

www.gay-ebooks.com.au

Man Overboard

Featuring all new writing from

**Ian MacNeill
Jarred Connors
Barry Lowe
James May
Trevor Ball
Nicholas Kokinidis**

Editor Gary Dunne – November 2008

Man Overboard

Contents

Click on an author name to go there, page number to come back

Editor: Gary Dunne

Proofing: Brian Watson

Production and cover art: Laurin McKinnon

© 2008 Individual authors retain full copyright.


© 2008 This edition by www.gay-ebooks.com.au

Internal graphics are stolen partial video frames.

Ian MacNeill	4
Barebacking	
Jarred Connors	10
Fingerprints on my glass	
Barry Lowe	16
Paias Wynstan Jeroboam	
Orders a Hot Chocolate	
James May	24
Trash and I	
Trevor Ball	28
Show and Tell	
Nicholas Kokinidis	30
Mouth to Mouth	

One aim of www.gay-ebooks.com.au is to produce volumes such as this. With this collection, authors have waived their royalties so that you can sample their work at no cost. We encourage you to spread their work by passing this locked file on to others - printing is possible, but extraction of text or graphics is restricted. Contact us, or any author, through enquiries@gay-ebooks.com.au

Produced using Open Source software: Linux OS, Scribus for layout; GIMP for graphics; and Open Office for text.



Man Overboard

Editorial

Welcome to the latest anthology from www.gay-ebooks.com.au. Our tradition of good strong writing continues in Man Overboard with new stories from Ian MacNeill, Jarred Connors, Barry Lowe, James May, Nicholas Kokinidis and Trevor Ball.

Each collection we release is an original collage of images of who we are and how we view our world. In this pdf several stories deal with love and lust against the ongoing backdrop of HIV/AIDS. Others deal with family, both biological and acquired, and how we sort out who really are our significant others. While both themes are well known in gay lit, these stories bring wider current realities clearly into focus.

This is the first collection we've released that doesn't contain at least one "virgin" writer. For us, one of the great things about anthologies (both here at gay-ebooks, and previously with BlackWattle Press) is their unique ability to bring new authors to a larger audience. If you've a folder of stories lurking unseen by the world on your hard drive, our next collection is due out in early 2009. Take a chance and send us something gary@gay-ebooks.com.au.

Gay literary fame is potentially only a mouse click away: (gay literary fortune can take somewhat longer.)

A number of things are happening over the next few months. On November 15, this collection will be launched at Quench, a part of the annual Adelaide Feast Festival. Kate O'Brien from our sister site, the new www.lesbian-ebooks.com.au, will be launching their first collection, Flaunt, the same event. Keep an eye out for the pdf of the winners of the Feast Festival Short Story Comp, available from www.gay-ebooks.com.au and www.lesbian-ebooks.com.au in mid November. Also on both sites will have the entry form for next years Sydney Mardi Gras Short Story Comp. We're sponsors of both competitions and are pleased to be part of the current revival of contemporary g&l lit.

And finally, do check out Flaunt, available for free from www.lesbian-ebooks.com.au. It's wet and wild pdf jam packed full of luscious lesbian literary goodness and featuring several contributors who will be very familiar to regular readers of Oz queer lit.

Laurin & Gary



Ian MacNeill

Barebacking

Jackson draped his arm around Ahmid's shoulder as the guys came up. They were having a taste of a porn site.

Ahmid laid a hand on Jackson's poised over the keyboard.

'Oooh, I want him to bareback me.'

Dawson Burg was big, hairy, blue chinned and cheeked with a killer smile which promised warm cruelty and no embarrassing good-byes.

'Yeah but that's ... you can get AIDS. Remember what Friedrich said.'

* * *

Ahmid had told Friedrich they were on the pr-r-owl.

'OK but always use the condoms,' Friedrich had said as he inspected their choux pastry.

'He's disgusting!' Breeze hissed. 'That's sexual

harassment, you should report him.'

'That's not sexual harassment, that's good sense and can we get on with this?'

Breeze had walked out, Claire shrugged, Jackson dumped his choux ball onto the floured bench.

'He was just trying to give you good advice,' Claire said.

Breeze came back in after a while and complained her choux pastry was ruined. Friedrich came and looked. 'I cannot tick you off for the competency. You will have to do it again. Clean the pot.'

This was easier said than done. 'This is your fucking fault!' Breeze said to Claire. Claire laughed. So Breeze had thrown her pot in the sink and walked out again.

* * *

'You can't get it from one ... You have to be a

real slut and be gangbanged or ... I can just feel him all over me, in me, he's gorgeous, he's the sort of boyfriend ... ' Ahmid ran a finger over Dawson Burg's huge cock.

'Don't,' Jackson said, 'you'll dirty the screen.'
They shrieked.

Ahmid had been practising anal intercourse with a reasonable dildo and a popper. It didn't hurt any more. At first he couldn't, it killed. Then someone at TAFE told him to try amyl and make sure he was using plenty of lube. After a while he could get it in.

'It makes you feel more confident,' he told Jackson.

Jackson was waiting for someone who he could really trust.

'I'm going to get someone at Engineered. I'm going to wear that cut away shirt. Should I get my nipple pierced?'

Jackson said he should just be himself and if he wanted to.

'What about a tat like that girl had ... just here?'

'I think they're over but if you like.'

They were going to stay at Jackson's cousin's flat and rest all day and drop their eccies and go to Engineered about eleven, maybe have a drink at that pub first.

Jackson's cousin gave Jackson a key in case he didn't come home or they got separated but they weren't to bring any trade back. They were

going to have a recovery breakfast together.

They couldn't rest. They tried to drink a lot of water. They went out and had coffee. It seemed like the world was getting ready for Engineered.

'I bet she bought that to wear. I wonder what it is.'

Ahmid grabbed Jackson's hand under the table, 'Fourteen hundred high. He's going. Do you think that's his boyfriend?'

Ahmid hollaed. The guy turned around. Jackson was really embarrassed. Ahmid was really embarrassed.

'I don't think that's the way to go about it,' Jackson said, 'everyone's staring, they think we're jerks.'

'I couldn't help it,' Ahmid said, 'he was so hot.'

Jackson said, 'You look really good, stop worrying,' as they charged towards the warehouse. 'Doesn't he, Tonio?'

Tonio thought so but said, 'He looks OK. Be careful who you mix with. And don't bring your trade back, I want my laptop there when I get home and ... Listen,' he said to Ahmid, 'don't be in too much of a hurry, you're in too much of a hurry.'

Ahmid thought Tonio was really cool, if only he wasn't Jackson's cousin but maybe ... That would be really, really the best ... but.

They lost Tonio on the dance floor.

They were being eyed by a group of leather

guys. Jackson tried to dance away but Ahmid wouldn't move. The leather guys started slugging the air around them, grinning so Jackson said he was going to get some water.

Ahmid came up to Jackson who had found Breeze who was telling him how much she hated Claire and that she thought Claire was a dyke.

'I've got to go to the toilet. Come with me. We'll be right back,' Ahmid told Breeze as he pulled Jackson away.

They didn't get to the toilet.

'Give me the key. He wants to go back with me, he hasn't got ... He's from out of town. And he can't take anyone back to his hotel.'

'But Tonio –'

'He won't know. He won't be back tonight, you know that, he looked so hot he'll be ... He's probably left with someone already.'

'It's only –'

'Please. He's the one, he's just like Dawson Burg. Don't ruin this for me. Please, Jackson, I'll never find anyone like him again.'

'You don't know him, what if –'

'Jackson, this is my chance, don't ... Nothing will happen, he's really honest, he's from the country. You can trust him. I'll watch him all the time. Why would he want to steal Tonio's laptop? It's only a Toshiba in any case. What's he got on it?'

'You better ask Tonio.'

'How? He's gone. I'll never find him. Please, Jackson, I'll make him go before Tonio ... It'll be all right, I know I can trust him. He's the one for me.'

As they were walking away from Engineered the leather guy put his arm around Ahmid. 'You're one lucky little dude, this is going to be great.'

Ahmid felt his warmth. He moved in closer. The leather guy pulled away, relit his cigar.

In the taxi Ahmid thought about when he was going to put his arms around him and kiss him – he thought he could stand the smell of cigar but maybe he should tell him Tonio didn't let people smoke inside. The leather guy squeezed his knee so the taxi driver couldn't see.

Inside, the leather guy grabbed Ahmid's balls and squeezed them. It hurt.

