosie said. 'I'm already in trouble.'

'I'm going to the state school. I don't have to put up with this.'

'Oh please don't! I won't have anyone to play the trio with, we've worked so hard, Ms Toogood says we'll probably do well in the exams, it's my best piece. You've got a scholarship.'

'I won't need one at the state school.'

Felia Roshanev watched as the girl walked into the shop. She looked different; was she taller? Thank god she had a new dress, it wouldn't have been the mother who chose it. She was growing up. She was going to be beautiful, this Australian girl who went to school with Kiril and whose artistic mother had asked them all to dinner and then her for coffee. She would have to guide her carefully but she would be good for Kiril now that he too was growing up. So fast. She had quite good manners for an Australian. Australian girls made her shudder, none would do as a daughter-in-law. This one, this Karen, was polite and quite hard working and her family were respectable. Mrs Roshanev pondered the degree to which the Barkers were also rough and eccentric.

Her son was teaching Lloyd how to do a blow job. Lloyd was gagging. 'I show you,' Kevin said and expertly took Lloyd in his mouth.

'Where did you learn all this?' Lloyd asked.

'From man – a man – in dressing sheds,' Kevin said. 'Lifesaver. Maybe. Perhaps.'

Both boys laughed.



Digby was having a party before all his mates had to settle down for the HSC. His mother insisted on a guest list and the telephone numbers of the parents.

‘Hullo, this is Valerie Barker. My son has invited your son to a party here on the twenty-sixth. I just wanted you to know I am allowing a little alcohol – I will make a punch. My husband and I will be here all night. I have told Digby the last guest must be gone by one. There’s plenty of parking if you want to pop in. Only the Hibbert boy lives close enough to walk – or so I’ve been informed.’

Karen watched as her brother writhed. There were tears in his eyes as he remonstrated again with his mother. She looked through his tears and dialled the next number.

Digby stormed out. ‘I’m going to commit suicide, you give me no choice. I’m going to jump off the cliff.’

‘Go and save your brother and get your father to help,’ Mrs Barker ordered Karen.

The three sat together on the cliff. Below them the surf swept over a table of rock.

‘Your mother believes she is doing the right thing.’

Digby pulled savagely at tussocks of grass.

‘We’ll stay out of your way. We’ll be in our room. I’ve got the score of *Snegourochka*. Pyotr Roshanev is lending me a tape.’

Digby clasped his head. Karen suppressed laughter.

The party was a great success. There was grass and alcohol. Digby made Karen buy a bottle of vodka and put it in the punch. The music went well. Nobbo Rolinson shared some sort of tablet with Digby. The food, which was delicious, was eaten. Digby was persuaded to invite Kevil, Karen was allowed to invite Rosie. The three young ones sat outside on the ragged

lawn at a distance from the heat of things and sipped on the half bottle of vodka Kevil had stolen from his parents. The sounds of *Snegourochka* drifted to them from the Barkers' bedroom.

'Listen to that. What is it?'

'It is *Snegourochka*, Russian.'

'What's happening?'

'*Snegourochka* wants Tsar to – Russian king – to kiss her but he kisses another girl.'

'Then what?'

'She becomes lesbian.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Lesbian. And moves off to Australia.'

The girls took a moment but then laughed.

'Really?'

'Sure. All best lesbians in Australia, everyone knows that.'

'How does it end?'

'*Snegourochka* arrive to Australia and becomes tennis player and beats Yvonne Goolagong in Davis Cup. Then she marry Martina Navratilova and they live happily ever after running tennis school for Australian adolescents.'

'I know – What's her name again?'

'*Snegourochka*.'

'Who's that singing now?'

'Is boyfriend.'

'But I thought you said she was a lesbian.'

'Yes. Lehl, her boyfriend is gay.'

'Then ... ?'

Kevil shrugged. 'Is Russian fairytale.'

The girls laughed and Kevil grinned broadly.

They drank again and listened some more.

'What's happening now?'

'Is always the same in Russian fairy tale – the Snow Girl melts.'

A wind began to blow at the perfect stillness of the night. The Roshanevs and the Vachettis turned up to collect their young.

Rosie, installed protesting, into her father's car, opened the window to say to Karen, 'Isn't Kevin nice? I wish all boys were like that.'

'He's not right for you.' Karen walked away from the car disgusted by the blast of alcohol on Rosie's breath.

'Well, I am surprised,' said Mrs Barker at the cleaned-up house, 'you must have been up all night.'

'I had nothing better to do,' Digby said.

'Next time your brother has a party, will you get him to ask me?' Kat asked on Monday.

'No,' said Karen, 'you wouldn't cope.'

'What do you mean?'

'You're still at the bitchy brat gangirl stage, Kat, older guys can't stand that.' And she and Rosie stalked off.

Kevil said he would get some more vodka.

'Oh. Rosie won't be able to drink it. Her parents thought she had been drinking the last time.'

'She had.'

'They're mega strict Catholics. But get the vodka. You can come to mine and we'll listen to music. Digby's got some great stuff ... so he says.'

'Maybe we print. Maybe we can print something. I would like

that. Not much room in my place.’

Lloyd was having trouble accepting Kevin’s dick. ‘It’s too big. You didn’t put enough stuff on it. You can get a disease.’

Later on they saw the headline in a gay paper someone had brought to school STDs ON THE INCREASE. Lloyd exchanged a telling glance with Kevin. The next time Kevin wore a condom and it went in.

They would go to Kevin’s apartment. His parents were always working. They would listen to music, talk about school and end up on Kevin’s bed. Then they would raid the Roshanev refrigerator. Once after they had had a shower together Mrs Roshanev complained about the mess and the wet towels. Kevin had had to lie about soccer and Lloyd and him both getting dirty. His mother had scrutinised him carefully.

‘We should not do it no more, maybe,’ he had worried to Lloyd.

‘Any more. Only westies say ‘shouldn’t do it no more’ – it’s any more.’

‘Yes. Double negative – any more, not do it any more.’

‘That’s right.’

But they couldn’t help themselves.

‘Soon we’ll have girlfriends,’ Lloyd said.



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‘You should sell your prints.’

‘Who would buy them?’

‘They are good on fabric so dress makers, fashion designers. They are really good. I’ll help you.’

Karen and Kevil were lying, intoxicated, at the bottom of the Barker’s garden. Year Twelve was almost over and they were

facing their futures with some apprehension. Over the past year they had got into the habit of killing half a bottle of vodka together in various isolated spots around the beach. They would sit and drink and talk. Lately they had taken to driving in one of their parents' cars to another beach to smoke a joint and listen to the car radio.

'I don't know what you do with that boy,' Mrs Barker said one afternoon, 'there were take away cartons all over the back seat.'

'Kevin got hungry so - '

Digby burst into laughter.

' - we got some ... take away.'

'It's not good for you. You could have brought him here and made a nice toasted cheese sandwich. It was cold last night. One or the other of you could get the flu and then what would you do with your exams coming up? His parents are counting on him doing well.'

'He'll do well, he's brilliant at Art and English.'

'And he could hardly speak it when we first knew him. Next time invite him in.'

Later she came to Karen's room and began, 'I know they tell you about this at school but ... I just want to remind you - it's my duty - that young people can be overcome by their feelings. I know Kevin's a decent type but ... You might consider protection. I will make an appointment - '

Karen leapt from her desk. 'Oh please! I'm more likely to rape him than - '

'I'm not talking about rape, I'm - '

'Oh you're as bad as Brother Leo, he's always telling us not to let our hormones talk our walk. Even Rosie laughs at him. Can't you let me have a friend? Why do you want to spoil it? He's the best friend I've ever had.'

Mrs Barker drew back at this. 'What about Rosie?'

‘She’s alright. But ... We’re all going to the formal together.’

Mrs Barker withdrew. She sat in her kitchen and over a cup of tea came to the conclusion that this was not altogether a bad thing – some of the friends Digby brought in ... She ought to get Trevor to have a talk to Digby too. It was time now he was at university and prey to who knew what influences.

Karen appeared. ‘Will you help me make a dress? I want to create my own formal gown. It has to be fabulous.’

Mrs Barker was appeased by the normalcy of this. ‘Yes. We’ll go into town on Sunday and choose a pattern and some fabric. I saw some nice glazed cotton the last - ’

‘No. I’m going to design it. Will you help me pin the material and sew it? I want silk jersey. To drape.’

‘Oh Karen, do you know how much that will cost? And you’ll probably never wear it again. I suppose that’s what Rosie’s wearing. Remember her parents are well off and she is their baby.’

The formal was held in the ballroom of an almost grand hotel.

Karen was dressed in swathes of glazed cotton she had printed in yellow and mauve swirls.

‘You look like a lounge chair,’ Kat pronounced taking in the coordinated sandals and bag before worrying at a corkscrew of hair.

Karen, Lloyd, Kevin and Karen had been given a vermouth with their antipasto at the Vachettis. Lloyd was driving them in but Mr Vachetti was picking up his daughter at twelve.

