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Nicholas Kokinidis    Barry Lowe  
Peter Mitchell        Shaun O'Dowd  
Phil Scott             Jarred Connors  
Mal Path                James May  
John Bartlett         Tim Miles  
Trevor Ball            Ian MacNeill



**NEW GAY FICTION**

Editors Gary Dunne & Laurin McKinnon  
December 2007



# contents

click on author to go there – the *Queer Hearts* logo to come back here



<b>Nicholas Kokinidis</b>	<b>Hearts kindred</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Peter Mitchell</b>	<b>Every Friday</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Phil Scott</b>	<b>A creature of habit</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Mal Path</b>	<b>The fit of the stretch</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>John Bartlett</b>	<b>The man I love</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Trevor Ball</b>	<b>Discretion</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Barry Lowe</b>	<b>Liquid assets</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Shaun O'Dowd</b>	<b>Desperation</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Jarred Connors</b>	<b>And then he kissed me</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>James May</b>	<b>PCP 2006</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Tim Miles</b>	<b>Flight</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Ian MacNeill</b>	<b>Le baiser de la fée</b>	<b>57</b>

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## Editors: Gary Dunne and Laurin McKinnon

Welcome to *Queer Hearts*, the third collection of contemporary gay fiction from gay-ebooks. As readers you've downloaded thousands of copies of titles from our web site which we're interpreting to mean you like what we're doing. It's certainly very reassuring when each new release scores more download hits than its predecessor, and each collection attracts many more submissions. Thank you for your support.

This is our biggest cyber-anthology so far, a mix of established and new writers from around Australia as well as from overseas (congrats Mal on being our first!). The large number of submissions and their high quality, made for a tough editorial process. As a collection, *Queer Hearts* presents a slideshow of visions of who we are and where we are now; a rich and exciting diversity of views, full of challenges and pleasures, heartaches and celebrations, love and frustration ... and then much more. We hope you like it.

Special thanks to our ms readers and to Brian for proofing.

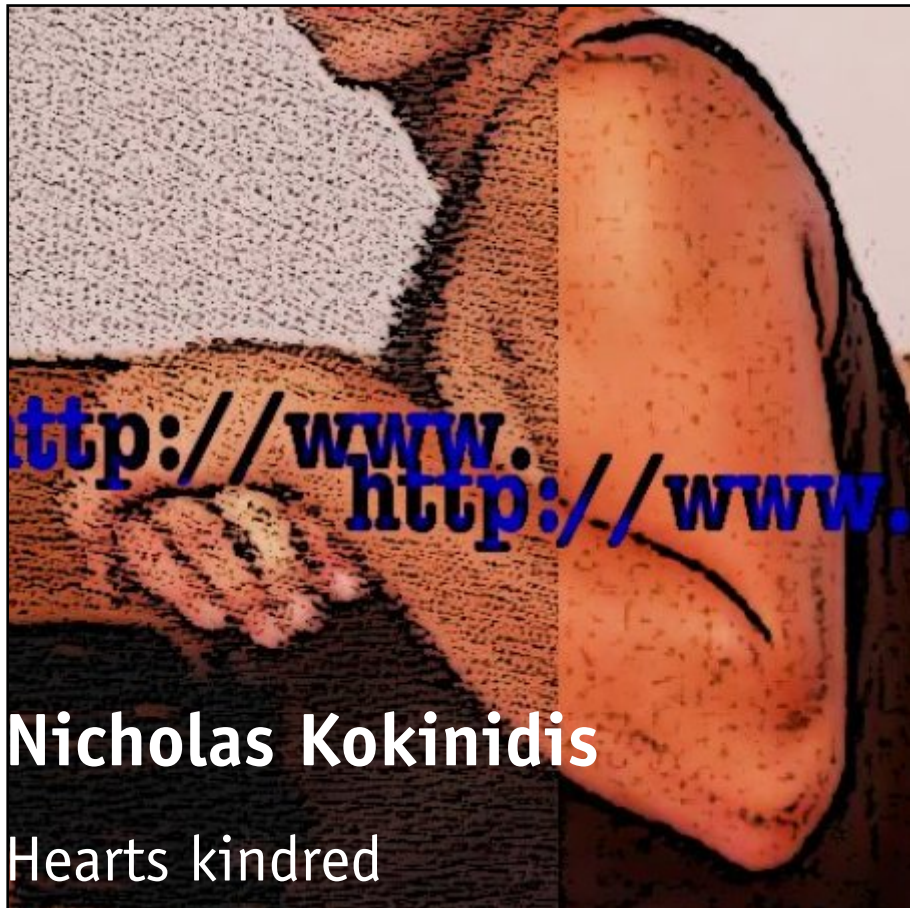


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Cover art is a modified still from the movie 'Wings' (1927), featuring actors Buddy Rogers and Richard Arlen, director William Wellman. Other art used has some basis in Broderbund ClickArt [©2002] products, on internet graphics and personal photos. The digital mischief is all our own doing.

Produced with open source software running on openSuse Linux: Scribus desk top layout; The Gimp for graphics; and Open Office for words. Tomorrow we move that mountain a metre to the left.



**I was only joking when** I posted that I'd sell my virginity to the highest online bidder. It's my website anyway so I can do whatever I want. There's straight material – my drawings – on there too, so the site's not a complete brothel. So what if I put some nude photos of me on there too. At least I've drawn a fig leaf over my "paintbrush" – so to speak. More or less. But now I'm starkers, and getting painted by Mr Famous Artist. I can't move so I'm going through my own retrospective in my head.

I know I was under-age. Still am. I just thought since I was putting in all this hard slog for my HSC major work I might as well get the most out of it. So that's when I created my own website. I didn't just post the offer to sell my virginity (homosexual virginity – my heterosexual virginity went free-of-charge years ago). I put my HSC stuff up there too. I uploaded years of sketches. I've always drawn, and now finally you can view my stuff online. And my ass as well.

Like I said I've always drawn. Even as a nipper. When I discovered girls I worked out you could exchange their portraits for kisses. About a year ago I discovered boys so I'm wondering what I'll be exchanging my portraits for this time?

Everyone thinks I'm currently going through a sci-fi period but that's just a cover. Actually, I've had more periods than motherfuckin' Picasso. In my high school there's a hardcore group of sci-fi nerds so I've been trading my master-sketches of Imperial Cruisers – better than the ones in Star Wars – and Enterprises – with more extras than the one in Star Trek – for someone else to finish my Physics homework. To all budding artists out there some words of advice: have some sci-fi tricks in your arsenal. I remember back in Primary I was trading my drawings for Stormtrooper figurines. Or maybe I was just a perv back then too and was scamming to get my hands on a real life figure – fuck the figurine. Man, was I precocious! I guess what I'm trying to say is: Sci-Fi equals loyal customer base.