In the bedroom he squeezed Ahmid's nipples till they hurt. Ahmid started to feel cold.

He asked Ahmid if he had any amyl. Ahmid said they wouldn't need it. This seemed to be the wrong thing to say so he took his pants off. The leather guy squeezed his balls again so Ahmid tried to kiss him.

'Hey! None of that.'

He pressed Ahmid's head down, unzipped his jeans, unclipped his chaps.

He was wearing a leather pouch. But he wouldn't let Jackson slip it off. Ahmid got sick of

the taste of leather so stood up.

‘You’ve got great abs,’ the leather guy said, ‘how old are you?’

Ahmid said he was twenty.

‘Cool. Now let’s see ...’

He pushed Ahmid down onto the bed. Ahmid rolled over. The leather guy laughed.

Ahmid looked at him. He seemed to have shrunk. His belly was way out in front of his pouch which didn’t look interesting. The light played through the hair curling off his shoulders. Ahmid saw he was a suburban red neck like someone’s nasty father and was about to get up when he pushed him down hard.

He was lying on top of Ahmid. His harness buckles were pressing into Ahmid. They hurt.

‘I’ll just get some lube.’

‘You don’t need that.’

Ahmid felt a finger push in and then another. They hurt. He seemed to be cutting him with his nails.

‘You’ve got a tight little boy pussy.’

Ahmid felt encouraged, lifted his arse.

‘Don’t move. I can’t do it if you move.’

He was doing something. Sometimes his weight seemed less. Ahmid hoped he would get off. He was getting scared. Then the weight pressed down harder than ever.

He was trying to get in.

Then his mobile rang.

‘I’m just up the road ... Some twink ... It’s OK ... Yeah, it’s just yeah ... I’ll see you ... soon.’ He chuckled into the phone, threw it aside and started again.

Ahmid’s chance to get up had gone.

‘Shit, you are tight. Relax, you cunt.’

Ahmid tried. Pushed up a bit to make it easier then stopped himself, remembering.

He wondered if he should fight him off. He weighed so much he probably wouldn’t stand a chance. Uh, he was in.

‘Come onnn!’ he grunted and Ahmid thought of Lleyton Hewitt.

It hurt a lot then he popped right through and Ahmid sighed with relief.

‘You like that do you, you little slut.’

Then he began jerking and it hurt again, more and more.

‘Stop,’ Ahmid said, ‘I have to – ‘

‘Fuck,’ he said and rolled off and it was like heaven for Ahmid.

As Ahmid’s mind raced over what to do the guy heaved himself off the bed and said, ‘Where’s the bathroom?’

‘Down the hall.’

When he heard the tap turned off Ahmid got up and put on his pants.

The guy came in and lit his cigar.

Ahmid followed him out. He picked up Tonio's Murano ornament, held it up to the light, put it down roughly.

At the door he pinched Ahmid's nipple then suddenly bent down and bit it hard and was gone.

Ahmid looked to see if it was bleeding then went and sat in the lounge room.

His head slumped, in it his mind raced but was empty.

After about half an hour he got up and went and looked at the bedroom. The cover was a bit mucked up. Ahmid examined it. There was no sign of spoo. He straightened the cover.

At the door he looked at the room and the bed to see if it was proper for Jackson.

In the lounge room he began to wonder if it had happened. He sat down and wondered what to do. What time was it?

It was one-thirty. What should he do?

He went to the toilet. Something spilled out of his bum. He looked. It was yellow stained cum and blood. He wiped his bum. It was blood.

He went and sat down in the lounge room, slumped into blackness then jerked up at the sound of the door.

Jackson came in.

'How was it?'

'Great. I had the best sex. I've got blood.'

Jackson sat down. After a while he said, 'You used a condom?'

'How the fuck would I know?' And Ahmid laughed and slumped.

The world was very still for a long, long time in that lounge room.

'Are you all right? I was scared to come back in case I ruined ... Then I got scared in case he trashed Tonio's ... And ... I'm glad it was great. Where was the blood?'

Ahmid shook his head.

After a while he heard Jackson come over, felt his arm on his shoulder.

Ahmid started to shake then he grabbed Jackson's hand and kissed it, held onto it. Jackson sat next to him.

'What'll we do?'

Ahmid shook his head.

'We could go to Emergency.'

Ahmid shook his head.

'Are you still bleeding?'

Ahmid shook his head and said, 'I don't know.'

He went and checked. He wasn't.

'I think ... I don't know. How can we get Friedrich's number, he'd tell us.'

'Forget it. I'm all right.'

They couldn't sleep. Ahmid didn't want to go back to Engeneered. Jackson didn't really want to either. Ahmid wanted to go home but the trains didn't start again till six-thirty.

They watched television.

Tonio came in and Jackson tried to tell him but Ahmid shut him up.

Tonio said they'd go for a great recovery breakfast but they had gone when he got up.

Jackson told Claire at TAFE. She told Friedrich. Friedrich took Ahmid away after the prac was over.

Claire took Jackson to a church. They lit candles and prayed.

© 2008 Ian MacNeill

Ian MacNeill remains concerned about how little guidance young homosexual people are given, both at home and at school. There is no point discussing the religious institutions.



Jarred Connors

Fingerprints on my glass

“Tuesday night then, say eight.” It'd taken me weeks to even get him on the phone but finally he was making a date. “No, make it ... seven thirty? What about Maria's Diner? In Georges Road. Past the Op shop. On the right.”

“Great, I'll be there. See you then.” I was so relieved that we'd finally got to this stage.

“Sure. Looking forward to it.” At least he ended the call positively.

Ryan was big in HIV/AIDS community politics; particularly with support groups. I'd never asked but always assumed he was positive. He had a job that allowed him to take time off freely; it was with one of the universities, I found out later. We'd known each other, as friends of friends, for many years and I'd wanted a date with him for some time although I hadn't really tried before. Even though our circles often crossed it was mostly a nodding acquaintance. He was popular and had lots of people about him but I'd never heard of a

regular partner. But there was a glow about him that intrigued me and I just knew I'd like to get to know him better. I won't deny that his cuteness helped — or maybe it was just lust.

I'd had an awkward accidental meeting with him a few weeks before. He was dining at one of those footpath restaurants down by the ferry terminal, and I was out for a walk and caught his eye, so I stopped. Given my interest, there was no way I was not going to chat to him. We swapped greetings and talked about an upcoming rally, along with other gossip. I'd guessed he wasn't dining alone as there were two drinks on the table. When his date came back from the toilet he seemed unamused to see me chatting to Ryan.

Ryan introduced us, “Shaun, this is Andrew; Andrew, Shaun.”

I nodded hi to Shaun mid-sentence and finished the gossip item I'd started.

At a pause, Shaun addressed Ryan directly, “I guess we should order. We'd like to order now,”

the second statement was at me; he looked about trying to catch a waiter's attention. All the waiters were otherwise occupied.

I ignored the hint and asked Ryan about the conference he'd been at the previous week; there was a write up in the gay press about a controversial speech he'd made in favour of gay marriages. We had friends in common who'd been there and so I quizzed him about some details. Shaun fidgeted and smacked his lips loudly and made it quite clear he wanted me to move on.

"So where are you off to tonight? A tour of the bars?" Shaun, to me. And he flicked his eyes up, off somewhere else, a fairly crude suggestion that he wanted me to go.

"Just a walk. I like the evening light around the harbour." I paused, "But I might stop in at Archies for a drink on the way home. Are you likely to be around later?" I directed the offer to Ryan who was looking a bit unnerved at having to negotiate through this sudden bitchiness.

"I, ..." Ryan sort of faded off, looking at me, then Shaun, and back to me. I hadn't thought much about his view point; his quiet dinner was about to have two mad queens working up a screaming match at his table.

"Some people just can't take a hint ..." Shaun started, to no one in particular.

"I'll leave you my mobile number," I offered to Ryan. "In case you do feel at a loose end – later."

They both watched me as I struggled to get my wallet and a business card free.

"Just feel free to give me a call," I said rather too sweetly as I wrote my mobile number on the back. "If you can get away, I mean," not saying but meaning Shaun, "It'd be good to catch up some." I turned and was away before Shaun had much of a chance.

Ryan never came for the drink. I can't say I blamed him, really.

ii

It was just after seven and so I was early. I filled the time by window shopping the op shop, then a hundred metres or so down the street and back, keeping an eye out for him should he turn up early too. He didn't; he was right on time. He'd changed from the suit I knew he had to wear for work; he now looked cool and casual, slacks and loose top; ideal for the late summer we were having. He spotted me from across the street and he smiled openly as he waved. I waved back and made for the pedestrian crossing. He waited at the restaurant door.