The ballroom seemed vast, its very dim lighting was banished here and there by pools of brightness. A smoke machine extruded a heavy fog onto the dance floor. It slopped around knee high to be kicked away by the legs of dancers and intermittently sliced by a puny laser before rolling to its doom in lurid colours borrowed from a bipolar light ball.

The graduating class was awash with a sentiment compounded of fear and nostalgia. Nearly all had been groomed and decorated to allure and impress; that was now the conscious aim of very few. Taffetas glowed in the gloom, shoulder pads swayed, heads were held swan-like above swathed bosoms. Young men who had submitted to hairdressing and bow ties thereby forgoing their right to schoolyard thuggishness felt they were now obliged to bear themselves like princes; winged collars and gaudy cummerbunds further impressed this thrilling burden.

A D J assembled sets which pulsed in their veins, vibrated and fibrillated in their brains, thudded rhythms for their hearts to synchronise with. They shimmied then screamed and shouted and shimmied again and grooved with their shoulders and hips. They sat and were demure. It was extraordinarily erotic and unsexual. They were conscious of their childhoods draining, their futures looming irrevocably, of the mature enough beauty of some of their classmates, of their own unpreparedness. After this their school uniforms could only be a facade. They sought escape from the responsibilities being imposed by the ritual – a drink in one of the hotels bars from which they soon fled back, outside to smoke a cigarette or catch a breath of fresh air, to the toilets to check how their masks were holding up; the toilets reeked of dope.

‘I am so glad to be out of that ballroom,’ Karen said as Lloyd drove her and Kevil homewards.

‘Oh we can’t go home!’ she exclaimed as Lloyd approached her road, ‘we have to stay up all night.’

It was not yet two.

‘Let’s walk on the beach,’ she said when she noticed the tremor of resistance which passed between the two young men in the front seat. ‘Then I can go up and see if Digby has any dope.’

The waves frothed around her ankles. She wondered if she looked like someone in a film to the two boys standing on the beach. ‘Come on, it’s not cold.’

Kevil took off his shoes and socks. Lloyd stood adamant in his rejection of whatever Karen was proposing.

Having persuaded Kevil in, Karen joined Lloyd on the sand in an attempt at persuading him into complicity with her fantasy. They watched Kevil wading with his trousers rolled up against the frothing white. Almost alone of the Year, Kevil had worn traditional black tie. He was deep in thought and his hair flopped over his brow.

‘Doesn’t he look like a prince?’ Karen noted for Lloyd.

‘That’s what Mr Blackman said.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. He was passing our table – you were dancing – and he stopped and said, “You look like a prince, as usual Roshanev.” I think he was bit pissed.’

‘He’s gay.’

At that moment Kevil walked out of the sea and came up and kissed Lloyd. He put his arms around him and kissed him deeply.

Lloyd could not protest.

It was as if a huge wave had taken Karen by surprise and dumped her. ‘What about me?’

Kevil put his arms around her and kissed her but when she opened her mouth he withdrew.

They sat on the beach. Karen felt shocked, a profound cold welled up in her. ‘Come on up, I’ll make cheese sandwiches. Mum is always telling me to. I’ll walk, you drive.’

Kevil went with Lloyd.

As she stumbled up the path, clutching her sandals and bag, trying to hold the billowing hem of her gown up, Karen’s mind raged. ‘He’s mine,’ she said to herself, ‘he’s mine. Kevil’s mine.’ And she recoiled from her own desperate presumption.

She hoped they'd just drive away but they were waiting for her.

She led them into the kitchen.

The tea and toasted sandwiches helped. They picked incidents from the night and turned them over like periwinkles. At last she said, 'I don't think I can get the dope,' and they left.

Kevin put his hand on Lloyd's thigh as he drove then moved it to his cock. He stroked the erection through the hired fabric. 'Don't,' Lloyd said, 'you shouldn't have done that.'

'Drive to the park,' Kevin said.

There, he began kissing Lloyd, got his cock out, stroked it, then took it in his mouth until Lloyd sighed and stroked his hair. Then he got out of the car and dragged Lloyd out and led him by his erection to a rock, turned Lloyd around and placed his arms up onto the rock, reached around and hugged his chest, moved his arms down, fumbled at Lloyd's trousers until they fell, slipped Lloyd's jocks down.

Lloyd felt Kevin's moistened finger circling and pressing at his rectum. He was in, then another finger. Kevin embraced Lloyd again and moved his hands up under his shirt. Lloyd thrashed, transfixed in his posture then felt his nipples being rolled between Kevin's smooth warm fingers. Then he was pressing against him and he felt the huge warmth of Kevin's dick pressing, pressing then suddenly it was in and Lloyd's head thundered and flashed until the smell of damp leaves and soil drifted into his consciousness. He turned around and held Kevin, his mouth open and searching for Kevin's lips.

Kevin took his hand down to his penis which was warm and smooth and still strong.

'I didn't mean to come so soon,' Lloyd said as he drove away, 'I don't know why.' He was mad with happiness despite that regret.



Karen was eating and eating.

Her mother watched. 'You'll put on weight,' she said.

'So what? I'll still be me. It's just advertising.'

'What is?'

'All this about having to be slim.'

Her mother picked up her bag and left for work.

Karen wanted to talk to someone. Rosie was getting ready to go to Europe, her father was in the study orchestrating a tune for a television ad, Digby was out of the question.

Kevil appeared.

Karen's heart thudded. 'I've got to be at work soon,' she said, 'your mother will go mad.'

'Not till eleven.'

They sat in silence which Karen broke with, 'What time did you ... I mean, did you stay ... It was a great night, wasn't it? Wasn't it awful when Mario threw up in front of Brother Leo?'

Kevil shrugged. 'I have a plan. Why don't we try and sell some of your designs? I know where to go. We could take some samples around the fabric shops and see if we could get some orders to print.'

'No-one would take them. What chance would we have?'

'We have a chance.'

'What could we take? I haven't got enough.'

'You only need three – maybe four to six samples. You could use your HSC work.'

Karen, despite herself, had been glaring at Kevil, now the glare was dissolving. 'Which ones?'

They moved into the studio room to examine Karen's prints. 'I wouldn't know what to charge,' she said, 'even.'

'Mum has a friend in the industry, we could ask her. I'll come to the shop with you and we can ring up. Mum will give you the number.'

They walked down the hill together, Kevil pushing his bike.

'Are you angry about last night?'

'No. Why would I be?'

'You're not talking.'

'I just can't think of anything to say.'

'I'm gay,' Kevil said.

'Oh. With Lloyd?'

'He says he's not.'

'That's O K. Do your parents know?'

'No.'

'I won't tell them.'

'That's good. I'll tell them when I'm at the College of the Arts.'

They walked on in silence and tears ran down Karen's face.

'Why are you crying?'

'I don't know. You won't have children.'

'Van Gogh didn't have children.'

'He went with prostitutes – female ones.'

They walked on.

'That was a stupid thing to say, I didn't mean it.'

'Is O K.'

These days Kevil only regressed to Russian-English when he was upset.

‘Oh!’ Karen wailed, ‘I didn’t mean it. I’m glad you’re gay, I really am, I always hoped you were, now we can be friends always ... Can’t we?’

Kevil put his free arm around her and hugged Karen.

She wept uncontrollably. People stared. She told Mrs Roshanev it was her time of the month.

‘Is exams,’ Mrs Roshanev said, ‘now you begin to relax. Ball not to relax – too much excitement. Kiril ... what you say with mood?’

‘Moody.’

‘Moody like you. Shout at his father. His father!’

Karen continued to eat.

‘You want to watch it, you’re putting on weight.’

She ignored Digby.

‘He’s got a point, dear you don’t – ’

‘You’re a male fucking chauvinist pig!’ she screamed.

They were all staring at her.

‘He’s screwing Mel Hopkins, she’s half his age. You’re a fucking child molester!’

There was a grotesque silence.

‘How old is this girl?’ Mr Barker spoke in the deep, severe tone his children had only rarely had directed at them.

‘She’s eighteen, Dad.’ Digby got up, gave his sister a puzzled, furious, hurt look and left the room.

‘I can’t have this talk. I can’t be upset like this. I have to light some products for advertising, it’s so tedious in its way – lawnmowers and whippersnippers - and Mr Timmins wants me to learn how to scan things so we can put them on the computer. I can’t have this ...’ Mrs Barker also rose and left the room.

Karen hung her head, picked up her spoon and ate some more of the muesli with hazel nuts she had bought.

Her father sat while she ate. She kept eating in order to avoid his eyes. Finally she had no option. She burst into tears. Her father kept sitting, looking at her. She got up to flee his unrelenting gaze. 'Sit down,' he said.

'I couldn't help it,' Karen snivelled.

'You're approaching an age when you can't in any decency say that.'

'What then?'

'You know Karen, we can't always have what - or who - we want.'

Mr Barker got up and left her to her misery.

Again she was all glares when she encountered Kevil in his parents' shop. This time he made no attempt to mollify her.

'I can't have - I won't have that language. If either of you use it again I will withdraw my support. Your father and I have done all we can. I hear them speaking like that and I am revolted. We sent you to a good school - the best in the neighbourhood - so you would not be exposed to that kind of influence.'