Straight boys come with their own periods too. They'll always be a market for cars, all things military – that's jetplanes, tanks and seamen. They'll always be a market for Muscle Marys and female nudes. Straight boys like both. Master these forms and you're flying. If you draw them they will come!

For one boy I've had a "Lord of the Rings" phase. You don't have to be motherfuckin' Freud to see that there's a homo element to all that Tolkien. Anyway to cut a long story short I was after the ring of this boy that was obsessed with Lord of the Rings. To think all the Knights and Elves, Hobbits and Dragons I churned out to impress that guy, and all I got for my efforts was a drunken grope. That really wasn't a cost-effective time in my career.

I've had a Black period too. It turned out as stuffed as my Lord of the Rings period. At the time I was chasing this wog-chick (wog-chick is how she described herself). It ain't rascist if I'm just repeating it, is it? I did this series of portraits

for her. Classic stuff: Biggy, Tupac, Jay-Z. But it just wasn't to be.

So I was thinking back to safe old sci-fi when I launched my website. Now I've ended up as the art object instead of the artist. Just in time too. My cruising was getting a bit out of control. About a week before I launched the website I discovered this new cruising area. I know, I know, cruising but still a virgin. But if oral sex isn't sex for Bill Clinton why should it be sex for me? But like I said the cruising was getting out of control. I'd see all these guys in their cars and all I'd see was the Enemy. I'd see Imperial Cruisers. I'd see Stormtroopers. After all weren't they just white guys patrolling the outer-provinces too? I knew I was in trouble when after a night of bad oral in the back of a Death Star –sorry meant car, with a baby seat and all – I first asked for money. "Can I have some cash Daddy?" The gravel didn't hurt that much when Daddy threw me out. I knew I was in trouble and starting to lose the plot too when I wasn't coming up with the right answers to the questions. For example., an Imperial Stormtrooper – sorry a Gay man – has a standard question: "Where do you come from?" The answer is the country the Gay-stormtrooper finds 'hot'. The answer to "Where do you come from?" is not "Well I've just come from the Seven Eleven".

So Mr Famous Artist discovered my website just in time. I thought I'd had to tell him I was only joking when I posted that my anal-cherry was up for sale. So I was blown over when he said he wanted to paint me. He's painting me now.

"Hey can we take a break I'm hungry?"

"Oh not now darling, I'm on a run."

"Just some McShit or something I'm hungry."

"The muse is flying. Not now dear. Though your gutter mouth is completely tantalising. You're my suburban boy aren't you?"

"Fuck you faggot. Don't stereotype me. I'm every type of boy."

You should have seen the food at the party. He threw me a party when I accepted his offer to

model. It took some time for me to say yes because he wanted to pay me after the painting was finished. I thought “As if, asshole.” I admit I was aiming for a rather ambitious figure for each session but I let the asshole talk me down. The things I do for art. Anyway, back to the party. He cooked gumbo. He made a speech of course: “John Olsen has his paella. I have my gumbo. The recipe’s from pre-apocalypse New Orleans. It’s the key to my whole oeuvre.” That wasn’t the last French word I had to look up that night. There was ‘roux’ – it was brown and thick – it’s also French for your mums stock cubes from Continental. The slabs of pork and crab were the pink of baby flesh. Strips of chicken were getting a tan. “What’s that swimming in there?” “Doll, that’s okra.” The onions stayed Spanish-purple and the peppers were the shiny traffic-lights of a City where you could do anything you want. Red. Stop. Amber. Wait. Green Go. All-at-once. There were tubes of dark sausage and ‘all the rice in China’ too. I think I was getting drunk on the gumbo because more and more people kept joining the party and I thought I knew them. I thought I’d seen them on the TV. Talking head art experts. I was getting seriously impressed and then this lady introduced herself to me. “Hello I’m Sascha Rose. I’m the biographer.”

This is what Wikipedia has to say about Sascha Rose. ‘Sascha Rose. Cult writer. Activist. Born 1952, London, UK. Best known for her six-novel science fiction series of the 1980’s “Hearts Kindred” which features gender-fluid characters with exotic body types and sexualities. Outspoken critic of Thatcherism and militarism and campaigner for Palestinian statehood.’ And this is what Wikipedia doesn’t say about Sascha Rose but what Sascha Rose told me (in her funny accent which was as thick as that gumbo stock). She told me that the fact that she was English, a Jew and a lover of women played some role in her “sensibility” but it was impossible to quantify. She told me that she fell in love with an Aussie and discovered Australian painting all at the same time. Her career took a complete about

face. She emigrated about five years ago. “I just had to see the place that gave the world Whiteley’s women.”

She also somehow scored the gig of being Mr Famous Artist’s biographer. The sci-fi stuff launched our friendship that gumbo-night and I’ve even started reading her series of novels. Oops sorry, her oeuvre. The best time I’ve had with her was when we had a ‘date’. This was between session five and session six with Mr Famous Artist. We had just gone to the Gallery and seen some of the maestro’s older works. Those boys must be meatless bones and six feet under by now. We were walking in the Park. Sascha was raving on and on. She was covering everything that day: paintings, Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, Margaret ‘bloody’ Thatcher, going on and on. She must have spied a slice of the harbour because then she said, “This city, it’s Utopia.” I just thought what the fuck are you going on about. See where I’m living, it ain’t utopia. I didn’t say any of this, but must have given her the filthiest look because she lost it for a second and went to sit down. I remember that garden seat because there were these winged horses carved into it. I guess our resting place along with what she said left the impression. She said, “Don’t trade with your heart.”

Man, I’m starving. But we have to wait for the master’s male muse of inspiration to pass. Although I can talk tough I know not to push it. So I go back to being the silent model. But I’ve learnt you can learn in silence. I sketch mental notes. Notes on how to talk for example. I mean I like cock but because I’m young and a no-one I can’t afford to talk like a fag. My artist likes cock too but because he’s rich and a some-one he can talk all faggy – with all that Darling and Dear shit. What else have I learnt? How he mixes his colours for a start. I’m learning his moves as well. I could copy them if I had to. I know what his body does around a canvas. I know what his face does depending on if it’s going well or not.

I’ve also learnt about his past. Thank God,



(also known as Caravaggio) for search engines because my high school art books leave so much out. I mean from the textbooks you can trace the fact that there have always been boys in his body of work. But they don't tell you anything about The Scandal. He left the country after The Scandal. That's when his odyssey began: Bali, the Greek Isles, Sri Lanka – I've teased him: "Bet it was called Ceylon in your day" – and New Orleans. One site says he ended up on The Gold Coast – apparently that's in Africa not Queensland. Suburban-boy can't know everything can he? I have my lapses. But back to The Scandal. I thought I'd get him on this and was keen to as well, especially after all his smart-ass dissing. "Hey is it true what the papers said about you? Was that why you left the country Grandad?" I swear his eyes actually lit up when I asked him. I was expecting him to cower in humiliation or something. But instead, you would think he created The Scandal himself. Grandad said: "My boy, you're not an artist unless the Vice Squad is interested."