"Glad you came," I greeted him, somewhat lamely.

"And you," he replied, as he held the door open.

The waiter, who was glad to see more diners on what looked to be a slow night so far, rose to greet us from a table down the back, and with some fussing, we were seated, presented with

menus, glasses of water and left to review the chef's choices.

"About last time we met ..." I started, wanting to apologise for my behaviour.

"Don't apologise, you were both awful, Shaun in particular." He looked away at the street traffic for a bit. "We had words later. He's gone back to Adelaide, thank goodness. We've known each other since we were kids. He didn't know about my health and was being over-protective," he paused, "I didn't ask him to. And he knows he doesn't have to now."

Silence seemed a suitable response but I wasn't sure how to start again.

"So, you have family in Adelaide?" I ventured, after a bit.

"Born there. In the hills, wine country, idyllic, beautiful; but my father was a desperate in a new country, a slave driver who made us work on the farm, mornings, nights and weekends, actually, any time that we weren't in school, and even sometimes when we should've been. After I finished high school I had to get out, and so I came up here. Two wrongs. Leaving didn't fix either. My father died two years later, a heart attack. Now, I wish we'd made up."

This time I needed the silence to take all that in.

"But you, you're not from here either?" he led this time. I spent a few sentences explaining my introduction to Sydney, to sex, to men; sort of all mixed up together, as it had been.

The waiter hovered so we ordered; a light meal,

vego curry, salads and some fish cakes. I picked a bottle of WA white from the list that I remembered the label of. It came quickly and we touched glasses before sampling.

"Good choice," Ryan commented and I relaxed a bit. "So what's this all about?" He had a habit of making eye contact every time he asked a question; it was a bit unnerving.

I counted the fingerprints on my glass. "I think ... I think I'd like to get to know you better." Even though I'd had some time to think through this conversation, I hadn't actually decided on a definite plan. I certainly hadn't considered the full frontal approach that I'd just done.

"Mmm. And I thought it was about some crazy scheme or other. I'm flattered. You know I've got the lurgy?" Again, he looked me squarely. "And much, too much to do. Especially politically. And too little energy. Not a good basis for a relationship; you'd be better finding someone else, with more to ... give."

I was having trouble charting any sort of reply.

"I wasn't actually proposing marriage," I said as we were distracted by the arrival of the entrees. "Yet, anyway." I added as the food was placed.

We both smiled at the reference to his political work, and I, at least, relaxed as we surveyed the food. The waiter named the dishes as they landed; refilled our wine glasses and snuck away. I was again glad for the distraction. We both started in on the food.

"I may have misinterpreted what you meant.

Explain 'get to know'," he looked over to me again, as he sampled the salad.

I took my time about forming a reply.

"Honestly, I've always felt attracted to you," I searched for words, "So I like you a lot and I'd like to spend some time with you. Get to know you some. Maybe, if it works out, to be more than friends." He said nothing, so I continued, "I don't know what you think of me. You probably think I'm an idiot. I feel pretty stupid right now."

It was his turn to be silent for a bit. "You're not an idiot. But I don't know you really," he looked straight at me again. A ten count silence.

"Whatever ... but, at this time, I'm not really looking for any serious commitments. That is what you're suggesting. Is it?"

"I'm not really sure I'd thought it through that far. What I'd like ..." I fussed about, spooning myself some curry. "Actually, right now, I'm not suggesting we even jump into bed, or anything." I offered him the plate. "And we don't need to solve all of my love life right away. At least not before dessert anyway." Conversation became postponed by the food and later we moved on to gossip and scandal.

iii

We were coming back from a farewell party; yet another of our friends was off to spend six months in the south of France. Ryan's mood had swung all night. At first he'd been tired and irritable, and would hardly talk to me all all; he

was distracted and just made grumpy noises. But he brightened up when we got to the party as he started to chat up the room. He'd rapidly downed several fruit punch drinks; so overpoweringly spiked with white rum that even the floating fruit looked exhausted in the short time it'd hung around the bowl. Ryan's behaviour – this on again, off again mood swing thing – had been going on for a while. Typically he'd brighten up considerably and would be chatty with everyone after we settled in. Tonight was no different.

We left before midnight. The cab driver was doing ok, by which I mean he seemed to know where he was going, and wasn't chatty or playing right-wing radio. Ryan though, decided that he might be going the wrong way and corrected him twice. Then he insisted on paying, purely, I knew, so he could minimise the tip. It was a game. I gave up; I was too tired and simply let him do what he wanted.

We fell into bed with Ryan still being busy; he revisited the outrageousness of a friend's antics at the party. "Did you see that, the way he looked when she heard that? He's always been two-faced about that deal."

I rolled over without making any comment. Right now, I just wanted to sleep. But Ryan kept going on, mixing up incidents, and blurring the rights and wrongs of discussions. The alcohol still had some control of him and so my dilemma was, as always when he was like this, should I respond to the barrage, or just turn over and go to sleep? I never knew what to do

and tonight I was far too tired to care much. I mumbled agreements and grunts where I guessed they be appropriate.

Slowly his mood mellowed and instead of being jumpy and annoying, and a pain, he was all subtly and solemnness and silence. He spooned into my back and asked how my day had been. (We had gone straight to the party from work.) We laughed together at a water throwing incident at the party. Suddenly it's like he's focussed only on us, me; suddenly it's like he does really care.

After a bit, he says, "I do love you, so much," and he clasps me tightly. "You know I've grown to depend on you being around." I can still smell the alcohol on his breath.

"I know." We kissed. "It's Saturday tomorrow, can we talk more in the morning? I've had a hell of a day and I'm so desperate for some sleep right now." I searched for an escape; knowing all along we'd probably not get around to talking tomorrow.

"I'm still wired. But yeah, let's try and sleep anyway. Night." And in a minute or so, he's off, softly snoring.

Of course, after negotiating all that, I'm wide awake. I can't get away from the review of our relationship that I'd started in my head. We've been living together about eight months, and it has worked well, but lately we've both been under some work pressure and we've both been leaning on alcohol too much. His moods change so quickly — from uncaring to wooz —

and sometimes we connect with real feeling, but mostly, now I think about it, the good times are when he's a bit pissed. So are my dramas just when he's sober?

At the party two of my friends separately asked me about how the relationship was going. They've never asked (or cared?) before. When I wasn't effusive about where we were at, Jane even suggested that maybe our relationship had run its course, that maybe we were bored with each other. I was shocked, not because what she said may've actually been true, but that I hadn't seen an end coming. Was it possible? Somebody else had quipped: Wake up, there's a whole world out there.

I don't regret much of our relationship. If I have to sum it up there've been many good bits too. The week at McCubbin's Beach was fantastic. And lots of other good times. But we've both changed; personally and together. There are things we don't do any more, and there are other things we now do as a couple. That's ok. We've grown.

Later, Jane had said I should be talking to Ryan about the complaints I had rather than chewing on her ear. I was surprised at that too because I hadn't thought I was bitching; she's a close friend and I thought I was just being open and honest with her.

Still in the end, what it comes down to is: I have been annoyed with his behaviour of late, in particular towards me, but also to our friends. Maybe we are going to have to talk it through. I need him to want our relationship to work; we

can't let it float along like this, wildly swinging about. I will talk to him in the morning and if he doesn't want to face it, or even try - then maybe that is a sign, for sure. Though I'm uneasy with this conclusion I'm somewhat resolved in deciding on at least an action, and I finally start to drift off.

iv

The waiter cleared away, leaving us with the bill and mint chocs.

"It's been fun, thank you for inviting me." Ryan even looked sincere. So that confirms it, it's home alone.

"Yeah, I've had fun too. Would you like to do it again?"

"Let's think about that," he smiled — encouragingly I imagined. "I'm not saying no," he added, smiling at me.

As the meal progressed Ryan had loosened up somewhat — we'd both had a bit to drink I suppose, but I was nervous and needed to relax. Maybe he did too. We paid Dutch at the counter and thanked the waiter.

Outside on the street we stood and watched the people and the traffic, neither of us seeming to be able to say goodnight nor able to find more to talk about. I was steeling myself to end the night; perhaps a quick drink in my local bar on my way home.

"So, will you sleep with me tonight?"


"But, I thought you didn't want to?" I asked.

"I'm not sure what I want. But let's have a one night stand ... and tomorrow ... we'll work out then. It could be fun!"