'I never -'

'And you,' Mrs Barker continued, turning her attention on Digby now, 'must bring all your friends home for ... for dinner, so we can meet them. And I hope this girl's parents know what is going on because I don't want some irate mother accosting me in the mall or some ...'

'Happy now?' Digby said to Karen.

Later Karen borrowed the car and drove to the nearest shop and bought three chocolate bars. She sat in the car and ate one immediately. She ate the other one as she drove home, got into bed with a book and ate the third then fell into a leaden sleep.

The Christmas season was approaching. ‘Everyone puts on weight at Christmas,’ she said as she trod off the scales five kilos heavier.

She wasn’t speaking to Kevil. Rosie was in Europe. She didn’t go near the beach. She worked for the Roshanevs. She read. When Digby brought Melanie Hopkins for dinner she all but ignored her. After which her mother said, ‘I am ashamed of you. You have obviously abandoned your manners but I do think you could have made an effort for your brother’s sake, he seems very keen on this girl.’

‘She’s a slut.’

Her mother gazed at her in horror then wondered if this were true – what if Digby were serious about this girl? She must see if she could find anything out about her.

Rosie rang her on Christmas Day. She was having a fabulous time in Palermo. She had lost three kilos and her cousins were helping her choose dresses – and shoes – and they had taken her to a fabulous hairdresser, ‘Wait till you see!’

Karen rushed off to weigh herself – seven kilos now.

Lloyd rang and asked her round for a dinner party. She refused. And the night of the dinner party went out after dinner and bought a carton of sweet and sour pork and fried rice to eat it with. She sat in the car park stuffing herself. A car pulled up nearby. It was full of girls from school. Karen screeched out of the car park, their laughter and excited manner flashing through her brain. The pork and rice flew all over the front seat.

Her mother woke her in the morning. ‘What have you spilled in my car? It smells like Chinese food and there’s rice everywhere. Get up and go out and clean it up.’

At breakfast she had to confess she couldn’t get the stains out. ‘It’s only an old car in any case.’

‘Well you needn’t drive it any more.’

She had trouble fitting into her skirt and blouse. She looked at herself in the mirror. Worse was the look – up and down - Mrs Roshanev gave her as she walked in. Then, in a quiet moment, Mrs Roshanev asked her very gently if she was alright.

She started to cry. Mr and Mrs Roshanev had given her a very generous Christmas bonus to help her start at university. Mrs Roshanev took her in her arms. Karen broke free and said she was O K.

That night her mother came into her room and asked her if she really wanted to start art school feeling overweight and not able to fit into all the lovely clothes she had.

‘They’re not lovely. I made them in any case. Other girl’s mothers take them to shops and they can choose what they want.’

‘I am not other girl’s mothers.’ Mrs Barker said. ‘Your clothes are of the best materials and they fit – are fitted perfectly. They are an outlet for your creativity. I thought ...’

Mrs Barker had retreated dismayed and confused. In the morning Karen tried to apologise by explaining what she had meant. ‘Other girls despise homemade clothes. Rosie is buying couture clothes in Italy. She’s had her hair done by a top hairdresser.’

That night her mother came in again and said, ‘Your father’s doing very well lately. I’ve spoken to him. You can have your hair done in town though god knows what they’ll do to it. How much will you need for your wardrobe? We’ll have to give Digby money to buy a car.’

A fierce greed overcame Karen – now she could buy clothes and shoes and make-up, have her hair done by someone really good. She would become one of those plump, very made-up and well dressed girls and ... ‘I’ll go into town and see,’ she told her mother.

She had her hair styled and paid for it herself; it cost her an exorbitant amount. When she woke up the next day she saw

her fat self looking back at her under a rumpled stylish cut. She couldn't get it to fall the way the hairdresser had.

Kevil stared at her and she saw what he saw and was desperately unhappy, hopeless.

'What are you doing for New Year's Eve?' he said to her the next day.

Karen was overjoyed. 'Haven't thought about it. Really.'

Kevil looked at the row of vodka bottles. Karen nodded.

'Kevil and I are having a few drinks on the veranda,' she announced to her parents when they asked her if she wanted to go with them to a neighbour's. Everyone was relieved.

'Mel and I might join you for a few before we go out,' Digby asked.

'A few! You are not drinking and driving. You have a responsibility to that young lady. As well as yourself. On New Year's Eve.'

Karen's heart clenched against the idea of having to share her Kevil on New Year's Eve. She dare not say anything that might be interpreted as dislike of Melanie Hopkins whom she held in contempt and whose contempt she feared. 'Kevil and I are going through my designs so we can choose the best to try and sell. We'll be pretty absorbed.'

Digby really liked Kevil, they joked through the dinner. She made a special effort with Melanie who in response confided why she hadn't spoken to Kat Trenerry since Year Ten. Then said, while she and Karen were alone, 'I wish Dig and I could be like you and Kevin.' In her confusion Karen nodded understandingly.

Kevil scanned her designs as they knocked back their first vodkas. They selected five for a portfolio to take around fabric wholesalers, then one to print a couple of metres to give an idea of how the designs would translate. They had decided on them as curtain or furnishing fabrics and to move onto

clothing when they had got some orders and understanding of the market.

Business over, Karen dragged the long windows open, Kevil produced a joint, the sea thumped an irregular beat followed by a cymbal swish and the deep white and ivory gardenias Mrs Barker had placed in an old blue ginger jar exuded waves of their heavy perfume.

‘So where’s Lloyd?’ Karen could no longer hold back the question which had been pressing on her mind since they had colluded on this New Year’s Eve together.

‘Marina Czesovic invited him to a party.’

‘Oh. Where?’

‘I don’t know. Does it matter?’

In their misery, they began to select C Ds. Then they adjourned to their favourite spot at the bottom of the Barker’s garden. Karen was blissful, again she couldn’t stop herself, ‘I never thought we’d be here ... ever again.’

‘Why?’

‘I ... I just thought you didn’t like me any more.’

‘Why wouldn’t I like you?’

‘I don’t know ... You were going to help me with the designs and you didn’t come and ... I thought you were busy with Lloyd.’

Kevil’s silence confronted Karen with the falseness of her words.

At last Kevil said, ‘Are you a friend of mine or not?’

‘Of course! What makes you say that?’

He got up. ‘If you’re not, just tell me.’ And he began to walk off.

Karen tried to scramble to her feet but her new weight,

intoxication and lack of suppleness made her plop clumsily down again. Kevil was at her side, clasping her arm. 'I'm so fat,' Karen said, 'and I haven't been going to Tae.' She laughed.

Kevil sat. And they laughed. And laughed.

Finally he said, 'We've got to do well now. We've got to get out of here. It's alright for you but I'm a prisoner.'

'We will! We'll be brilliant. I'm going to work so hard.'



viii

Lloyd called Kevin late New Year's day. 'Happy New Year.'

'Same to you.'

'How was it?'

'How was what?'

'Your New Year, up at the Barker's. What did you think I meant?'

'It was O K. Good. We had a few drinks, a smoke ... Made some business plans.'

'Was Dig there?'

'At first, for dinner, with Melanie Hopkins then they went out. So did Mr and Mrs Barker. Mr Barker's doing a film score.'

'So it was just you and Karen?'

'Yes, I told you. We made business plans, we're going to sell some of her designs to fabric wholesalers. We're going to print them ourselves.'

'That's good.'

'How did you go?'

'Good.'

There was another silence.

‘You want to hang out tonight?’

‘O K. Where?’

‘Come round, my parents are going out. Renee’ll be here but we ... Come as soon as you can, they’re leaving us money for take away. Have you got anything to smoke?’

Kevin didn’t.

The boys played a computer game. But Kevin got bored with it.

Lloyd put his arm around Kevin’s shoulder but it was shrugged off. ‘You’ve got a girlfriend now.’

‘Who? Oh. Marina’s not my girlfriend, we only ...’

‘We’ll be in different campuses, we probably won’t see much of one another.’

‘I can drop you off, it’s on the way. We can go to Orientation Week together. They’re not far apart. We can come home together if our lectures end at the same time.’

Lloyd had got into Dentistry.

‘So how was the party?’

‘I told you, it was O K. Dig turned up with Mel Hopkins. They didn’t stay long. It was mainly a Year Twelve crowd. She thinks she’s hot now she’s got him for a boyfriend.’

‘I know.’

‘It would have been good if you were there.’

‘I wasn’t invited.’

‘Yeah. But it would have been good.’

Again Lloyd tried to put his arm around Kevin but it was shrugged off. ‘I think I better go, I don’t feel well. I think I’m getting the flu.’

‘It’s the middle of summer. You’re just pissed off with me

because I went out with Marina.’

‘If you say so.’

Kevin started to leave. Lloyd grabbed him in a hug, ‘Don’t I get a New Year’s hug?’

‘O K.’

But it did not progress very far because Kevin started to sweat. Then he swayed.

Lloyd watched as he wobbled on his bike, then it straightened.

‘It’s for you!’

Lloyd had heard the phone ringing. ‘What time is it? Who is it?’

It was a very upset Mrs Roshanev. Kiril was in hospital. He had been found collapsed on the side of the road. Had they been taking drugs? What had he eaten at the Mooneys?