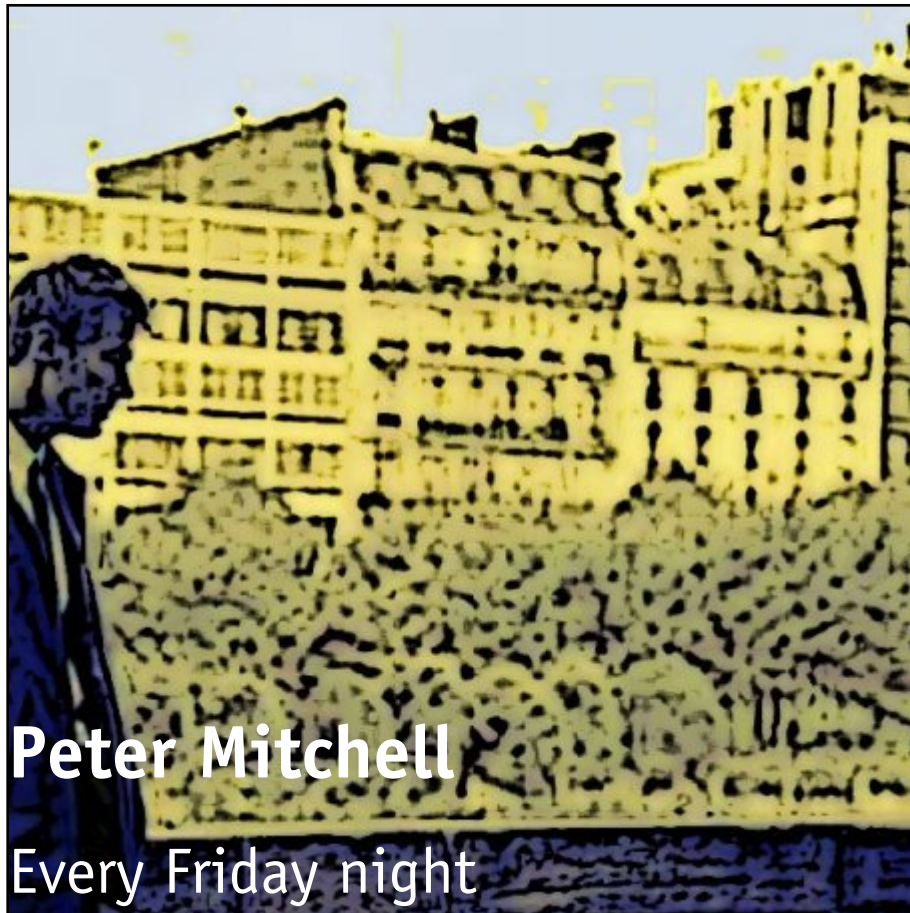
Let's give him some vice right now. I'm sick of just sitting here. I'm making my move. How much do you think I'll get for my ripe cherry? How much do you think I can get for prodding his dried-up prune? The model is moving. The statue's alive. Can you see me massage my thigh. Can you see me take a step forward. See me lick my lower lip. I'm preparing a kiss...

When he gets there I'm not sure what he's going to do. I've had to invent this scenario by piecing together the clues I see around me. All this is just fictional conjecture. The artist does have a new model but no one is sure what they're doing together. He is rather old though. You may have worked out by now that this hasn't been the voice of a boy from the wrong side of the tracks. Please dear. They don't have that kind of vocabulary not even in their stream-of-consciousness. This is the voice of the biographer. It's Sascha Rose here. Yes, I am the English writer and activist. I did everything to dismember Thatcherism while creating gender-

free planets. Now, I'm just trying to fill in the gaps in this Aussie artist's biography. I've been following him around – he says trailing – but still I'm no closer. I'm not sure how certain members of my queer audience is going to take this pedophillic turn of events. I'm not sure how I'm taking it. What kind of thrill am I getting from imagining this man-boy trade-off. Perhaps I just want to trade my alien accent for the local lingo. Perhaps this is a fig leaf covering my desires. I feel like one of those Japanese women who 'hack' – as they say – Star Trek. Apparently, they create entire comic novels and websites where Captain Kirk and Mr Spock snog till buggery. But my tale is a bit more risky. Then again, what does Star Trek's opening lines say anyway. Shouldn't I be going boldly forth? And perhaps there's more fame in gay porn than in high art.

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Knickers (a.k.a Nicholas Kokinidis) writes all the time. He has worked as a postie, storeman, printer, clerk, market researcher, interpreter, carer and sexual health counsellor. Knickers \ Nicholas acts in his part-time with Takeaway and Bulldog Theatre companies.



Base art ©2002 Broderbund ClickArt [modified]

## Peter Mitchell

### Every Friday night

**Every Friday night, John escapes** the absence of laughter in his three-storey, terrace house. He walks to Ash Park, always sitting on the same seat. Behind it, a jacaranda tree, its thick, knotted trunk the colour of ash, casts a protective shadow over him. Occasionally he recalled the first meeting with the love of his life. Vulnerability etched his facial features. A strand of black hair framed his face as he half-smiled. On this Friday night, John spreads his legs in a vee-shape, leans forward and rests his elbows on his thighs, his chin in the cup of his hands. He stares into the middle distance, his eyes glazing, his imagination lost in the hazy warmth of reminisces.

It is the end of summer. The air is like molasses, sticky and heavy with humidity. The daytime skies are domes of wren-blue brilliance and rainstorms skitter across the blue-black of evening.

Rays of yellow light arc through the night sky. In Oxford Street,

John and his lover, Mark walk with thousands of tinselled, tulle and leather-clad bodies, writhing and cavorting to the thump-thump-bump of disco and techno music. The men's chests shine with silver glitter, their minds a fusion of technicolour, their feet gliding on a layer of cool air. In the middle of Taylor Square, the mandarins on a drag queen's green lame frock wink at them.

Later in Moore Park, some revellers carry sparklers and loop them through the air, leaving trails of stars that hang suspended for a few seconds then disappear. The lovers walk arm-in-arm across the hard-packed ground, wending their way to the party at the showground.

John's recollections end. His eyes focus on the silhouettes of other men cavorting in the distant shadows. For several minutes, he thinks about their significance in his weekly wanderings through the park. He considers them company, their sexual play life-affirming in contrast to the desolation of his house. He stands and stretches his arms, turns and walks home.

John kneels on the edge of a raft. Leaning over, his fingers splayed in the shape of a fan, he reaches for Mark. For ten seconds, their fingers intertwine as if forming a bridge, and then slip apart. Mark sinks further under the grey-green algae floating on the ink-coloured water like damp rags. John notices a movement on the periphery of his sight. He looks up and sees a dorsal fin slicing through the algae. Twenty seconds later, the shark surfaces, its mouth open, showing rows of sharp, jagged teeth like picket fences.