He gave a little wave and immediately conjured up a cab in the heavy traffic. Flabbergasted, I jumped in.

© 2008 Jarred Connors

Jarred Connors resides in Tasmania, but has pretty much resolved to end his adventure in rural life, especially with diseased Devils; too many distant, long phone calls; miserable, cold, wet mornings; and a two-week bout of food poisoning caused by his home-made mead developing a life of its own. He has also become excessively fixated on a particular coffee bar in Leichhardt (NSW), and prays they still serve *risotto con panna e rucola*.



Barry Lowe

Paías Wynstan Jeroboam Orders a Hot Chocolate

Paías Wynstan Jeroboam fanned himself with the letters he had been writing home, the envelopes of which were already adorned with pre-addressed labels and a hodgepodge of stamps, for he had been severely aggravated in not being able to buy a single stamp of the correct denomination no matter how many stars the tourist office allocated the hotel.

The ceiling fan whisked his frustration with, to his 56-year-old mind at least, the romantic aura of Graham Greene or Somerset Maugham perspiring in tropical climes. If nothing else Paías Wynstan Jeroboam had a literary bent.

He'd chosen the Hotel Victoria on a whim because the name was redolent of old-fashioned values and, yes, he had to admit, fading grandeur. Perched on the side of a steep hill overlooking the town of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, and the bustling Pan American Highway, it proved to be modern motel-style and anything but fading in grandeur.

Without requesting it he had been allocated a premium room with a picture window view of the valley and, because he was so accustomed to being shown to the second-rate, so accustomed to being overlooked, he thought there must be some mistake. He had pre-paid and his budget did not allow for unexpected and expensive upgrading, he explained, but the bewildered bellboy had assured him this was the correct room and so overwhelmed was he at being treated with courtesy he joyously over-tipped.

He spent time mapping out an itinerary, a routine he would follow slavishly to circumvent all sorts of unnecessary complications. Spontaneity, like passion, was a concept alien to him. The remainder of the afternoon he used to write the aforementioned letters of oppressive triviality to those back home who had expected that his first venture outside the waters of his home country would have already traumatised him beyond endurance. But his friends, acquaintances rather, at the

Metropolitan Community Church had already forgotten him, his departure had left no vacuum, and they were only reminded of his existence when his letters arrived.

To James and Gilbert he'd confided: "Do you realise the airlines here do not serve tea to their passengers? Even after I had asked the cabin crew for a cup of boiling water for, as you know, I always carry my herbal tea bags with me, I was refused." It was with satisfaction that, as he lay down his fountain pen, he picked up the mug steaming beside him. His electric jug, current adaptor, and caffeine-free tea bags had been a godsend.

That which he deemed too trivial even for his letters, or just plain embarrassing - the cramped journey from the airport in the communal Kombi taxi van perched alongside the driver high above the steering, clinging desperately but unsuccessfully to his dignity while bouncing over every pot-hole to the scarcely suppressed amusement of his fellow passengers - he banished to the pages of his diary. Not so much a volume of intimacies as the minutiae of his life: the cost of airport tax, and how much he'd tipped the bellboy. Such was the fabric of Paias Wynstan Jeroboam's life.

At the hotel restaurant, he was content with a meal, lukewarm as all Mexican food seemed to be, of tomato soup, unlike the rowdy Germans at the next table who sent everything back to be

reheated. He had been warned off the indigenous food by well-meaning acquaintances because they thought the idea of his venturing into such uncharted gastronomic territory was likely to wreak havoc with his rather pedestrian culinary tastes.

His main course, spaghetti and bland butter sauce, was also lukewarm but served by such an agreeable waiter who promptly replaced his fork with a clean one when it fell on the floor, he did not have the heart to complain.

The dull grey cardigan, always draped comfortably across his shoulders, he pulled more tightly around him as the rain pelted against the side of the hotel. He had been placed near one of the open windows and was being lightly spattered so he asked the waiter with nice manners to close it lest he catch cold. Then he turned his attention to a beverage. He detested coffee and although the hot chocolate sounded tempting he had been warned that Mexicans added chili thus making it far too stimulating for him. He dispatched the waiter to the kitchen for hot water with one of the ubiquitous tea bags. The returning cup of tea was ... lukewarm.

He made a pretence of drinking what tasted like ditchwater before returning to his room where he could make a decent cuppa with real boiling water from his reliable little travel jug.

Later, when weariness had sapped even his

voracious appetite for correspondence, he'd thrown back the curtains, his one concession to a new culture. Normally he would never consider sleeping anywhere with the blinds open.

However, he slept through the sunrise, described in his trusty travel guide as the highlight of a stay at the Hotel Victoria, but, as he had other mornings remaining, he did not mind his tardiness. And he still managed an energetic examination of the ruins of the ancient Zapotec capital of Monte Alban, the scattered remains of which overlooked the town and the name of which, he chuckled because he did so like his little private joke, it shared with one of his favourite film stars, Ricardo.

That completed he looked back with satisfaction on the already completed weeks of his trip which many had warned him would be an ordeal. True, the consistently high temperatures had been distracting to one used to the drab drizzle of Melbourne's winters and the bright sunshine had been much too dazzling to one used to the gloom of a house in which the curtains were habitually drawn.

He rang the front desk to book further local tours for later in the week before settling in to mark his observations, while they remained fresh, in the precious diary. Then he turned his diffident attention to the officious correspondence from his solicitor, knowing it would be more papers to sign and that it would

bring back abscessed memories of those long debilitating years in which he nursed his mother through the dry rot of terminal cancer.

The promised help from his married sisters and brothers was never forthcoming and he, alone, fetched and carried, and undertook the unpleasant rituals of lifting his mother on and off the commode and washing her geriatric genitals. He had performed his duties willingly and without complaint, just as he had cared for the injured blue tongue lizard that had limped into the backyard after a ferocious mauling by the neighbour's dog. He had fed it and cared for it and made a companion of it even though it had frightened him. A bit like his mother.

Now he read the calculated inconsiderateness of his dead forebear whose dappled flicking tongue, blue from her prescribed medication, had always scalded him with criticism. Even as Paias had been bathing the leathered and scaly skin of his mother's crippled body she had been planning changes to her will citing the fact that as he, the aforementioned Paias Wynstan Jeroboam, had neither children nor dependents he, Paias Wynstan Jeroboam, therefore, needed less.

He winced at the parsimony and stared at those spaces where Messrs. Pollock, Aitken & Butterfield, Solicitors, had appended an "x" and which they expected he would duly and dully sign. He pushed the papers to one side.

The sense of betrayal and injustice made him too despondent to notice the sunrise the next day and on the third he arose in darkness for the early start to his bus tour to Mitla. And it was his salty mood plus the fact he did not like to draw attention to himself which prevented his raising his hand when the guide asked if there were any English-speaking passengers aboard. He was convinced there would be others who would have raised theirs. Only after they had been travelling for some thirty minutes did he realise he had been wrong and, too embarrassed to cause a fuss at this late stage, sank into further melancholy.

At Mitla itself, he shared its architectural magnificence with his only companion who understood English - his guide book - but he longed for the warmth of spoken words to bring it really to life. Late in the day, still resolutely on the fringe, as the bus sped back along the highway fleeing the inescapable afternoon electrical storm dancing jaggedly across the valley, Paias was lulled into sleep from which even the loud displeasure of the thunder could not rouse him. He awoke with a start only at the sounds of a riot in progress. Peering through the window he was only mildly delighted to discover what he had mistaken for a riot was the commotion of some sort of festival.

Disembarking, he was caught up in a wave of infectious enthusiasm as excited children rushed to intercept a handful of airborne sweets

tossed by a tubby priest. Struggling to stay on his feet in the surge his arms flailed and he accidentally caught one of the wrapped boiled bon-bons. Giddy, but pleased with himself, he sought out the runt of the litter, a young girl, unable to compete with the older children, and, bending forward, placed it in the small hand making sure that no one could steal it from her. The little girl ran off without a second glance clutching excitedly to her prize.

Paias extricated himself from the melee and wandered through the market stalls that reminded him of long-forgotten school fetes except here the wares were more exotic than the plaster of Paris platypus ashtrays and jars of gooseberry jam. He fingered a few shawls, amazed at the intricacy of the needlework, forgetting that the mother on whose behalf he was admiring it was no longer in a position to enjoy it. What brought his attention back to reality was the bleak prospects of the chickens and the ducks wedged uncomfortably in fatal baskets and wire cages.