Kiril was propped up in the hospital bed sketching. He looked saintly. Adoration clutched Lloyd’s heart. Mr Roshanev was sitting beside the bed, he glared at Lloyd. ‘Why you let him ride his bike? You have car.’

‘Dad. Please. I was O K. Lloyd didn’t know.’

‘I drive him home plenty times.’

The hospital couldn’t find anything wrong with Kevin and he was discharged after four days. Though the pizza was cleared, Mrs Roshanev continued to harbour suspicions. Both the Roshanevs now viewed Lloyd with hostility.

Lloyd could hardly keep his hands off Kevin now. He was fiercely protective of him. He told Karen she had no right to let Kevin take her around the wholesale fabric shops. ‘Let’s go away, spend some time together,’ he beseeched. He wanted to spend the night with Kevin, be totally with him for a night ... or a few nights. And then they could start uni and act more grown-up, he told himself. The girls would be all over Kevin and he’d never get ... again. He stood off and looked at his

friend turning over some books in a bin – the broad shoulders tapering to the narrow hips, the lock of shiny thick hair falling over the skin golden again, the gentle luminous eyes under the silky brows, the broad mouth and square jaw, the grace ... Kevin grinned at him looking at him, ‘What are you staring at?’ The white even teeth. Lloyd was overcome. How could he have got close to such a creature? He was so proud to be seen with him. People turned to stare, they turned at the deep clear tones of his voice. The way people looked at him. Once, in a pub, a waitress had kept coming back to see how their drinks were going to stare at Kevin and then had retreated in confusion when he had smiled at her. What made it devastating was that he didn’t even notice – he was oblivious to the reaction he created. One day in a club Nobbo Rolinson had said, ‘Look at him, he doesn’t belong here, he makes the rest of us look like shags on a rock.’

Lloyd startled to tremble when he finally got Kevin naked again.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I don’t know what I’m doing any more.’

‘I’ll show you,’ Kevin said and smiled his for-Lloyd smile.



ix

‘Not for us. Curtains you say? Let me have a look again. Maybe this. What are you printing it on? It’ll need to be stain resistant. Are you sure it’s exclusive? We don’t want to see it in every outlet around here. We’ll try ten metres for a start see how it goes. On consignment.’

‘No ... No ... No ... Maybe ... No ... What other colours can you do it in?’

‘We handle mainly imports, we’re a luxury outlet. Could you do this in silk and let us have a look?’

‘Too tasteful,’ Mrs Roshanev’s friend said skipping through Karen’s samples. ‘Nice ... but.’ She told them what they should have charged for the on-consignment order and put them onto someone who would tell them about proper dyes. Then she looked severely at Karen, ‘You nice girl, I see in your design. Not right for this period. Nouveau period – you know what that means?’

Karen nodded.

‘Go back and look. Horrible. Gold. Paisley. Satin. Tassels. Vulgarity. Expensive. You shouldn’t say cotton – never say cotton. Silk. Everything expensive and look expensive. Versace.’ She shuddered. ‘But spend, spend, spend, pay anything. Is good.’ She laughed in the high pitched manner of Mrs Roshanev. ‘Maybe never pass. Maybe we never get back to taste. But you want business. Give them what they want! Las Vegas, Hong Kong, Milan, Milan now is ... how to say? Brothel.’

On the way out she kissed Karen after kissing Kiril and said, ‘You got talent, you got taste. You are young. Maybe you can wait but look, look! What is around. Look at overseas magazines – here!’ She grabbed one up from her desk and pressed it on the girl. ‘Pornography. But if you want to make money, you must be whore.’

Kevil took her to lunch in a Russian club. They had iced borscht. A rattling floor fan blew a soft breeze. The waiter was a grandfather. Kevil spoke Russian to him. They laughed over the morning’s ordeals and sallied forth in high spirits to ‘look what is around’. Karen sketched and made notes about the fabrics they saw. They laughed at them and made penetrating observations. They got the feel. They covered a lot of territory and only felt how tired they were on the bus home. Karen laid her head against Kevil’s shoulder. She raised it again when she felt a tremor of resistance.

Karen made a very small profit on the ten metres which sold so quickly that more was ordered. She took in some new designs

she had done – based on Russian tapestries in a book the Roshanevs had lent her. They were to be printed on velvet. Then Natalia, Mrs Roshanev's friend contacted her and she was invited to bring in her original sample designs to show a potential client. 'Could she sew?' She said she could and received an order to print a design of green sprigs on a cream background for two bridesmaids dresses and fit and sew the dresses. She was paid so well for this she contemplated buying a car.

Rosie arrived home. Karen saw at once that she was now a young woman. Her hair was cut very stylishly and she was wearing clothes that really suited her rounded figure. She had a new confidence – she even sounded different - Rosie was modulating her voice and pitching it lower. For the first time Karen felt a glow of envy and resentment towards her friend. She had noticed Rosie's reaction to her – surprise and a hastily disguised disgust.

The Vachettis commissioned Kevin to paint their daughter's portrait. He did many sketches then began the work in oils.

'It's so boring,' Rosie said to Karen, 'I have to sit still for hours. He won't show it to me. I hope it looks like me, Dad's paying him a lot.'

As Karen herself worked at her print designing and fitting and making up the bridesmaids' dresses, her need for food receded. She started to jog. The effect was almost immediate. She started to look smarter and sharper. She went back to Tae Kwan Do. 'Good, you're losing weight,' Natalia said. Mrs Barker dared not say anything but observed her daughter nervously.

'Don't worry Mum, I'm not turning anorexic,' Karen said one day after refusing a slice of bread to go with her chicken salad.

Digby was about to say something but his father caught his eye.

The bridesmaids' dresses were hard work but her mother helped her. 'They'll look lovely in them,' Mrs Barker sighed

after photographing them for her daughter's portfolio. 'Come on you two, I'll take your portrait.' Kevin was there printing the velvet as the women sewed the dresses. He stood forward readily but Karen held back. 'I have no time for that nonsense Karen, it's just vanity. Stand back a bit Kevin, turn to the right – no too far ...' 'Then Mrs Barker rearranged the studio lights. Again and again. Karen suddenly realised she was being given a lesson in professionalism. Then it went beyond that. Mrs Barker moved the tripod right in, undid one of Kevin's shirt buttons, stood back. 'No,' she said, 'it's all wrong. Go over to the print table please. Push the – yes.' Mrs Barker moved the studio lights again. 'Move that one over here Karen please. Yes. Now lower it ... further. Now bend over and look up into the lens, Kevin ... Lower the chin ... Up a bit – Yes.' The shutter motor clatter-whirred. 'One of those should be alright. Just a minute.' She moved right into Kevin's face, adjusted the lens, turned him to face the light coming in the window and the shutter motor whirred again. 'Let's see if you can capture Rosie as well as I've caught you. Though mine will have the disadvantage of ...'

'Of what?' her daughter asked.

'I would have preferred to capture Kevin spontaneously or think a long time about how best to pose him.' She began packing up the lights. Kevin helped her carry them out to the car.

'Lloyd's out,' Renee Mooney informed Kevin.

'Will you tell him I called?'

'He's working with Tim Waterhouse, his father is paying them to clear some land. They're staying on the property.'

'O K,' Kevin said. 'Thanks.'

He was stunned; Lloyd hadn't told him he was going away. For how long? he wondered. He returned his attention to Rosie's portrait. He knew the Vachettis would want to frame it in gilt so he was working the colour down – and up in glints here and

there - to accommodate that fact. He suddenly felt very tired and had to lie down. By the time he got up it was time to go to the shop.

‘You working too hard on painting.’ Mr Roshanev stroked under his son’s eyes with his thumbs. ‘Finish. It is finished. Stop. They will pay you no more. Is perfect now.’

Kevin knew it wasn’t and resented the morning he had wasted sleeping, resented Lloyd who was affording him so much puzzlement and pain – why hadn’t he said he was going away to work for Mr Waterhouse? When would he be back? He didn’t feel he could ring the Mooneys again; maybe the parents wanted Lloyd to stay away from him.

He worked intensely on the portrait that night then looked at it in the daylight. The colours he had applied under electric light only needed lifting here and there.

The drafting had been elaborate. Rosie, dressed in one of her new Italian frocks, was holding her violin and looking at music on a stand. There were blue and pink hydrangeas in a large bowl glazed in deep, deep rose with a design of fruits standing on the dining room table. Beside the bowl of hydrangeas was a glass dish of fruit – plums, a mango, bananas, a pineapple.

Kevin had developed the skill needed for oils and the endless hours of sketching practice had given him an accurate eye and dexterity. He had wanted to abstract the portrait but knew the more academic the portrait was, the more pleased Mr and Mrs Vachetti would be.