A loud groan reverberates throughout John's bedroom. He wakes on the other side of the bed. He closes his eyes, imagining Mark's thoughts as he woke to that scene every morning. His attempt fails, his projections only picturing jagged teeth. The bedclothes suffocate him. He kicks them off and looks out the door, imagining the coldness from the silhouettes of the furniture spreading to the other rooms. He switches the

lamp on, its light forming a pocket of warmth in the black of the night. Reaching over to the small bedside table, he picks up a novel and resumes reading.

John stands and walks to the centre of the park. He passes a square-shaped garden bed with ground-hugging bushes. Bending down, he breaks off a sprig and squeezes a small, oval-shaped leaf. He stands up, sniffs a pungent aroma and looks to his right, observing several men in the distant shadows.

Weaving between ghost gums, he reaches a seat and sits down. Nearby is a war memorial, the stone facade faded from age and the natural elements. On the side of it, the names of the men and women killed in World War One are engraved. He regards the names, wondering about the lives of the young men and women. He has always wondered why it is called the Great War. What is the difference between it and other wars? He stands, takes a few steps and stops, a wave of memories forcing him to sit back down.

In Ward 17 South, the night is quiet and still. In each room, the beds are in neat rows, one metre apart and flush against the walls. The bluish glow from a lamp above each bed arcs upwards. In Bed 3, Mark breathes with difficulty. In his left-arm, bactrim courses through a cannula in a slow rhythm.

John sits next to the bed and holds Mark's hand, listening to his gurgled breath. Occasionally, John gazes out the window at the street lights of Paddington as if the electrical energy from them will give his lover life. He faces the bed again, senses a shadow in his peripheral vision and shivers with fear.

A cream Volvo parks in the tree-lined street bordering the southern boundary of the park. For several minutes, the engine idles, grey smoke coming from the exhaust pipe. The driver turns the engine off, the bright red parking lights fading. He hops out, locks the car and shrugs on his black, leather jacket. Lighting a cigarette, he strides quickly into the park. He reaches the



centre of it and stops, his eyes surveying the distant shadows. He chucks the cigarette on the ground and walks to the other side.

John notices the man as a distant silhouette among a grove of trees. He pictures the single coffee cup on the kitchen table at home. He half-turns and stares at the grove of trees. He stands slowly, closes his hands into fists and slides them into his jeans pockets.

As he ambles towards the man, John notices he is still at the same spot, smoking leisurely on a cigarette. He reaches the edge of the grove, stops a short distance from him and immediately turns away as if disinterested.

The Volvo driver blows a column of smoke into the air. He takes another drag, glances at John and moves a few steps further into the dimness.

John notices his movement. For twenty seconds, he considers his options. Move closer? Or remain still? He decides to remain still.

The Volvo driver leans on a tree trunk. He stubs out the cigarette with the toe of his right Reebok. He glances at John, then away as if feigning disinterest too.

John turns around, his back to the other man. For a second time, he thinks about his options. Should he walk away? The picture of the coffee cup crosses his mind again. He decides to stay, turns around, and for a minute, disregards the Volvo driver.

The two men move closer to each other by degrees. Their eyes play cat-and-mouse games: looking at each other, glancing away, looking back, their expressions simultaneously suspicious, expectant and hopeful.

John wishes the Volvo driver would make a move. He stares in the direction of the war memorial. At the same time, the Volvo driver lights a cigarette, takes a few final steps and says, "How's it going, mate?"

"Um," says John swallowing hard, "um, pretty good."

"It's cold tonight, mate," says the Volvo driver, pulling his jacket tightly around him.

"Um," says John, "yeah, it is."

"It'd freeze the balls off a brass monkey." He

offers the packet of cigarettes to John who refuses them. "Ya sensible mate," says the other man, "it's a bloody awful habit." For twenty seconds, he regards John and says, "By the way, what's ya name, mate?"

"Ah," says John. He is surprised by the unexpected question. Many men in the shadows prefer anonymity. "Um, John," he says faintly. He clears his throat. "John," he repeats more confidently.

"Pleased to meet ya John," says the Volvo driver, shaking John's hand vigorously. "Mine's Paul. Paulo to me mates," he explains with a wide smile.

John looks into Paul's eyes. They appear blue-grey and coloured with a hidden strength. He appreciates the strength of the handshake, imagining Paul's strong arm across his chest. He shuffles his feet. For twenty seconds, he searches for words, wanting the conversation to continue. Only predictable questions cross his mind. "Um," he says finally, "do you come here often?"

"Oh, about once a month," says Paulo, hoping the answer gives the correct impression. He doesn't want John thinking he uses the beat too often. "Yeah, about once a month," he repeats, feeling satisfied with his answer. "Ya wanna sit over there?" he asks, pointing to a seat a short distance away.

"Yeah, sure," says John, reminding himself about having unrealistic hopes.

The two men walk to the seat, sitting at opposite ends of it.

"Been busy in the park tonight?" says Paulo, gazing around.

"Not really," says John looking around the park too. "A couple of guys. That's all."

"How long have ya been here?"

"Since about eight o'clock," says John.

"Uh-huh."

For a minute, the two men are silent. Paulo smokes another cigarette and gazes around the park. "Ya know what gives me the shits?" says Paulo, turning to John.

John shakes his head.

"The guys who drive around and around and

around all bloody night.”

“Yeah,” says John smiling. He leans back on the park bench. “They can’t make up their minds if they want a fuck or not. And they bring unnecessary attention to the beat.”

“Ya said it, mate. Bloody princesses, they are.”

John moves fractionally closer to him.

“The park’s great on a full moon,” says Paulo, sweeping his right-arm in front of him. “It’s awesome.”

“Yeah,” says John. “Yeah,” he repeats, a nervous edge to his voice. He moves along the seat. For a third time, he pictures his kitchen, the large, wooden table with the coffee mug, a ring of dark grains edging the bottom of it. “The park is beautiful on full moon nights. Although sometimes, the play of light and shadow is spooky.”

Paulo nods in agreement. “And summer too, mate,” he says. “Some nights, I come here and sit for hours.”

John nods, removing his left-hand from his pocket then returning it. He glances at Paulo, at the ground and then into the middle distance.

“Well, here we are sittin in the park on a Friday night,” says Paulo, more to the air in front of him, than to John. He takes a last drag on the cigarette and stubs it out.

John glances at Paulo and wonders if he’s leaving. He edges his foot along the ground, his shoe reaching Paulo’s left foot. Paulo glances at John and half-smiles. John moves his foot up-and-down the edge of Paulo’s Reebok and stretches his arm along the back of the seat. “What do you like doing?” asks John, looking at Paulo.

“Well, if I had about three hours, mate, I’d tell ya,” says Paulo raising his eye-brows.

John smirks with nervousness. He is uncertain about Paulo’s answer. “Um, well, what do you like doing in bed?”