He felt an insistent tugging at his cardigan and on looking down saw the pleased smile of the little girl on whom he had bestowed his pitifully small largesse. She had in her hand the remnants of the half-sucked sweet and was offering it to him. The simple gesture moved him but he popped the sweet back in the child's mouth and the little girl ran off giggling and shrieking.

"Magnanimous of you, Señor," a voice to the left of him said.

Paías waved away the tour guide's compliment more surprised at his grasp of English than at his praise.

"They can be very selfish," he said, indicating another flurry of children in single-minded pursuit of the showering sweets.

"And so can parents," Paías was inclined to add. "What is this festival?" he asked in order to change the subject.

"*The feria del arbol*. The Festival of the Tree."

Paías remembered reading of it.

"It's an ahuenhuete, a type of cypress. About 42 meters around last time we measured. We call it the tree of life. Over two thousand years old. It has been growing here since before the time of Jesus Christ. You put your arms around and the further the distance between your outstretched fingers the more years you have remaining of your life."

Paías smiled at the naiveté of the folk tradition. The tree's girth was such that, obviously, it would confirm the longevity of anyone who hugged it.

"It can be a dangerous tree, Señor," he said although Paías waited in vain for him to elaborate.

It was ahead of them now.

It drew him and repelled him in much the same way as Frida Kahlo's hypnotic images in the Instituto de Artes Graficas de Oaxaca in whose welcoming dry rooms he had sheltered fortuitously the previous day when a rain shower caught him unprepared as he walked to the Zocalo, the town square. The pictures had reminded him of his own tortured demons.

Now all he desired was confirmation of how much more of his crippled life he would have to endure. For endure he had, his life a blur of bedpans, suppurating sores, and a few grabbed moments with his diary. And now the guilty secret relief that Mary, his mother, was dead and no longer a burden. He would have cursed had he known how.

Whether for himself, for he was sometimes given to self-pity, or because he felt so helpless, he flung himself against the giant cypress, surrendering to its puissance.

But instead of a sense of calm he felt panic. His arms were stretching like India rubber, grasping their way around the mammoth trunk, welcoming oblivion.

The tree was telling him what he had been afraid to acknowledge - that he had tiptoed through life, soul dead. He had wanted his life to be interesting, god how he had wanted it to be interesting, but he had allowed his

comfortable timidity to envelop him.

He longed for that little boy he had been once, vibrant and inquisitive. And with a scream and an effort that required all his strength he ripped himself away from the terrible embrace of the truth tree.

He felt foolish as he heard the toot of the bus and hurried toward it.

As he scrambled aboard the guide helped him up and said kindly, "The tree has great wisdom."

Back at his hotel Paías soaked in the bath, washing away the exhaustion and the fear, wondering what to do on his last night. He had seen a vegetarian restaurant from the coach as it drove back through the small streets of the town and he had jotted down its locale. He would seek it out.

That the cafe looked much less prepossessing and a great deal grubbier close up daunted him just slightly. Two teenagers, a boy about seventeen and girl about fifteen, were lounging about near the kitchen and their smiles invited him in. They were quickly banished by the surly waitress, obviously their mother, who plonked him at a table with a plastic tablecloth and small containers of green and red chili.

The menu was entirely in Spanish so he pointed at the few words familiar to him hoping he was ordering fillingly if not majestically. The few other patrons vacated their tables until he

realised he was alone and that the reason for the waitress's irritability was that she probably wanted to close up.

When she brought the meal Paías Jeroboam smiled and thanked her in his most pleasant manner.

"You are not American, Señor?"

"No, I'm Australian."

"Where is that?" she asked.

He took time to draw a rough map of the Southern Hemisphere and position Mexico and Australia on it. A sudden idea presented itself and he took a kangaroo pin from his pocket. He presented it to the waitress who laughed in recognition hopping around with her hands held like paws.

She called the two teenagers to the table and showed them the pin.

"I apologise for my rudeness, Señor. But my children, Isabel and Alejandro, they are much sought after by rich tourists who come to Oaxaca. They mistake the sensuousness of our food ..." Her shrug completed the sentence and, seeing that Paías blushed at being mistaken for such a predator, she added. "They have such hunger."

She barked orders in Spanish and Paías's plate disappeared.

"And I am Guadalupe," she said disappearing

into the kitchen. "We have a special banquet day on Sundays here."

"I'm leaving Oaxaca tomorrow," Paías said, he realised with genuine sadness.

"Then this is specially for your last night," Guadalupe proposed. "Come join me and my children in the kitchen."

"Alejandro is preparing Flor de calabaza rellena."

Paías had noticed the fresh courgette flowers in the markets and wondered. Now he watched as they were stuffed with cream cheese and "Queso anejo," Alejandro explained.

"It tastes a little like Parmesan," Guadalupe added.

Alejandro suggestively squeezed the sphinctral lips of the flower with his long supple fingers before twisting them, erotically lathering them with egg and flour and dropping them in a pan of welcoming hot oil.

Paías had never eaten flowers before, not even remotely tempted by those pre-mixed supermarket boutique lettuces created for the indolent or wealthy otherwise too preoccupied to tear their own salad greens. Now he tasted the stuffed courgettes burnished with green tomato sauce, his bland palate immediately intoxicated by the blend of exotic ingredients which till now had remained merely labels on spice or herb jars: coriander, epazote, chili,

parsley, lime, tomatillos, lemon and aromatic cheeses.

Isabel followed with a steaming bowl of lentil and pineapple soup which Paías ate with relish at his table as the aromas of the main meal wafted from the kitchen.

"It is the specialty of the region and also the specialty of our humble little cafe," Guadalupe said. "Beans with salsa endiablada."

Endiablada. Even with his perfunctory Spanish, Paías could translate beans with devil sauce. Shivering with misgivings he spooned it into his mouth. It was hot. Very hot. It made his eyes water and his throat seize up.

"You don't like it?" Guadalupe was concerned.

The fire, the passion, the intensity even as it made him choke warmed him like nothing had aroused him for a very long time.

"I adore it."

"Would Señor like something to drink?" she asked. "Perhaps another of those specialties for which Oaxaca is famous."

He felt adventurous. "What would that be?"

"Champurrado," she said with not a little pride. "Our region is noted for the glory of its cacao beans. It does take a little time to prepare, Señor, so I understand if ..."

Paías looked at his watch and realised it was long past his usual time for bed.

“I will get Alejandro to drive you back to your hotel, Señor.”

The youth smiled his compliance.

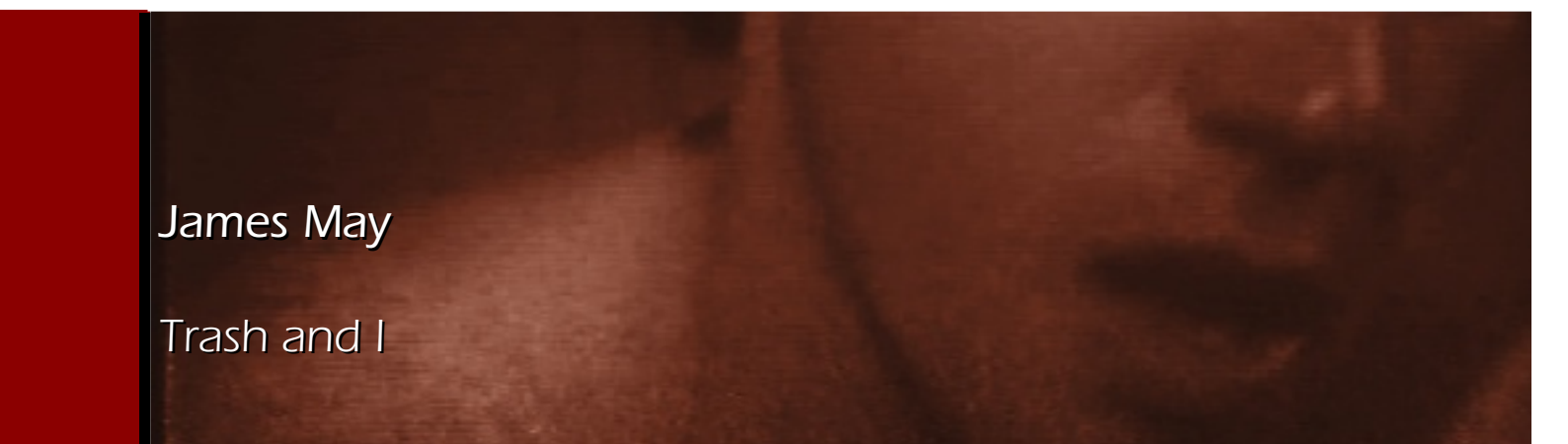
Paías didn't agonise over the chili that would be sprinkled on top of his warm drink. “Bugger the consequences,” he thought and then heard himself utter,

”Yes, I would like a hot chocolate, please. I'd like it very much.”