He concentrated on Rosie – what had he said about her? What did he know about her? She held the violin somewhat carelessly (the rendering of the hands was very good) but her gaze on the sheet music was intense. Her frock reinforced a sense of careful richness in the room. The wood of her violin gleamed with a touch of the light also reflecting on the polished table over which was laid a luxurious cloth trailing a gold fringe. The chair at the table was upholstered in shining gold

cloth. Rosie's dress seemed a little too big so that she appeared somewhat imposed upon by her surroundings. Her hair was coming a little undone, an effect Kevin had created on his model. Had he been unjust to Rosie? Had he missed something in her? Had he made her, despite her rounded figure and face, less substantial than she had become? He decided he would take the portrait up and show the Barkers.

He unwrapped it in the studio room. He was nervous. They and Mel Hopkins stood, staring. Kevil placed it on the print table and took up a position behind it, holding it up. He didn't dare look for their reactions. They crowded forward.

'It's much ... It's more traditional than I had expected. Much,' was Karen's immediate comment.

'Yeah, it's not what I was expecting,' was Digby's reaction.

'It's gorgeous! Will you do me next?' was Melanie's.

Kevil now dared to look at the parents. They were both staring at the portrait. Mrs Barker glanced at him, then back to the portrait. The she moved closer and began to inspect it closely.

'If it was a print I could sell kilometres of it,' Karen said, 'in plush.'

'It's very good Kiril,' Mr Barker suddenly pronounced in his special deep serious voice, 'we're going to celebrate. You come and help me, Karen.'

Everyone looked at Mrs Barker for her response. She was crying.

'I'm sorry, sorry,' Kevin said.

Mrs Barker just shook her head and pulled a tissue from her pocket and began to blow her nose.

They all stood around the portrait with glasses of champagne.

'To Kiril!' Mr Barker intoned and raised his glass.

They all drank.

‘Yes. I’m sorry I made such a fool of myself. I had no idea you’d come such a long way. You should enter it in the Archibald – it’s too late this year but next year.’

‘What are you going to call it mate?’ Digby asked.

‘Portrait of Rosie,’ I suppose.’

They all stared again at the portrait.

Kevin wrapped the portrait.

In the kitchen, over a cup of tea, he found the nerve to ask Mr and Mrs Barker, ‘Is it right? Have I said the right thing? About Rosie?’

‘Well I thought it was really a still life - about the pinks and blues and the wood and the curves of the violin,’ Karen offered.

Mr Barker nodded reassurance strongly and slowly at Kevin in an attempt to obliterate his daughter’s comment.

‘Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude Stein is supposed to look more like her than she did. I think they’re going to be thrilled – they’re idiots if they’re not. And they’re not idiots, the Vachettis.’ Mrs Baker was looking at Kevin with a new, respectful warmth.

‘It’s not finished yet.’

‘Don’t overwork it,’ Mrs Barker advised.

‘It’s her but is it you, mate?’ Digby asked.

Lloyd rang. ‘Hi.’

‘Hi.’

‘Um, how’ve you been?’

‘Good.’

‘That’s good.’

Silence.

‘I’ve been up in the bush clearing the Waterhouse’s land.

‘They’re building a house.’

Silence.

‘Hullo?’

‘I know. Renee told me.’

‘Can we get together – take it easy?’

‘Sure. Any time. But I’m working in the shop and I’m still finishing Rosie’s portrait.’

‘Oh. How’s it going?’

‘Good.’

‘Good.’

Silence.

‘Um, when?’

‘When what?’

‘When will we chill out?’

‘Whenever. Look. I’m busy.’

Kevin hung up. Lloyd was left holding his phone with a cold feeling.

Rosie’s father was so delighted with the portrait that, despite Rosie’s protests, he insisted on her giving a dinner to show it off to her friends in its new frame (moulded gilt) and position – on the wall behind the table in the portrait itself.

They were seated at the table for the dinner, Rosie’s portrait with its blues, rose, pink highlights and gleaming wood, ignoring them in its gaze towards the music stand. There were six of them, including Karen, Kevin and Lloyd.

Kevin and Rosie were diffident, Karen resentful and inclined to a brittle irony and Lloyd conflicted. The other two guests – a male cousin of Rosie and a musical friend – were puzzled and confused by the strained atmosphere. At one point Kevin

noticed Rosie looking desperate.

‘Karen is doing really well selling her prints and Lloyd has been working hard in the bush. Rosie has been working hard sitting for her portrait.’

Rosie said, ‘Oh not that hard, I just had better things to do – oh sorry, I didn’t mean ...’

And everyone laughed.

The cousin asked Lloyd about working in the bush and Karen’s success was inquired into. The wine was taking effect and the dinner settled into pleasantry.

Lloyd tried not to but kept glancing at Kevin who was lovely in a new shirt but pale.

Lloyd offered to drive Karen and Kevin home. Kevin refused but Karen said, ‘Oh come on, stop being a sulk.’

She got out of the car with, ‘Bye, don’t do anything I wouldn’t, you boys.’ And slammed the car door.

They watched her indignant stalk down the path to her front door.

‘What’s with her?’ Lloyd asked.

Kevin didn’t answer.

‘Where are we going?’ he demanded when it was obvious Lloyd was not heading towards the Roshanevs.

‘I thought we might have a smoke, Tim gave me some. He’s got it growing in the bush up there.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t smoke – or drink – with people I don’t trust.’

There was a long silence while Lloyd drove. Then he stopped the car. ‘Why don’t you trust me?’

‘You just take off with Tim Waterhouse without telling me. I ring up, your bitch of a sister tells me you’ve gone away. First I’ve heard of it.’

‘I ... I ... It was – Tim just asked me and they were going the next day, practically. You’re earning money, I have to get money for uni too. I never saw you, you were always working in the shop or on Rosie’s portrait. I never saw ... I’ve got to make new friends. Tim’s doing Engineering so I’ll see him, you’ll be at the other campus. I won’t know anyone, you’ll have Karen to go around with, at first. You’ll both have heaps of money and I’ll be struggling. I’m the one with the car.’

‘Karen’s getting a car.’

‘Is she? What sort? Oh come on, have a smoke with a mate.’

Lloyd drove to the parkland where they had made love the night of the formal.

They smoked the joint and sat in silence, brooding. Lloyd tried to take Kevin’s hand but this advance was rejected.

After a while, Lloyd started the car and drove Kevin home.

Just as he was getting out of the car, Lloyd gabbed him back in, ‘I’m sorry! I ... It’s hard for me, I’ve got to ... You’ll be at art school, they’re all poofs, I’ve got to ... Renee keeps saying ... I didn’t know what to do, I’ve got to ...’

‘Try growing balls,’ Kevin said and got out of the car.



X

Karen was able to relish Kevin’s company – they had a few classes in common at art college and he was helping her make up the orders for her designs which were coming in regularly through Natalia and other sources.

‘You have the commercial eye,’ Natalia said, flicking through

some samples Karen had made up. She had regained her figure and was, on Natalia's advice, using her own fabrics to make her clothes. She bought a dummy on which she fitted the fabrics for her clothes. She paid frightening amounts for shoes. Natalia glanced at them in approval. When she was asked how she had lost weight she would say, 'I just don't have time to eat any more.'

She bought a car and saw her father's accountant to work out how much of it she could write off on tax. The accountant was also investigating how much of her clothing she could write off.

Her success was evident. Most of the students and some of the lecturers treated her with special respect – it was known that she was already selling. This alienated some of the other art students who despised any aspect of commercial art. Karen tried to compensate for this in her Painting and History and Theory classes. Then she was featured in a Sunday supplement as a rising new fabric and fashion designer. This polarised attitudes towards her.

Sometimes, and behind his back, in order to maintain the image which had overtaken her, she referred to Kevin as 'my Kevil'. He was an obvious object of desire and already recognised around the college as a special talent. Though it made her feel guilty, Karen relished being seen with him. When two magazines published photographs of them at an exhibition launch and a fashion show he began to show reluctance to be seen with her at such events.

'We're very old friends, he's a friend of my family. We have known his family forever. What a cheap thing to say,' she proclaimed to another student who had commented, 'He's such good p r,' of the photographs, then she had stormed away, aware the comment had been made in the spirit of the pseudo smart conversation they had been having. Her hypocrisy worried her and she didn't seem able to resist it.

Kevin was going around with another gay student. Karen didn't approve of him but accompanied them to the gay bars

they went to after college and sometimes on the weekend. She longed to be alone with Kevil but their social lives had begun to contaminate the moments when they were. ‘You should be careful, you’re becoming too gay,’ she said during one of their vodka sessions. She had been confessing to Kevil what she didn’t like about Martin, Kevil’s new boyfriend - ‘He’s strident, he’s superficial, he’s not really good looking, he’s pretentious, he’s not going anywhere, really.’

Kevil was too wrapped in their vodka intimacy to protest, besides it was all to some extent true. ‘I really want to be like a combination of Klee and de Kooning, you know, like Poof 1, Poof 2, Poof 3, Poof 4 ... then a new series but related – Gay Man 1, Gay Man 2, Gay – ‘

‘I get it, you don’t have to go on ad infinitum. How will they be different?’

‘The poof series will have them in Lacoste T-shirts – I want to play with the alligator logo and ... I want to get a whiff of Aramis into – I know, I’ll glue a bottle on – ‘

‘Too Whitely. Where’s the Klee in all this?’