Paulo sighs heavily. “I hate questions like that, mate,” he says shaking his head. “That’s all they,” he points to the distant men in the shadows, “ever wanta know.” He stands, pushes his hands into his jacket pockets and walks away.

John shrugs his shoulders. He stands too, his

fists still bunched tightly in his pockets and walks back to the silence of his house.

John sits on the seat of his grieving. He warms to the smile on Mark’s face and feels the warmth of his body in bed. During these times of remembering, there are instances when the moment stills and John’s imaginary screen becomes blinding white as Mark is removed from Bed 3.

On the other side of the park, Paulo parks his Volvo behind a grey Pajero ute. Several minutes later, he ambles across the well-kept lawns to his favourite grove of trees, sits down and lights a cigarette.

John notices Paulo cross the park. He shivers slightly, remembering the rebuff from several weeks ago. He frowns, scratches his head and wonders if he should approach him. He sits up straight, staring at Paulo sitting in the shadows. Several minutes later, he stands and at first, walks tentatively, then strides towards the grove of trees. At the war memorial, he stops for a moment, pretending to read the names of the fallen. He resumes walking, still nervous about Paulo’s reaction.

John stops several metres from him. Paulo recognises him and nods. John sighs with relief, walks to the seat and asks, “Do you mind if I sit down?”

“Nah, not at all, mate,” says Paulo, pointing to the empty half of the seat with his cigarette.

“I wasn’t sure how you’d feel after the other week,” says John.

“Oh that,” says Paulo shrugging his shoulders. “I got pissed off with ya wanting to know what I did in the cot. That question shits me.”

“Hmm, I know,” agrees John. “I was nervous. I was just making conversation. I wasn’t really...” His words fade into the night.

Paulo nods his head. He throws the cigarette to the ground, squashing it. “Do ya come here every Friday night?” he asks suddenly.

John looks at him quizzically.

“I drove past here two Friday nights ago and saw ya sittin on the seat over there,” says Paulo, pointing across the park. “And you were sittin

there as if in a dream. And then the following Friday night, I drove past on my way into the city and saw ya again. Just sittin there.”

“Hmm,” says John. For twenty seconds, he remains silent, thinking. What will I say? “Hmm,” he says for a second time. “I do come here every Friday night,” he says blushing as if confessing a secret, “and just sit on the seat. I find it comforting.” He pauses then says, “I suppose that sounds a bit strange.”

Paulo shrugs his shoulders.

“But ever since my ex-...”. His words fade as he stares into the middle distance.

Paulo looks at John and frowns. For a minute, there is a long, drawn-out silence between them. Paulo senses a sadness enveloping John.

“Ever since my ex-lover, Mark, died about a year ago,” says John looking at Paulo. “Maybe a year and a half. The weeks and months fly by. This was where we met,” continues John pointing to his right. “The first time we met, we fucked on the seat that I was sitting on earlier tonight.”

“Do ya come here to remember, mate?” says Paulo.

“Hmmm,” says John, drawing out the word. For thirty seconds, he considers the question. “I suppose I do. I like to remember. I like thinking about the good times and the happiness we had together.”

“Does it help?” says Paulo, thinking he sounds like a social worker.

“Maybe it’s a part of my grieving,” says John. He shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t really know.” He gazes across the park. “At first, I asked myself that question and couldn’t come up with an answer. So after a while, I didn’t bother asking it any more.”

“Fair enough,” says Paulo nodding.

“Do you always ask such deep and meaningful questions at a beat?” asks John.

“Nah, not always,” says Paulo smirking. “At least, it’s better than askin guys what they do in the sack.” A moment later, he shivers and pulls his jacket around him. “Phew, it’s getting cold out here,” he says, his breath whitening the air.

John nods in agreement.

“Do you have cups and saucers at your place?” asks Paulo.

“Yes,” says John frowning. “Why?”

“And tea? And sugar?”

For a second time, John nods his head to both questions.

“Well mate, why don’t we go to your place for a good old-fashioned cuppa tea?” says Paulo, “and continue talkin there.”

For a moment, John thinks about Paulo’s suggestion. He decides it’s a great idea and says, “Okay, let’s go.”

The two men walk across the park to Paulo’s Volvo. John opens the passenger’s door and leans on the roof of the car. “Do you like milk in your tea?” he says, picturing two mugs on the kitchen table.

Paulo nods his head.

“Well, we’d better get milk on the way to my place then.”

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Peter Mitchell lives in the Rainbow Region, writing poetry, fiction, a range of journalism and literary criticism. He has been published in newspapers and journals, including *Australian Literary Studies*, *Campaign*, *New England Review* and *Sydney Star Observer*. From March to August 2007, he was mentored by Dr David Reiter (Interactive Press), working on poetry. Presently, he is writing a collection of poetry, *These Scarlet Moments*, memoir and literary criticism.





## Phil Scott

### A creature of habit

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**I have always been a creature of habit.** I plan my days and nights well ahead, and, like many gay men, I can easily get shitty if my plans are thrown out of kilter by circumstances beyond my control. Simon has often had to speak to me about it. He's just the opposite of course. "Let's drive somewhere," he'll say out of the blue. "Let's call in and visit so and so." Opposites attract, I can certainly vouch for that. Mostly I go along with his whims – after complaining first – but I still prefer things to be planned, so I can a) get excited or b) worry about arrangements in advance.

One cool morning towards the end of winter I had a mid-week flexi-day. I'd planned it down to the last second: gym, breakfast, newspaper, work on tax, cook mushroom risotto and watch a DVD. I'd lined up several choices of movie, to give Simon the impression he had some say in it. As long as he didn't decide all of a sudden we should eat out, which he could well do, then the whole day would be perfect.

I set off walking at a brisk pace, but I knew even before I reached the gym that things were going to go wrong. For a start I had a close call crossing the road with some P-plate driver, stupid idiot. You take your life in your hands, honestly! I was totally in the right, crossing with the lights. Then the weather, which had been fresh and bracing, changed its mind and decided to cloud over. I hadn't factored in rain – the report had predicted fine weather – so I'd brought no umbrella with me. A bloody nuisance: what if I had to buy one? The day instantly became warmer too, and sort of muggy. It was very peculiar, an early warning sign of our climate change problems no doubt.

But the gym was just as I like it, thank heavens: practically empty. The businessmen had been and gone, and the young mums were yet to arrive for their aerobics class. I changed clothes and plunged into my structured, unvarying routine. I spotted a guy I often chat to in the change room; I waved, but he was so engrossed in his exercises he didn't wave back.

So I got on with my program, finding everything terrifically easy for once. I even increased the weights I used – doubled them in fact – with no trouble at all. Way to go! I felt so pleased with myself. Regular gym work was evidently paying off after months of slogging away. I looked exactly the same, but felt a good ten years younger.