He knew now that he would return to his hotel tonight and before drifting off into the most contented sleep of his long and boring life he would write letters to his friends back home telling them that he had decided to stay on in Oaxaca for a while longer. And tomorrow morning, before he checked out of the hotel for less expensive lodgings, a large hat and a Spanish/English phrase book, he would make sure he watched the sunrise. And then he, Paías Wynstan Jeroboam, would draft a letter to the Messrs. Pollock, Aitken & Butterfield, Solicitors, instructing them to sue for a fairer share of his mother's estate.

© 2008 Barry Lowe

Barry Lowe's short stories have appeared in *Hard Hats*, *Time Well Bent*, *Cargo*, *gay-ebooks.com.au*, *Mammoth Book of New Gay Erotica*, *Surfer Boys*, *Flesh and the Word*, *Best Date Ever*, *Boy Meets Boy*, *Out of the Gutter*, and others. He is also the author of *Atomic Blonde*, a biography of 1950s blonde bombshell Mamie Van Doren published by McFarland. He co-wrote the screenplay to *Violet's Visit*, and his produced plays include *Homme Fatale: The Joey Stefano Story*, *Dutch Courage*, *The Extraordinary Annual General Meeting of the Size-Queen Club*, *The Death of Peter Pan*, *Seeing Things*, and *Rehearsing the Shower Scene from 'Psycho.'* He lives in Sydney with Wally, his partner of almost 40 years, and their irascible baby dinosaur, Tofu. His website is: www.barrylowe.net.



James May

Trash and I

I have a new friend. We met at a support group for young queer guys in Darlinghurst. He's young and thin and he has bad skin, but he's friendly and confident and comfortable with his sexuality. I tell him I'm new in town and I think I'm a poofter, even though I've never been with a guy. He's streetwise and wears funky clothes, and he knows where the best clubs are and where to get his hands on speed and pills. He forgives my lack of social skills and the way I stutter my words and refuse to look him in the eye. He knows I'm vulnerable but he doesn't take advantage or use it against me; he makes me feel good about myself. I like him but I think he likes me a little more.

I give him my phone number and he visits my house in Glebe. We go for coffee and he shows me around the city. He's lived in Sydney all his life and he knows it like the back of his hand. He's still with his conservative family in the suburbs but stays with a friend in Darling Harbour on weekends. He says he's never had a relationship but he's had sex with a lot of guys.

He goes all the way with most of them because he likes fucking. He never uses a condom because they don't want to wear one and he likes taking a risk anyway.

He meets a lot of guys who work at Central Station. They suck each other off in the toilet cubicles or fuck in a cleaning room if they get the chance. They're usually older guys; Lebanese, Indian, Greek; he doesn't care as long as they're up for it. They never talk or see each other again; it's just about getting off, he says. Sometimes he picks up at Centennial Park and they have sex in the gardens or the toilets; he says it's like a Roman bath house in that place. There's men jerking off at the piss trough and giving each other blow jobs in the cubicles. I'm jealous of his antics but I'm not up for casual sex and I couldn't do it unless I was pissed anyway because I'm too self conscious to do it with a guy unless I'm wasted.

Now and then he brings ecstasy to the house. We take a pill and play music and roll around the bed, laughing like idiots, kissing and

touching, waiting for the drug to kick in. We both love getting out of it; we'd get fucked up every day if we could. It's our secret world in that room and I've never been this close to anyone, so content and glad to be alive. I feel so open when we're high on this shit; I pour my heart out and give him every ounce of affection I can muster. I know that he adores me because I can see it in his eyes and it makes me a little nervous because I don't know what I want.

The drug swims through the blood in our veins like warm, soothing syrup as we lie flat on our backs with our arms and legs intertwined, staring at the ceiling, ready for take off. We are bathed in the lamp light as smoke floats away like mist on a lake, rising from the cigarette we pass from mouth to mouth, sighing with pleasure as every beat of music vibrates through the floor and pulses through our bodies. It feels so intense, touching his chest with my hand under his shirt and I feel his heart beat racing when I play with his nipples. His skin is delicate and sensual and I feel aroused when he caresses my face with his loving hands and every cell in my body comes to life. I run my fingers through his hair, so soft and gentle, and massage his scalp till he closes his deep brown eyes and fades away in a rush of ecstasy.

Time and space don't exist as we ride a taxi to Oxford Street and stumble out on Taylor Square, laughing like two kids in a candy store. The rest of the world is on the other side of a parallel dimension and we laugh at the insanity from the safety of our secret place. There is a homeless

woman guzzling wine from a cask, sprawled on the ground outside the pub. Now and then she screams abuse at one of the patrons and reaches for a cigarette they toss in the gutter. Everything is moving fast and one strange sight after another floats past like a deranged comic strip; we see a tall, sleek woman dressed in a corset and boots. Men watch with their tongues hanging out as she prances away like a high priestess. We see a guy being hauled away with a collar around his neck; a man dressed in leather with the arse cut out of his pants, yanking him by a chain. We see a drag queen, stumbling past with bare feet, weeping and sobbing with make up scrawled down her face.

We hear a mob of guys screaming abuse from a van; die faggots die, show us your tits, sit on my face. A young couple argue and chase each other into an alley, a man pukes behind a lamp post and two queers with tanned muscles and tribal tattoos walk hand in hand across Flinders Street. Now and then we cross paths with a stranger who is flying high and we stare into each other's intoxicated eyes and laugh in hysterics because we feel just the same in our altered state of consciousness.

We sneak into a crowded bar where the air is thick with cigarette smoke and cologne and the lights are low and guys are standing around, giving each other the come on; too afraid to make a move or say a thing. We giggle like school boys, holding hands, protecting each other from the disapproving look of lonely men with scowls on their faces and their lips turned

up. We feel young and foolish and free, mouthing words to the music and tripping out on the lights and the hustle and bustle of cruising queers and lifeless robots tapping the buttons of tinkering poker machines.

Every cell in our body is buzzing and we need to move or kiss or wrestle each other to the ground. We go to our favourite club and race up the tall, narrow flight of stairs to the tacky disco on the second floor. We smile at the bouncers and they laugh because they've seen us here before; we're back again and we're fucked up again but that's what this place is about. There's always a freak show and trashy music to lose our minds and forget the rest of the world. We take over the floor and dance as hard as we can, closing our eyes and grinding our feet into the vinyl. We take off into outer space and soar through a parallel universe of beats and lights and pulsating rhythms.

We're as free as can be, losing our minds, suspended in time. Every step feels so precise and powerful and smooth and sensual. We are poetry in motion, moving in perfect rhythm with every sound slamming through the soles of our feet. The whole world is watching us slide and sway and saunter across that floor; we are channels of light with our mind, body and spirit in perfect union. Every move is full of grace. We share smiles and hugs with everyone on that dance floor with manic faces and dilated pupils. Everyone is fabulous beneath those disco lasers swirling through the amphetamine soaked-atmosphere, saturating our senses. We are out

of our minds. We are off the planet.

We reconnect in a cloud of wafting smoke. Gazing into each other's eyes, we wipe the sweat from our face and share a chilled bottle of water, touching it to our flesh, sliding down our neck and our chest. We find a couch and fall in a heap, clearing our minds and catching our breath. It feels like the devil's playground but it's where we belong, holding each other close and making the most of the final waves of static pleasure, surging through our hands and feet. Our teeth chatter and our jaws grind with hunger but it feels so good, it can't last forever.

We close our eyes and hold on tight, coming in to land, we drift through time and space, making contact with a familiar place; our awareness of the ordinary world comes flooding back. The scene has shifted in every corner of our landscape, nothing looks the same as the moment just before. We try to recapture the intensity but it is fading fast and we refuse to let go or acknowledge it to each other.

Finally, we fall back into our bodies with a grinding thud. Our eyes meet and there's no denying the truth. The room is cold and we're more vulnerable than ever and everyone in that place looks wicked and possessed, with their tongues hanging out and their eyes rolling in the back of their head. It feels like a scene from the Night of the Living Dead where people are grinding their teeth and sculling water and stamping through that room with their chest out and their shoulders back like they could walk through walls and leap over buildings. The

music and the heat and the smoke begins to suffocate us and we know it's time to leave.