‘I want to call some of the Poofs things like The Twittering Machine and – ‘

‘Why don’t you do one as that baby vampire thing he did? What are the Gay Men going to be like?’

‘I’m not sure yet, I want to reach into the future. All I can come up with is straight looking men.’

‘Maybe that’s the point.’

Kevil fell silent. They listened to the waves swish up the beach. A wind whispered through the casuarinas. ‘The tide’s coming in,’ Karen said. ‘What are you going to do them in?’

‘I’m just sketching at the moment – I’m using that model we had in Figure for one ... mainly acrylics, I think. I can say more with colour that way. I thought I might use that fluro plastic somehow, I want the medium to speak more, I thought I

might use shower curtains. I remember them from that time we went looking at fabrics – remember? They were great, so kitsch – the ones with the mermaids and the bubbles?’

They laughed.

‘The pink one was the best.’

‘Yeah, the green was too tasteful, it was almost eau de nil.’

‘Why don’t you do a study of camp? The Poof-to-Man thing is too schematic. Have fun! That’s what I’m doing with the fabrics. Sometimes I can hardly believe people take them seriously. Maybe they don’t.’

‘Promise me something,’ Kevil said abruptly.

‘Anything.’

‘Never give up your study of nature. That’s where your best designs come from. All that second hand stuff you do is crap.’

‘It pays,’ Karen said, getting up, ‘rather well.’ She was very hurt.

In the morning her mother said, ‘Your father has had a job offer in America, I don’t think we can stand in his way after all these years of struggling. They want him to work on a film score over there. He’s trying to arrange for me to be the stills photographer on the set.’

‘What will I do?’ Karen asked.

‘The same as always, I suppose. We never see you in any case. Nor Digby. He can help you look after the house. We’ll only be gone for six months. You’re old enough.’

‘Six months!’

‘It’s for your father, Karen.’

When she went to pick Kevil up to take him to college, she found he was too sick to go. ‘It must be the vodka. We’d better drink champagne.’

‘It gives me a headache – unless it’s French,’ Karen said.

Kevin was admitted to hospital again. This time they kept him in for two weeks. Pneumonia, some sort of pneumonia.



Lloyd came and visited him in hospital. ‘You crook, mate?’ He had been shocked by how pale and frail Kevin looked and immediately despised the tone and argot he used, developed for his new friends.

Kevin nodded and pulled himself up in the bed. ‘I’ll be out soon.’

‘How’s art college?’

Lloyd said Dentistry was pretty boring so far – they hadn’t done anything about teeth, it was all biology and chemistry ... ‘I suppose you’re having a pretty good time. I saw you and Karen in the paper, she’s doing well. Renee bought a dress she’d designed.’

‘What do you get up to?’

Lloyd looked at Kevin for a lead to his tone. ‘Nothing much, I have to work pretty hard. I’ve got to get through Chemistry then I can forget it. I was never much good at it. How about you? You seem to be getting about, it must be pretty easy for you.’

‘The theory’s not. And I am learning new things, we’re doing welding, it’s good.’

‘You go out a lot?’

‘Not all that much. I’m still helping Mum and Dad and I’m doing some printing for Karen and helping with the deliveries. We go to the pub on Fridays, sometimes after college – sometimes during it.’

Lloyd gulped at the opportunity, then asked, ‘Can I come too? The guys out there – they all get pissed and ... it’s not my style. You taught me better.’ He blushed at Kevin’s grin. ‘I don’t ... Not like that. I ... I heard these guys talking about some gay disease.’

Kevin nodded. ‘You have to be careful, some are getting antibiotic resistant.’

‘The papers said you could get it from mosquitoes. Renee makes Mum keep all the windows shut and sprays her room – she’s mad but she’s just putting it on. She tried to spray the living room and Dad went feral at her.’

Mr Roshanev appeared. He glanced at Lloyd, ignored him and went over and kissed his son. Lloyd felt a pang. Then Kiril insisted his father recognise his friend. Mr Roshanev grunted at Lloyd.

‘I’ll come and see you. Good-bye, Mr Roshanev.’

He did. Kevin was sketching. He explained his Poof/Gay Man project to Lloyd. Then he asked Lloyd to model for him. Lloyd was hesitant but filled with longing – ‘You’re sure you won’t show anyone? It’s just to practise?’

Kevin posed him, expertly and confidently running his hands down Lloyd’s legs, moved his feet. Then took his hips in his hands and swivelled them to the angle he wanted, stepped back and studied the figure, his eyes sweeping Lloyd’s erection in the same seemingly objective survey that examined the rest of him. Then he took in the total effect and he began to sketch. He sketched furiously. Got Lloyd to change pose. Lloyd watched with concern as Kevin took in his face and the chalk flew over the paper then Kevin snatched up a pencil and hatched and slashed with it. Kevin’s palm rubbed, his fingers blurred something on the surface of the paper. Lloyd longed to see the marks but Kevin kept putting the sheets aside before he could see them, reposed him, began to sketch again.

They were both exhausted. Three hours had passed.

Kevin moved over to where he had arranged Lloyd on his bed, moved his hands in confident possession down Lloyd's body. Lloyd's dick was instantly alerted to the intention in Kevin's touch. Kevin caressed it, then leant and took it in his mouth.

Lloyd tried to engage Kevin equally but he was pushed back. Kevin worked the pole of Lloyd's dick, slippery with his saliva, with his hand, observed him as he surrendered ever more then – 'No. No ...' and Lloyd blew.

When he tried to reciprocate, Kevin handed him some tissues.

As they got the Roshanev's door Lloyd turned and said to Kevin, 'Why did you do that?'

Kevin shrugged but they both knew.



Lloyd was very unhappy doing Dentistry. He was not sure he wanted to and he had not made any real friends. He worked hard in order to dispel his isolation. Then he rang Kevin and was invited to join some of the art students in a bar.

He went one Friday afternoon. Karen was there. And Martin. Martin confronted him when Kevin went to the bar. 'So you knew Kev at school?'

'Yes.'

'What was he like?'

'Like he is now, sort of – he's more ... we've all matured since Year Twelve, haven't we Karen?'

'I certainly have.'

'He wasn't gay at school. He is now. I'm his boyfriend. She's his fag hag!' Martin was tall and powerfully built and desperately femme and desperately out. No-one liked him much but they were too impressed by his street smarts to reject him.

Kevin returned with the drinks.

‘Thanks. I was just talking to your schoolmate here, seems you weren’t exactly out at school – hmmm? I was. Everyone knew. No-one gave me any shit.’

‘That’s easy to imagine,’ Karen said.

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘You look as though you played front row forward.’

Martin shrieked and fell into a brooding silence which he broke by accusing Karen, ‘Why do you say that? Front row forward?’

‘Oh I don’t know Martin, maybe it’s because you push so hard.’

Martin considered this, looked Karen up and down discovering a new respect, and snuggled up to Kevin in gloating triumph.

Kevin disengaged. ‘Let’s go,’ he said to Lloyd and Karen. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow night,’ to Martin.

‘Where are you going? I haven’t finished - ’

‘I’ve got to get on with my project. Karen’s giving me a lift home. You’ve got to work on yours too, it’s due in three weeks.’

They left Martin defiantly scanning the bar.

‘He’ll be alright, there are plenty of people from college there,’ Kevin said as they walked towards Karen’s car.

On the way home Kevin asked Karen to stop; he vomited. No-one said anything for the rest of the journey.

Karen rang Lloyd that night. ‘What’s wrong with him, do you know?’

Lloyd could not voice his suspicions so he said maybe it was just the watered-down vodka they served, you know ...

As the year progressed Kevin lost weight, then put it on again. He told how his parents had interrogated him about drugs. Mr Roshanev turned up at the college one day and created a stir by

seeking out his son in order to see what he was up to.

Kevin's revenge on Lloyd had allowed them to draw close again. After it, Lloyd had pondered why Kevin might be so angry with him that he abused him like that and Kevin had felt guilty and hungry for the intimacy with Lloyd that he had rejected. With Karen, they began to go out as a trio – films, parties, dinners, openings ... 'Are you a ménage à trois?' someone asked.

'Well, we don't live together, if that's what you mean?' Karen was heard replying and it was reported in a gossip column.

Lloyd had to endure Renee bringing it up in triumph at the dinner table and his parents' questioning and disapproval. At uni some of his mates demanded to know what was going on there. He had learned to wink and grin but he could see the scepticism in some of the gazes. Again he retreated from public association with Kevin and Karen. He tried to garner time alone with Kevin but Kevin was resistant.

Fortunately Karen was giving almost weekly dinner parties at her parents' house to which he was always invited. Rosie and her new boyfriend from the Conservatorium were staples. Digby and Mel Hopkins were tolerated because they had to be. Karen got more ambitious and began to ask business contacts. The demands of her work now outstripped her interest in college; the lecturers indulged her in the face of her burgeoning success.

Her parents too were doing well in Hollywood.