On top of the world, I hit the showers for a fierce, self-indulgent scrub. I would never do this at home, but when you're not paying the water bill yourself it's different, don't you think? God knows how long I showered; it must have been ages because my mind drifted off into dreamland. I thought about all kinds of things. For instance, I thought about the overseas trip we're planning, and about my parents (!), about Simon, even about sex. Well, that one's not so unusual under the shower.

A young guy I'd never seen at the gym before

was changing when I came back to the dressing room. Pale, thin but toned, with a mop of fine blonde hair, he sat there in a pair of white underpants, slowly removing his socks. I looked without staring, if you know what I mean. We didn't make eye contact; it's a silly unspoken rule in change rooms. After a while, it dawned on me that we'd met before, but I couldn't think where. I'm finding it much harder to "place" people these days.

The boy didn't seem to be going anywhere. I could not even tell if he was about to start his exercises or whether he'd finished. I was dressed and all ready to go, but felt a compulsive desire to break the golden rule and speak out loud. "Hi," I said. "Looks like a change coming in the weather." His reaction was weird, to say the least. He didn't look up, just shrugged slightly and sighed. And then quietly, almost to himself, he said, "John." My name!

"Sorry, do you know me?" I asked. "It's funny, I thought you looked familiar. Where did we...?" My question was left hanging in the air, because with an unexpected spurt of energy he stood up, whipped off his underpants, and strode away naked (and rather beautiful) in the direction of the showers. I simply stood there, open-mouthed. Was I supposed to follow? I'm hopeless in these random cruisy situations, completely at a loss without a ground plan. I waited – there was no sound of a shower running – then thought 'to hell with it', grabbed my bag and left.

Breakfast was next on the agenda. Unlike the gym, my favourite café was packed but I found a table for one in a dark, cramped corner. As I cast my eye over the menu (which I already knew by heart, but still read anyway) I mentally kicked myself for not going with the gym boy. He knew my name; we must have met at a party, or a work function more likely, and flirted a bit. I'm completely faithful to Simon, but once in a while your eye wanders. Nothing wrong with that, it means you're still alive!

And a bit of spice can do a relationship good, I really believe that. The odd thing was, the more I tried to pin him down, the more I thought I'd met this blonde guy a long time ago. Years ago, even. But that must have been somebody else; he was no more than 21.

I was brought back to reality when I noticed a whole new table of four had come in and been served since I'd been sitting there. Don't you hate that? How disorganised must a café be to serve their customers out of order? If I were running the place it would never happen. I smiled and waved discreetly at the nearest waitress. I suppose she must have seen me, but pretended like she hadn't because she wasn't ready to deal with me. I saw red: this was the last straw. "Fuck it!" I said loudly, and with a conspicuous show of grumpiness, I scraped my chair back, got up and walked out. No doubt I made a bit of a fool of myself, but I didn't care. Waitpersons ignore me at their peril.

I could have tried some other place but decided instead to head home, mainly because the sky was darker than ever. It was good to get home, too: here was I, on my day off, and I hadn't managed to relax yet. I put out some cat food for Piddles (an unfortunate but apt name for our old puss), turned the radio on and brewed myself a strong espresso. It was absolutely tasteless. Had Simon bought some different type of coffee beans recently? It would be just like him, even though it took me forever to find the ones I like best. The more I drank the stuff, the more I hated it. In fact, I spat it out. Then I began to feel ill, and incredibly tired. So this was why the day was working out so badly: I was getting sick. Typical, as soon as you have some free time it happens. And after feeling so healthy at the gym, too. I'd lost all my previous energy and could hardly drag myself upstairs to flop down on the bed.

I only intended to have a nanna nap – half an hour, tops – but when I woke up and glanced

casually out the window, I could see the pale rays of a setting sun. At least it wasn't raining. I checked the alarm clock: 5.30! I had been asleep all day. Well, I thought to myself, I must have needed it. Probably exercised a bit too hard on an empty stomach. It was still empty, I remembered, but I wasn't the least bit hungry. Even so, it was time to start preparing dinner: Simon would be back around 7.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I walked into the lounge room and there he was! "Oh, you're home early," I exclaimed. "Thanks for not waking me. You know, I've slept the whole bloody day away. Didn't do my tax or anything. I better get started on dinner. Pick out a DVD. There's a pile to choose from on the coffee table."

Simon didn't answer me. He was sitting on the couch with his hands in his lap, just staring at the floor, miles away. He looked awful.

"Is something wrong?" I asked. "Baby, what is it?"

He didn't move. Oh God, I couldn't deal with this on top of everything else.

"Is anything bothering you?" I snapped. No reply. "We're not speaking, is that it? Really, darling, I wish you would grow up. I don't know what I'm supposed to have done. Was it that boy in the gym? I didn't touch him! Fuck it, I wish I had, if you're going to carry on like this." Such behaviour was so unlike him; if anything, I'm the sooky one.

"Hey," I said, in a more tender tone of voice. "Stop it. If something's the matter, tell me. Hello? It's me!" I pulled him to his feet and put my arms around him. He started shaking. "Simon, what is it? Has something happened to Piddles? I didn't see her around anywhere. Has she eaten her food? That's the only thing I managed to get done today. Unbelievable."

His mobile rang.

"Oh leave it," I said. "Don't answer it now."

But he did, after checking the name on the screen. "Hi," he whispered in a throaty voice.



“Look... thanks for calling. I just wanted to let you know... John died this morning.”

What? What on earth was he doing? Playing some mean practical joke? I was speechless.

“Hit by a car,” he continued, taking a deep breath. “In a fucking pedestrian crossing... I know... I can’t really talk now, I just wanted to let you... no, I’ll be OK, really. I’ll call tomorrow... you too... yes, no, I’m sure, but thanks.”

Now we both just stood there. I was looking straight at him, but he wasn’t seeing me. I still couldn’t work out what was going on, but I knew I wanted him. I’d never wanted anyone or anything so much in my entire life. “I love you,” I said, and hugged him as tightly as I could. I stroked his hair and his neck, and ran one hand up and down his back, never relaxing my grip with the other. I rubbed myself up against him and felt him get hard. Then I led him back to the couch, laid him down gently and sort of levitated over him (which felt amazing). While I kept on kissing and stroking him, he opened his pants and slowly started to bring himself to a climax. I concentrated as hard as I could, clearing everything else out of my mind. “Us, you and me, Simon and John,” I whispered, over and over and over again. Waves of something like a low-level electric pulse rippled through my body. Now I was almost floating away, but I grabbed onto his shoulders to anchor me, and I felt the weird electric pulse surging through him too. When he began moaning, I knew he was ready to come. I pressed my lips hard into his neck and kept them there.

He lurched, and cum flew everywhere. (One of my favourite moments; he’s always so sweet and vulnerable just then!) His body went limp. Sinking back into the cushions, he took a breath and burst into tears, grimacing and whimpering in a way I had never seen before. I held his hand and stroked him lightly. “I love you,” I repeated. “You’ll be all right,

baby. Don’t cry. Hey! I love you.”