We make a getaway before vampiric eyes pierce our minds and the poison seeps into our souls. We slink out of that room with our face to the floor under the cover of darkness; we scurry into Oxford Street and hail a taxi as the dawn begins to break and a new day bears down upon us. Back in my room, the bubble has burst and our fears are laid bare for each other to see. We listen to soothing music and smoke the last cigarette but our throats are raw and our mouths are barren no matter what we drink. Our bodies are weak and frail and our skin is damp and toxic, our eyes are bloodshot and bathed in dark, swollen circles.


We try to relax but we feel awkward and foolish and the trust is gone. We feel so alone even though we're in this together. We try to restore the connection but the magic is gone; we're both trapped in our own world, both lost in our own thoughts. I catch his eye now and then and I know he wants to hold on, he wants to reach out and touch but it doesn't feel right. I feel empty and afraid and I want to be alone to come to terms with who I am and how I feel.

I am confused and I want to explain but I don't want to hurt his feelings and there's no words to describe what I think about him or us or anything else. I wish I felt the same but I can't pretend. I sense his resentment but he doesn't say a thing; he never does. The sun is rising fast and the traffic is moving outside, time is getting away and there is nowhere to hide. He collects

his things and we give each other a tentative embrace. I know he wants to stay but I have nothing left to give.

© 2008 James May

James May is a writer from Melbourne. He enjoys writing short stories, theatre scripts and articles for magazines. He is influenced by his experience of the inner city, queer themes, and HIV/AIDS. He is also working on a novel about his time in San Francisco.



Trevor Ball

Show and Tell

“Do you have a wooden leg?” he asked as we walked under the full moon. I paused to contemplate how homicide could ruin a romantic evening.

“No, I have cerebral palsy.”

Silence sealed itself around us.

“Is it serious?” he asked.

“Yes,” I declared, “It’s serious. It’s so serious I can have a food fight all by myself!”

Nothing! Not a smile, a giggle, a chortle, snicker or a laugh. From the corner of my eye, I saw his humour and my romantic notions running in opposite directions, to get the fastest taxis out of there!

“Oh, that could be very difficult for you.”

“Actually, that was a joke... my cerebral palsy is of the pale blue, mild variety, it only affects my right side... and it’s on its very best behaviour.”

“Right, so it’s okay then?” he replied with sensitivity and an understanding nod of the head.

“Yeah, it’s okay... unless there’s a full moon.”

“What! Oh, that was another joke wasn’t it?” He looked very pleased with himself in spotting this piece of humour. But he did not laugh.

“So how did you contract it?” his pretty lips said. His dark eyes said more... Don’t give it to me, don’t give it to me, and don’t give it to me.

“A freebie out of a weet-bix packet... but it cost me an arm and a leg.” He looked confused. Obviously his humour was comfortably elsewhere, buckled up in a taxi. Egged on by my romantic notions, that had failed to escape, my mighty ego declared, “Make this beautiful bastard laugh and he’s yours.”

“Part of my problem,” I proclaimed while rehearsing the next line in my head, “is there’s a sibling rivalry between my two arms.”

“What... rivalry? What you do mean?” He had taken the bait so innocently.

“Well this is my good arm, it’s very manly, very macho, and it does all the work. While my wonky arm, the one with the palsy, is a sensitive sissy and only serves to wear my Swatch.”... Silence.

“Interesting,” he finally said.

“Yes, this sibling rivalry is not unlike that great biblical story...” I paused for impact... of Cain and Disabled...” No response.

We carried on walking around the foreshore, carrying the silence in my shoes.

“I’ll tell you a true story,” I injected in desperation to break the dead air.” A week after I came out to my mum she phoned me, all excited ’cos she had worked it out.”

“Worked out what!” he asked, sounding too polite.

“She had worked it out that my cerebral palsy made me a homo.”

“What! Really I wouldn’t think that...”

I interrupted him with my premium line and with a well rehearsed motion of my hand, “You see, my Mum’s right, I do have a naturally formed limp wrist.”

The stillness of my non-laughing friend was deafening. If seagulls could heckle I would have welcomed their rowdy abuse. “Bloody personal ads,” I thought.

Stubbornly I soldiered on, “I used to be a Goth, but they kicked me out ’cos. I was just too happy... Damn Prozac.” Nothing!

“I house shared with a couple of bouncers... that was tough... had to queue to get into my own home.”... Nothing!

“My life partner lives right here in Melbourne. It’s very exciting. I haven’t met the bastard yet but I’m very hopeful.” He gave me a concerned look and then nothing!

“Sadly love has escaped me, and has pressed charges.” Silence followed silence. I surrendered, admitted defeat, and waved the white flag.

This handsome Armani-clad muscle Mary of a man would not, could not, laugh at my funny self-disclosures and well rehearsed jokes. He was not falling for my comedic charms.

Was it in my delivery?

Had he heard it all before in a past life?

Had the stalking silence stolen our night?

In reaching Fitzroy Street, we each thanked the other, promised to do coffee and a movie with no intentions of doing so. As we were about to part I heard a high-pitched sound coming from my stranger. He looked very apologetic and somewhat uncomfortable as he removed a little device from his left ear.

“Sorry,” he said, “my hearing aid has been playing up all night.”

I walked away, alone, once more. I laughed cruelly at my vain stupidity and shrinking ego. I took it out and gave it a good thrashing. Not everybody wants to play show and tell. Heading home, I began to miss my silent stranger.

© 2008 Trevor Ball

Trevor Ball is a Melbournite, originally from the land of the long lost vowel, New Zealand. Over the years, he has been a regular performer at Midsummer spoken word events and in 2005 won the short story competition with 'The World Won't Listen'. He has dabbled in stand up comedy for a number of years until he was rescued by his partner from an angry audience. He draws mostly from his own experiences and has a real fascination with the meeting of strangers and their moment by moment interactions. Trevor earns his crust and the occasional beer as a social worker in adult mental health.

Trevor Ball < trevorball@iprimus.com.au >



Nicholas Kokinidis

Mouth to Mouth

Part 1. Swallowing Water

This is a mother on a mission. I am going to save my son. To do this I have to accomplish two things. First: get him off the pot. Second: find him a girlfriend. To accomplish the second, I understand he might have to be put on a starvation diet.

I have always been a good mother. My Ali (that's short for Alex) has never gone short: guitar lessons, trainers, gizmos galore. I'm a stickler with meals. Never skipped a food group. Always a clean shirt for him to try and squeeze into. We may have problems selecting them but we do sit down to a DVD together. So, if I'm covering it all, how come so much is missing?

Blind Freddy knows he's been eating behind my back. What boggles me is how much food he must be smuggling. Right under my nose too. And he was such a beautiful child. Prince Charming and charmed as well. My dark-haired Tinker-bell. There was no stopping him. Family would ask him what he wanted to be when he grew up and every time it would change. Or he would make up such strange combinations of

jobs that everyone would laugh.

"I'm going to be a robber and have my own band," he said firing his pop-gun.

"I'm going to be Aquaman and a part-time chef."

When did it all go so wrong? Just like his bum. Pear-shaped.

The divorce hit him hard. So hard it winded him. As soon as he caught his breath he was stuffing it with hot chips. Extra chicken salt please!

The divorce winded me too. I got my breath back – I know this sounds strange – by not stopping to catch it. I became SuperTemp. Typed enough for three secretaries. Signed on to every school committee that no parent or citizen could ask for more. I am the PC of the P & C. There was no more time I could tuck into the tuckshop. Oh, the white bread I've buttered...

The thing is, since the divorce he's been adding on the pounds while I've been losing them. Now

I've always been skinny-assed as they say. Got no bosom to speak of. That's why, even before I went straight, I did the entertaining behind the bar. Never got into the bra and knickers tease act. If you're into T & A (Tits and Ass), I'm not your woman. I'm smart enough to know I'm past that game even if I never played it. Besides, you can't pole dance to Elvis. My girlfriends say I should get back into the dating game instead of watching "Blue Hawaii". But Elvis and I have always been an item. And that's another story. This is my son's story – or lack of one. He's got no lack of kilos though, I can tell you. So what if since the divorce I've gotten skinnier. It's my son that's abandoned me for all you can eat.

Does he think I'm going to turn a blind eye to his pot?