At the end of the year Kevin came top in three subjects. Natalia was convincing Karen to go to India with her to organise the manufacture of some of her fabrics there. Lloyd passed well. Rosie was off to Europe again, ostensibly to explore the possibility of studying violin in Italy. Digby announced he was transferring to UCLA in order to further his computer studies (and, it was agreed amongst his sister's friends, to free himself of Mel); he would stay with his parents who lived within driving distance of the campus. He threw

himself a twenty-first during which he got off with another girl prompting sensational hysterics from Mel. Martin, having got a glimpse of a far more privileged life style, was around a lot. As Karen said, 'His awfulness is fascinating.' Lloyd found himself hypnotised – and immobilised - by it too though there were occasions when he experienced rages of jealousy.

Karen went to India with Natalia and, to her chaperone/companion's angry/envious concern, had an affair with an Indian cloth dealer. 'He really was a dish,' Natalia confessed to her assistant.

Kevin began to lose weight. The doctors couldn't find anything wrong. Someone recommended another one and Lloyd made the appointment and took him. This one diagnosed psittacosis, to everyone's relief. Then Kevin collapsed and was hospitalised again. Martin couldn't stand hospitals and in any case was intensifying his engagement with a lawyer he had met at one of Karen's dinners.

The Roshanevs were frantic. Mr Roshanev wanted to take Kiril to Leningrad for treatment. He was convinced Australian doctors were incompetent. Kevin kept refusing, saying it was psittacosis, he was getting better.

And indeed he was. When Karen got back he was out and about, a bit shaky though and his hair had thinned. It seemed as if had suddenly begun to age. She was shocked, then distressed.

'What's wrong with him?' she asked Lloyd. 'What's this psittacosis thing?'

'You get it from birds,' Lloyd replied and laughed wildly.

Kevin got thinner and thinner. His parents were alarmed. He wanted to move out of home.

When Digby left for California, the Barkers insisted Karen not live in the family home alone. They were going to rent it for six months. Mrs Barker flew back to make the arrangements.

Karen found a warehouse in town, not far from the college. It had living quarters and space for two long print tables. She had overhead racks put in for drying the fabrics, racks made for storing her screens. She bought washing machines for mixing the dyes and cleaning the fabrics, had a corner converted into a huge darkroom for photographic screening. The investment cost her more than she had saved. When her mother inspected the premises she said, 'Oh good, when I come back, I can use your darkroom – it's enormous! How on earth are you going to heat this place in winter?'

'The printing table is heated. I have to have the fans going all the time when I'm working,' Karen replied and had the satisfaction of seeing her mother's sceptical look transform into being impressed.

Kevin came in. This was the first time Mrs Barker had encountered him since she had returned. Now Karen observed as her mother mastered her appalled expression. She did this by rushing up to Kevin and embracing him. As Mrs Barker was not a physically demonstrative person, this was alarming but she covered it by exclaiming about the psittacosis and how Kevin must eat more now. When she was with Karen alone back in the family home, she said, 'Karen, you might not have heard of it here but in California they're all talking about this new disease that drug addicts are getting from dirty needles and homosexual men ... I hope you're being very careful, it's a very terrible disease apparently ... it can be fatal.'

'I'm not a drug addict and I'm not a homosexual man. So why are you telling me this?'

'I just ... want the best for you dear and I feel guilty pursuing my own career while you're struggling here to get a business off the ground.'

'Mum, I've got friends. I'm employing some from college to help me.'

'Yes but living in that area ... You know young people can do

such silly things, they're so easily led astray. I am very relieved your brother is where we can keep an eye on him.'

'And away from Mel.'

'I didn't say that. They were both too young. That's what I mean, you young people think you know everything.' Mrs Barker took a sharp breath then burst into tears.

'I'll be alright, please stop,' her daughter said, putting an arm around her, 'I didn't mean it.'

'Its not you, it's Kevin.'

Kevil said they should have one more vodka tryst before Karen moved and the 'tarted up' (Mrs Barker's words) place was let.

He could hardly drink but they lay in the arms of the warm summer night, listening to the sea, the hush of the night. Every now and again they shared the Bronski Beat and Jimmy Somerville through the Walkman earpiece.

'You're doing so well,' Kevil said.

'So are you. Mr Zdenowicz said you'd probably get a show with your project.'

'I want to do something different.'

'What? Of course, one always does. But what? Not another political thing, I hope? Why don't you do portraits? You're so good at them and you always said you could have made Rosie's into something if it hadn't been a commission. I know, why don't you do ...'

'What?'

Karen had been going to say, '... a series of self-portraits,' but she was given pause by how lessened Kevil's looks were.

'What?'

'Oh, I was thinking you could do some designs and I could print them, wouldn't that be great? Like Picasso and the pots.'

'Is that it really?'

'Yes.'

'I sketched Lloyd once, figure studies. I made him model, he didn't want to. Then I made him blow. I was so pissed off with him.'

'Why?'

'I thought he was rejecting me, I thought he was ...'

'What?'

'I was looking at the sketches the other day. I was so pissed off with him I hardly knew what I was doing but you know what?'

'What?'

'They're really good.'

'There you are then, you should ... He's such a closet queen.'

'He's not ... exactly – maybe he is. I can understand it. Sometimes. I didn't see him, I was so angry, I just wanted to draw lines – slash him out. I had to use chalk or I would have ... I couldn't have ... When I calmed down a bit I used pencil and then chiaroscuroed in crayon - you know those oil sticks I was into? It wasn't him but it's incredibly him.'

'Maybe you should give him one. I'd like one.'

'I should burn them. I can't though, they're the best thing I've ever done.'

'And you love Lloyd,' Karen said.



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Karen got a boyfriend, one of the young men she employed to help her with the heavy work of printing. She had so much work she had to skip college frequently. Then she decided to defer. The young man, Simon, moved into her warehouse with her. He too deferred and set himself to making sure the cloth production went smoothly. Karen was fiendish about the quality and there were conflicts over quality and quantity which were stimulating.

Her father rang her and lectured her on giving up college, ‘I know it’s different these days but in my experience it’s very hard to go back once you’ve left. It’s much easier to get your diploma, then do what you want. You can make money any time.’

But Karen was now too involved in the business. She had a loan to repay and the struggle engrossed her. She had heard the owner of the building wanted to sell and she and Simon had discussed buying the warehouse. They took on more work. Natalia brought a group of businessmen around. They wanted to ‘label’ her but she would have to design more clothes. Natalia was persuading her to agree and buy the designs from fashion students, have the patterns drafted.

Kevin had to be hospitalised again. This time a young doctor was adamant with Lloyd when he went to visit, ‘You know what’s wrong with him, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. He seems to be in some sort of denial.’

‘Is he?’

‘Yes. And his parents. Someone needs to be realistic, you’re his friend – his best friend.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘What do you think is wrong with him?’

Lloyd hesitated then said, 'I think he's got Aids.'

The young doctor nodded and strode away fiercely.

'Doctor!'

The young doctor swung round.

'What does it mean – how ... What will happen?'

The young doctor took Lloyd into a consultation room and told him that there would be more and more opportunistic infections and one would carry Kevin off. They were doing everything they could but all they could do was fight each infection as it happened and each time Kevin had less chance of beating it off. His T cell count was practically non-existent.

'So it's not psittacosis?'

'I think you knew it wasn't.'

Lloyd nodded. He had no idea what to do or say or to whom he would say it.

'Try to prepare the parents. There's nothing we can do, we're learning more every day about this thing but at the moment ...'

Lloyd went around to Karen's warehouse but she wasn't in. He knew one thing – he could never tell the Roshanevs, the doctors would have to manage that.

Again Kevin got better, went back to college. But he seemed to be withdrawing. He did a beautiful sketch of a cluster of plants growing around lichenised rocks in the Barkers' now rented out wilderness, all sage and straw colours, silvers and greys - subtle, elusive but clear and gave it to Karen who immediately had it framed in Scandinavian pine.

He asked Lloyd to go away with him over Easter. They were to hire a launch and cruise around the Hawkesbury. This became a much anticipated excursion. Karen and Simon were to join them for one day and the Roshanevs for another. The rationale was that Kevin was going to sketch for his landscape class and Lloyd was going to study – molars, at last.

The gleaming white launch with its varnished wood fittings rested on the water, an image of some idyllic past utterly beyond the reach of the present. It was astonishing to set foot on the planks of its deck. They were given an hour's tuition in handling her and a pole to push them off sandbanks if they ran aground. They were shown where they should go and told what to avoid. Then they were on their way.

Kevin was at the helm. After an hour he found a quiet cove and they anchored. He wanted to sketch the hills dipping into the waters but needed to rest. By the time he woke the sun was sinking and he was only able to dash some water colours across paper to record the effect of the dying light on the gum-treed hill and its reflection darkening in the perfect stillness of the estuarine bay. Lloyd drank a beer while the night invaded and soft golden lights sprang up in a few mysterious places on the surrounding hills. A fisher jumped and the splash was like a Prelude the river god had composed for the great nearly silent concert of the night.

Though the bunk was small they slept in perfect peace together.