After a while the tears stopped, at least temporarily. He closed his eyes. He must have been very tired.

I tried to stand. My feet wouldn’t touch the floor properly and I couldn’t see very well either. Something was radically wrong but it didn’t seem to matter. “Look, I think I’ll take a nap,” I said to him. “Don’t let me sleep too long, OK?” And with a fair degree of difficulty I wandered upstairs, slipped into bed, and blacked out.

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Phillip Scott is a musician and actor, as well as writer. He has had four novels published: *One Dead Diva*, *Gay Resort Murder Shock*, *Get Over It* (renamed *Mardi Gras Murders* in the US), and *It's About Your Friend*. He currently writes a weekly column for Sydney's gay paper *SX*.



## Mal Path

### The fit of the stretch

**Sam stares at the television.** Five hundred channels and nothing to watch, and he hates that; he knows it's a cliché, and that makes him hate it even more. He clicks it off, sets the remote control down on the arm of the sofa, and continues to stare at the television. Forlornly, he rests his head against the sofa's arm. The top of his head bumps the remote, which brushes back and forth once against his hair before it clatters to the floor and skitters across the floorboards. Sam raises his head to regard it. He reaches for it, but even stretching, it's too far away.

A knock at the door interrupts his meditation on the inadequacy of his mutant powers, the stubborn refusal of the cosmos to bring the remote to him through the force of his own mind and desire.

Sam glances at the door. Stares at it a moment.

Perversely, the door declines his invitation to open.

With a sigh, Sam swings his sock-shod feet onto the floor, wraps the comforter around him as he stands, and pads over to the door. He closes one eye, puts the other to the peephole, and finds himself winking behind the closed door at Aidan.

Winking, actually, at Aidan's eye. Which is flush up against the peephole from the other side. Too close to see, almost; Sam knows more than sees that it's Aidan.

He undoes the chain, slides back the deadbolt with an audible click, turns the knob to crack the door open, and pads back to the sofa. He curls up and looks at something better than television – Aidan is standing in the doorway, halogen lighting melting into the sheen of sweat on his torso, making him sort of glow.

Sam's gaze travels up Aidan's body to his face, lingering on the gentle curve of lips, flickering up to be caught and held in Aidan's eyes.

"Saw your light on," Aidan says at last. "Thought I'd drop in."

"Yeah," Sam says, and wonders why he said anything at all, and can't think what else to say.

Aidan doesn't say anything, either. He runs his hand through his hair, shaping and reshaping the damp curls absently; Sam follows his hand as it drops down to rest on his waistband, thumb hooking inside, dragging it down a little more, the curled lizard on his hip almost fully revealed.

Aidan is glowing so much, it is almost obscene.

Sam would like to make Aidan's glow completely obscene.

His eyes move back to Aidan's, and he still doesn't know what to say.

Aidan still doesn't know what to say, either. But he doesn't need words as he kicks off his sandals to come barefoot across the bare floorboards to Sam.

Sam tucks up his feet, knees bent, arms wrapped around them, to make room on the sofa for Aidan.

Aidan looks at the empty space that Sam has just made for him on the sofa. Then he looks at Sam.

And smiles.

Sam's caught in Aidan again, in Aidan's smile and Aidan's eyes, and Aidan's hands, unwrapping the blanket. Aidan's hands adjusting the curve of Sam's body, not straightening him but shifting him, so that Aidan can fit with Sam on the sofa.

Aidan wraps the blanket around them, wraps himself around Sam. Aidan's foot nudges under the bottom hem of Sam's jeans. Aidan's toes slide up over Sam's socks, try to hook inside them like Aidan's thumb in Aidan's jeans.

Sam closes his eyes, pretends that Aidan's toe is Aidan's thumb, and Sam's sock is Aidan's jeans, and does that make Sam's foot Aidan's cock? Sam isn't sure, but it makes him laugh a little.

"Does that tickle?" Aidan asks, his breath warm against Sam's ear.

Sam isn't sure whether Aidan wants it to tickle or not; he steels himself for a tickle fight as he answers, "No ..."

Aidan's breath is still warm against Sam's ear; Aidan's breathing without speaking, and his



toe worms under the elastic of Sam's sock, hooks in and pulls down. Aidan's foot loses its hold a couple of times, slips out and Aidan grunts softly each time, hooks in again. Keeps at it until he's worked Sam's sock down to his ankle, all of Aidan's toes hooked in now to pull Sam's sock over his heel.

Sam's toes wiggle when Aidan's set them free.

Aidan's toes skim over Sam's foot, the callus on the underside of his big toe abrading pleasantly; Sam is on the edge of a purr when Aidan's toes touch his, nudge and wedge between them, fitting their toes together.

It's not a perfect fit. Aidan's feet are bigger, and he's stretching Sam.

But the imperfection, the stretch, the fullness of it all makes Sam purr.

It's Aidan's turn to laugh a little now: he laughs, and licks his laughter onto Sam's purr, caressing Sam's throat with his tongue.

Sam tilts his head back, lets Aidan's tongue elicit more purrs until Sam is moaning, wiggling his toes with and against Aidan's, hooking his fingers into Aidan's waistband like his fingers are Aidan's toes and Aidan's jeans are Sam's sock, and Aidan's cock is something that may not fit perfectly, but it's the imperfection and the stretch and the fullness that Sam wants.

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Born in Manhattan, Mallory Path has lived in and around Los Angeles since earning a Master's in Film & Television Studies from UCLA. Mal's fiction has seen light of day with *Forbidden Fruit* magazine, and is forthcoming from Torquere Press and Iris Print's \*Queer Magic\*. Email is most welcome: [mallory.path@gmail.com](mailto:mallory.path@gmail.com).



## John Bartlett

### The man I love

“one day he’ll come along, the man I love...”

**Things weren’t always like this**, you know. I used to have a normal home with two parents (and that was pretty unusual considering most of my friends), two sisters and all that stuff, but it all dropped in a hole the night my old man ploughed his car into the back of a garbo truck with no lights on his way home late from work.

Yeah he sold life insurance so we used to have loads of cash and a good house and I was doing second year media studies. Can you imagine the silly bugger sold life insurance but he forgot to pay his own premium? Basically we were stuffed with no income. Mum’d never worked in her life, and Dad had always done everything for her, and anyway she was pretty out of it. I had to leave Uni and get the first job I could to keep things going and then there was Jenny and Bethy my two sisters to put through school. Here I was suddenly chopping up fucking carrots in a kitchen, up to my elbows in stinking greasy saucepans and trying not to listen to the ranting chef whose brain must have been cooked by being so close to the stove all the time.

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Carrots julienne sure as hell weren't going to pay all the bills. I knew I had to get a better job eventually or find some money.