I guess you could say my son has an addictive personality. Food, drugs, whatever he turns his hand to. Things are always heavy with him. These days, with the pot, it's like he's swimming underwater. And here I am, on the shore trying to throw him a lifeline.

He's never had a girlfriend to speak of. Comes home after school then he locks himself in his bedroom and hits the computer games with Abs (that's short for Abdul), his best mate. These kids have a nickname for everything. I hear the sounds of Armageddon from behind his locked door. One day I swear I'm going in. Luckily they stop around six because Abs has to get home and I have to start cajoling my son for his Japanese homework. I'd even settle for him just having a friend who was a girl. It's overdue. She

would smarten him up quick smart. Instead I get night raids on my pantry.

For all the food my son pilfers I don't think he's ever managed to steal a kiss. But I know it's war being a teenager. And probably this place isn't helping him either.

I grew up in this suburb. I moved away, and now I'm back with a child of my own. This suburb isn't beachside but it's close. But somehow it just missed out on the seaside make-over. When I was growing up here I imagined this place as one of those bubblegum machines. You know, pop 20 cents in the slot, and out comes a gumball. A rainbow wish and a chance. Nowadays, it's as if some beach bum has smashed the glass of that machine. Maybe he doesn't even have 20 cents to rub together. Now, those gumballs have scattered all over the place and you're more likely to tread on something sharp. It's getting sticky and sour and dirty.

Sometimes it's as if the virtual war in my son's bedroom has hit the street. Just for a split second. And I'm not being paranoid. A lot of the kids sport these strange mohawks. I call them middle-eastern mullets. I'm sure you've seen them. It's as if these kids were about to be beheaded but the sword slipped and got their scalp instead.

But back to my son. He needs to be saved from himself. He's been coming home later and later for days now. I thought he might be with Abs so I called him:

“Where’s Alex?”

A pause: “At the Hacienda. But don’t tell him I told you”.

I got into the car and drove. My Elvis doll was jiving on the dashboard like crazy. All I could think of was of getting to the Hacienda. I didn’t even think about how I was going to get past Barry. I must have been possessed. To get in you have to at least get Barry’s stoned nod. Barry is a local legend. Barry has been perched on the same back-rest, on the same street bench, with the same drowned eyes for years now. Like a poisoned seagull. I knew this place back in my time – can’t remember what it was called back then – but I was older than my Ali. Inside the Hacienda I imagine – all manner of things get sorted, weighed, and bagged. And we’re not talking oranges here. Sure, there have been complaints. Sometimes even a line or two in our local paper. The Hacienda just submerges, waits a breath or two, and re-opens with a new name. The Hacienda will never go away.

Barry just stepped aside when he saw me. I must have been fierce looking. Like I said, possessed. Let the storming Viking through, guys! Looking back on it, I didn’t even register their faces. Nothing clocked. The only thing I remember was the scales. I just thought ‘those scales are state of the art’. Then I saw him – my son slumped in the corner. I looked down on him and said:

“Get up, Fatso”!

Part 2. Bringing It Up (3 months later)

He’s coming tonight. Abs is everything and more. He blows my mind. Mum would never guess we did it. Last weekend at the beach we went to one of those huts where you throw chips at the gulls during the day and where other things happen at night. Since that weekend I’ve felt like a new star. Exploded by sex. And it’s going to keep on happening too.

I guess you wouldn’t call Abs textbook hot but I think he is. Eyes like black lychees if there were such things. His nose is big but we’ve decided on calling it dramatic. He jokes he’s going to get surgery and I told him if he does he’s dropped.

But I can’t understand all this hoopla over looks. It’s total bullshit so why let it get to you? Another thing too, when you’re big like me everyone’s got an opinion. And I’ve heard it all.

I not only get fatso – and from my own mum too – but I’ve been called fat shit, fat fuck, Moby Dick of course, beached whale. Mum says, ignore them. She says there’ve been many great men who have been ‘big-framed’. “Look at Winston Churchill.” Yeah, yeah, we will fight them on the beaches and all that...

When you’re big people think you’re asexual or something. You’re just the funny man. If I had a dollar for all the girls at school who wanted to adopt me I’d so be out of here by now.

Luckily I found Abs because my school is sports mad. I’m not going to win the 50 metre butterfly now, am I? I try not to be biased against the jocks. Mum used to say I could learn a thing or two about application from them. But

she hasn't said that for a while now. Mum says that at least a lot of poor kids are smart enough to get ahead with sports. But mum just sees the jocks when she's sitting in the stands at some swimming carnival. She's never shared a change room with them. She should hear them then. Talk about water on the brain.

I reckon hell would be an entire country that was like a swimming carnival. Day in and day out there would be over-developed shoulders everywhere and lame-ass ribbons flapping in the wind like soggy toilet paper. Everyone would be segregated according to some random category, like a colour, or an animal... I mean grow up! You'd have to sit in the stands and watch the jocks sniff each other's Speedos or the police would take you under the stadium and torture your non-sporting ass.

But no one can fuck with me now because I've got Abs. He's meeting me after work tonight. Mum got me a job after she busted me at the Hacienda. Man did she lay into me when she got me home. "You clean up your act, young man!" then she flushed my kif down the toilet. I don't touch the stuff now because Abs reckons it will slow us down. A week after the flushing, Mum said she'd found me an after-school job. At The Orange Orchid Thai Restaurant. Just opposite the beach. Mum said the owner owed her a favour.

"Maybe if you actually had to work around a kitchen you'll lose that appetite of yours."

Now a couple of months later I still have my

appetite. But it's for more work. Instead of chip sandwiches now it's Thai money bags.

I asked the owner – who we all call Pras (short for Prasit) – if I can have some extra hours and he comes back with another question. "Only if your mum say is OK." I think he's a bit afraid of her which is understandable. I told mum that I could do my homework during mornings and lunchtimes in the school library. Got no time for the playground now.

Looking at me you'd be surprised how quick I am around the tables. The other waiters run around more but they make more mistakes. Last week the entire posse came in for a meal and I showed off my skills. Abs went for the Pad Thai, Soraiya – his sister and a vego – had Deep Fried Tofu with Chili, while Mum did Curried King Prawns with Fried Banana for dessert. I was even flirting with Soraiya, which Abs found funny and Mum found delightful. I could tell Mum was stealing looks at me throughout. Later Prasit said I could sit – is OK – with my family. Mum, trying to hide her pride, asked me what I planned to do with all the money I was making. "Holiday," I replied. I didn't tell her I planned it to be indefinite. I'm out of this seaside dump. Finally! This place Mum's so sentimental about.

So as long as Barry stays off the H I might just manage it. He gets so out of it he can't be trusted to supply the weed and E. Man, you can't forget your customers. When I first proposed the idea to Barry you could see his eyes suddenly seeing the light. THAI TAKEAWAY AND DRUGS! Is that genius or

what? You see there's a straight clientèle who don't like hanging round the Hacienda. Wanting to keep up appearances or something. I cater to their market.

This is how I do it. I have the pot (fifties and twenties) in one pocket and my bags of the E in the other. I have bulges everywhere, man, so the fact that I'm carrying is inconspicuous. It's all a bit of a dance. Although I look like a fat Buddha, I'm really that Indian god with the many hands. Unlike the Buddha, although I have his proportions, I don't have time to be sitting on my ass on some lotus leaf in a pond.

Crunchy curry puffs over here, and a fifty under the plate. Green curry over there with four Es. Chili octopus, two twenties, squid salad, and five Es. I'm doing Pras a favour too. I've vamped up his standby, Tom Yum, with some old skool subs and 007's. Kind of like a side dish. Been doing this illegal dance all the time to Prasit's selection of music. Someone turned him on to Miles Davis in Bangkok in the seventies and Pras has stayed a loyal customer ever since. This music and scam keeps me on my toes. Each E is another notch on my belt.

But it's quitting time soon and my boyfriend's coming. I've scored some golden parcels, Tom Yum, and Drunken Noodles. And soon I'll be swimming in his kisses. Yum!

© 2008 Nicholas Kokinidis

Knickers (a.k.a Nicholas Kokinidis) still writes all the time. He has worked as a postie, storeman, printer, clerk, market researcher, interpreter, carer, sexual health counsellor and corporate whore. Knickers \ Nicholas acts in his part-time. Contact: yen_4_zen@yahoo.com.au



Got a story to tell?

We're looking for good writing from new and established authors to be included in our next issue.

Send us a copy of your story – we'd love to read your work and share it with our readers.

Email us at <editor@gay-ebooks.com.au>