Kevin did not want to leave 'their' bay the next day. He spent it sketching, dabbing water colours to capture the effects of the light on the water, the rocks, the bush. Lloyd applied himself to a text book and when he could stand it no more, went on deck and jumped overboard, returning almost immediately, his white skin glittering with the running river water. Kevin observed him, ripped a page away from his sketch pad, ordered Lloyd to stay where he was and drew. The charcoal, the pencils flowed over the paper in great curves and billowed in shadows and struck in electric lines.

Kevin took a blanket across to Lloyd when he saw him shiver, threw it around his shoulders and slipped his trunks down.

Lloyd looked around at the glooming green hills. Then surrendered. Kevin posed him against the deck rail, looking towards the bow, laid the blanket at Lloyd's feet and began again. The sun struck Lloyd and warmed him, lit fires in his

auburn hair.

Later in the afternoon, they raised the anchor and moved on, more for the sake of retaining their sense of perfection than for the need of fresh vistas.

They made love and Lloyd for the first time felt – allowed himself to feel desired and cherished. Kevin’s passion had emanated from his chest and his warmth had reached right down deep into Lloyd’s being, flowed there, throughout him. Lloyd moved along the deck in beauty, coiled the hawser in beauty, stood beside Kevin at the helm in beauty.

They made a fire on shore that night and grilled chops. The autumn was blowing in so Lloyd rowed out to the launch and brought blankets. Kevin rejected his, drew Lloyd’s about his own shoulder, took his hand.

They decided to spend the night on land, cleared a space and filled it with casuarina needles, laid a tarpaulin over them and snuggled under the blankets, rested their heads on pillows brought from the launch. A nearly full moon rose and lit the water so that it sparkled as it turned against the rocks nearby.

‘I could never capture that,’ Kevin said.

‘You don’t have to capture everything.’

‘I think you have to try – try to capture the beauty, to see what is there and accept it. It’s hard to explain.’

‘To a would-be dentist.’

‘Oh give me a break ... But you have to be brave and strong to see and to accept what is there and to really look how it fits together. Maybe it’s the same with teeth.’

‘And gums. I don’t think so.’

‘I think it is. I hope you will see. Come to see. I would like to draw a mouth open – inside a mouth with its teeth dripping saliva and the gums magenta and pink and purple and the tongue.’

‘Getting in the way sometimes. Of a dentist.’

They did not sleep as well. Kevin had to go off into the bush, had stomach cramps, wished he hadn’t eaten the chops. Lloyd wanted to go with him but he wouldn’t let him.

When the sun finally gave hints of appearing, they packed up their shore camp and went back on the launch. Kevin then slept and Lloyd joined him, finally also falling into a slumber.

When he awoke it was ten. They were supposed to pick Karen and Simon up back at the wharf at ten. He had trouble waking Kevin, getting him to know where they were. Then Kevin started to sweat copiously.

Lloyd rushed to raise the anchor, get the launch started and headed back to the wharf.

The hour long voyage turned into an unending nightmare. Kevin began to scream with pain, to clutch at his head, then his stomach. His bowels began to stream, thick stinking pitch. Lloyd kept stopping the boat rushing to Kevin, trying to do something for him, became frightened the launch would run aground. There was a radio. He called for help.

Finally the well populated bay appeared. There was the wharf. As he got closer he could see Karen and Simon. The launch manager came out of his hut to watch as the launch charged towards the wharf. He had asked Lloyd over the radio if they had eaten tinned beetroot. ‘No! No! My friend is really sick.’ ‘Food poisoning, they all get it,’ the manager had said. ‘Call an ambulance, he’s really sick.’

He saw as Karen’s and Simon’s faces turned from bored, angry impatience to astonishment and worry.

‘Did you call an ambulance?’ Lloyd screamed at the manager after he’d caught the rope Lloyd had hurled.

‘Steady on mate, let’s have a look at him first.’ The manager swung on board. ‘Leave him there. You can clean him up while I call the ambulance,’ were his next words.

Karen and Simon scrambled on. Simon backed away.

‘Help me get his pants off,’ Lloyd ordered.

Karen threw them overboard. She ordered Simon to get water.

Lloyd cleaned while Karen tried to assuage Kevil’s constant mewling for water. Every now and again he would groan, then start to scream.

Karen ordered Simon to get the boys’ things and put them in the car, see if he could find a shop with lemonade.

The ambulance took three hours to get there. A little, useless crowd gathered making suggestions about oysters and crabs which had not been properly cooked.

Kevin began to shake with cold. His bowels streamed again. This time the blood was more apparent.

‘Get help! Get that ambulance!’ Karen screamed at the manager.

‘Alright young lady, you don’t have to yell.’

The slow cynical professionalism of the ambulance men evaporated as soon as they saw their charge.

They got Kevin loaded then one of them turned, ‘Which one is coming?’

‘We both are,’ Lloyd answered. ‘Simon can drive the car.’

‘Only one of you can come, that’s the rule. Which one will it be?’

The small crowd waited, breaths baited, thrilled their patience had been rewarded with a glimpse of the truly sick man and now this conflict.

‘You go,’ Karen said, ‘I’ll see you at the hospital.’

The ambulance lurched and Kevin protested feebly through his weakness and the pervading drug.

‘Needs rehydrating ...’ Lloyd heard. He had denied knowing

anything was wrong with Kevin – ‘any existing conditions’ when these clowns had started to interrogate him before the crowd. Now he wondered if he should tell them. What could they do? They already had Kevin hooked up to a drip. He was about to lean forward and speak to them when Kevin stirred.

He was looking at him. He smiled, his wonderful white smile dazzled in the gloom. He pointed to the little blue and red lights beaming and blinking on the ambulance machinery. ‘Pretty,’ he said and reached out to take Lloyd’s hand. His clasp was wonderfully warm. Then he sighed and died.



xiv

‘Prick will not give me portrait of Rosie, I offer him fortune.’ Mr Roshanev was quite drunk. ‘What portrait we have? No portrait, just piss weak photos for coffin. Something to put on coffin.’ He turned to Karen, ‘You must choose good work – best Kiril to put on coffin.’

‘But you mustn’t bury it! His work was wonderful,’ Mrs Barker exclaimed.

‘Not bury! For coffin for funeral! Something beautiful.’ Then Mr Roshanev began to cry very loudly.

No-one could move in their despair.

Later, in their hotel room, Mrs Barker said, ‘I know! They must still be with my negatives.’ And she rushed to get ready to go out.

She developed them in Karen’s darkroom.

Mother and daughter examined them as they dried. After a while Mrs Barker said, ‘They’re not bad.’

Her daughter could not respond.

The Vachettis agreed to lend the ‘Portrait of Rosie’ for the

wake. Mrs Barker's wonderful photographs of Kevin, framed in the same Scandinavian pine that Karen had chosen for Kevil's plant study stood on the altar steps and on the coffin. There was the young Kevin, just emerging as a man, in the Barker's studio room looking out at them and at the print table, shirt a little undone gazing into their eyes and close-up, his wonderful, innocent, searching, amused awareness confronting them.

The Roshanevs had been stunned when Mrs Barker had presented them. Then each had clutched one. Felia Roshanev had swayed and swayed clutching hers to her breast, murmuring and sobbing in Russian.

They were both quite drunk at the wake. It was held in an annex room of the Russian club Kevil had taken Karen to for lunch. Karen had been entrusted to go through Kiril's things and mounted a valedictory exhibition in it. She had purloined the figure studies of Lloyd and told the Roshanevs they should give him the last sketches Kiril had done on the launch, which they did after glancing at them.

In the crush, Natalia told Karen that Felia was telling the Russian community that Kiril had died of a bite from an Australian parrot. She translated Felia's warblings – Karen was Kiril's fiancée, his first and only true love. Mr Barker protected his daughter as much as he could from the demands Felia attempted to place on her, wanting her to meet this one and that, display her devotion and grief. Digby stood for a while by Lloyd and then Lloyd left.



Karen had more than one opportunity to marry well but her work seemed always to win out.

She had accepted the businessmen's offer and became a 'label'. She did extremely well, riding out the crash of the late eighties

on a wave of property investments. She began importing fabrics from India as well as having her designs manufactured there. One day, in Bombay Airport, she came across Lloyd accompanied by a man who had something of her Kevil about him. She was disturbed and pretended to be covertly amused.

Lloyd had done Medicine after completing Dentistry. He specialised in the treatment of Aids. He had been in India contributing what he could. The man accompanying him was an ad man now intent on good works. Lloyd met Karen's amused glance of inquiry with a look that said, 'No. Not for me – he's straight.'

When Karen was back in Sydney she got out the sketches of Lloyd she had taken from Kevil's work. He had been right, they were the best things he had done. Reluctantly, she packaged them and had them sent to Lloyd.

He phoned her and asked her to dinner. The altruistic advertising executive was there. His name was Scott and he was very taken by Karen.

Lloyd had many lovers.

He did not know what to do with Kevin's sketches, so hid them and did not look at them again until he was almost old.

Karen did marry Scott; they had careers in lieu of children. As her father had warned, she came to regret not finishing her diploma. She went back to college at one point and tried to do a portrait of Kevil but failed. She did replenish her design work when she remembered Kevil's advice and returned to nature for her ideas. When she was almost old her designs began to be respected for their merit but by then she knew too much to care.

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