Next thing I know—it must have been only a couple of months and Mum's getting these visits from one of Dad's mates, a real prick he was, he'd always had his eye on her if you ask me. He had a pointy nose and big hairy eyebrows and me and the girls called him the Werewolf. I remember when he used to call by to pick up Dad for a drink, he'd come over all sweet and soppy to Mum while Dad was out of the room. He used to look at her as if he wanted to gobble her up. It used to make me sick and after Dad died he kept calling in, bringing red roses, how bloody clichéd can you get? Romantic crap. I couldn't stand it.

Well eventually we had to sell the house—it had a huge mortgage—and next thing we've moved in with the werewolf and his two sons. I think his wife'd left him years ago. Would you blame her?

Why did I go with them? I guess I thought I had to keep an eye on Mum, didn't trust the prick and that's when our troubles started. This prick's sons were little pricks too, a few years younger than me but they still treated me like shit. They both went to Trinity College so they were so far up themselves it's a wonder they could see daylight.

I was just the fucking stepbrother to them. When Mum wasn't around they'd call me the kitchen slut especially when I came home from Giovanni's restaurant after scrubbing filthy saucepans all day, smelling of grease and my hands red and bloated from being in hot water for hours.

They'd leave the kitchen looking like shit deliberately because they knew I'd clean it up.

Mum was still spaced out, drinking a bit and didn't seem to notice the mess. Somebody had to do it.

Why didn't I sort them out? I guess I didn't want to make things worse for Mum and the girls. I'm a bit of a peacekeeper like my old man was. I'd like to have been like him but now that he wasn't around it was a bit hard to know the best thing to do from day to day.

Sometimes I used to go and sit on his grave and just talk to him about how stuffed up it all was and what I should do. I promised him I'd look after Mum and told him what a fucking idiot he was for not paying the insurance when he should have and saving us all from having to live in the prick house. Of course he never said anything back, like he never did anyway when he was alive.

I used to go out for a bit of fun though when I could. I wasn't just the good little houseboy. Mostly I'd go down to the Purple Pumpkin and dance a bit have a few drinks and drop a couple of 'e's if I could score some. Sometimes you could even have a real conversation. Occasionally there were a few mates from Uni there and I didn't want to lose contact with that part of my life. I knew one day I wanted to go back and finish uni, even maybe transfer to philosophy. Life had suddenly turned me into a bit of a philosopher and maybe I'd be able to make a living out of it.

Well I was down at the Pumpkin a few weeks ago and having a pretty hot night. I'd dropped an e and I was out of it, sort of dancing on my own and every now and then somebody'd join in, a guy or a woman, it didn't really matter. The Pumpkin was pretty wobbly like that. You'd be dancing with some chick that had been giving you the eye and then next minute she was a he.



I didn't care. I just kept dancing and waiting for the miracle that'd get me outa the shit my life was in.

Anyway, I was dancing with my eyes closed, really out of it and when I opened them there was this guy dancing up real close to me and looking at me sort of funny. I didn't give a stuff really. I'm one for trying everything once and he was a pretty hot looking guy too. After a while we both took a break and he wanted to buy me a drink. We sat in one of those dark little corners and nursed a couple of drinks. Turns out he was a pretty interesting guy. His name was Prince (clichéd isn't it?). He'd dropped out of Uni years ago too and started making small docs on anything that interested him — rave parties, rock bands, black magic and some other pretty weird stuff. Seems there was money to be made if you found the market and he had. I was blown away by his stories. We danced a bit more and he seemed to be pretty keen to meet up again. I wasn't sure. This was new territory for me and maybe I was getting into something I couldn't manage. I'm a bit of a control freak and I panicked. I said I had to go to the bog for a piss and bolted instead. Had to wait half an hour down the road for a taxi and I kept thinking he was going to cruise by and see me.

I felt a bit of a heel really. He was a nice bloke, interesting and like he'd already done more than most of the people I knew my age. Why had I done a runner? He was on my mind all week while I chopped the vegies and tried not to listen to the chef calling me a scumbag because the carrot julienne were cut too big or to my prick of a stepfather telling me I ought to get a decent job that paid better (and him 'in between jobs' as he used to say, useless bastard) and Mum looking guilty all the time

because she couldn't understand how she'd got herself into such a shitty situation. It was true though. If I got a better job, maybe we could all move out and leave the prick family to themselves.

I went back to the Purple Pumpkin. I couldn't stay away. It was the only time the whole week I had to myself. Of course Prince was there and I thought he'd call me an arse-hole for pissing off the last time. We just danced together most of the night and if anybody else tried to muscle in, he'd just say: 'Piss off mate, he's with me.' We didn't say much that night but I felt pretty good being around him. Maybe something was happening to me. I've always liked chicks but maybe guys did it for me too. We stayed til closing time and Prince wanted to drive me home. I didn't want him to know where I lived or meet up with any of the prick family. These were two completely different parts of my life and I wanted to keep them separate. There was a special rave party happening later in the week and I agreed to meet him there.

When I thought about it while I was scraping burnt tomatoes off a tray, I decided I must be crazy. How could a nice guy like him want to be involved with someone like me and my stuffed up family? But I couldn't stop myself going back. I even used some of my week's wages to buy myself a new shirt with this gold and silver thread worked into it, which sparkled when it caught the light. I thought I looked pretty cool.

'Trying to score are you?' sneered one of the stepbrother pricks. 'Keep to the kitchen slags. They'll screw anything not bolted down, even you.' I should have punched out his lights then but thought I'd bide my time. My chance would come and I didn't want to make things harder for Mum.

This was a massive rave with six DJs and the music was fantastic. Prince and I danced together all night, til my new shirt was soaking with sweat and he made me take it off. We'd both dropped some good gear and were riding high. That night I thought I could take over the world and deal with all the pricks, no worries and look after my mum and sisters too. Somehow that's how I felt when I was with Prince. When the drugs wore off though I felt different. How could an intelligent, good-looking guy like Prince be interested in a dead-beat like me? I lost it again and when he was buying me a drink I hightailed it out of there. Shit! I'd got halfway home when I realised I'd left my new shirt behind with my ID in the pocket. The shirt had cost me forty bucks but I didn't want to go back. I couldn't face Prince after running out on him already once before. He'd think I was a weak bastard. But now he had my phone number and started texting me, saying he had my shirt and wallet and could drop them off at my place. I wanted to see him but it all seemed too hard so I piked out and didn't reply. I never went back to the Pumpkin either but all I could think of most of the time was Prince and how I'd let him down. I'd get over it I thought.

Then one day a couple of weeks later, I came home from work and Jenny was in the lounge reading some teenybopper magazine. She looked up as soon as I came in and said: 'Your boyfriend was here but the Werewolf told him you don't live here any more.' She went back to her magazine as if she'd just said the most normal thing in the world. She's only thirteen but I realised she'd just said something I hadn't been able to say to myself the whole time. Prince and I did have something going and I'd lose it if I didn't do something about it. Being the strong silent type like my father wasn't going to get me anywhere.

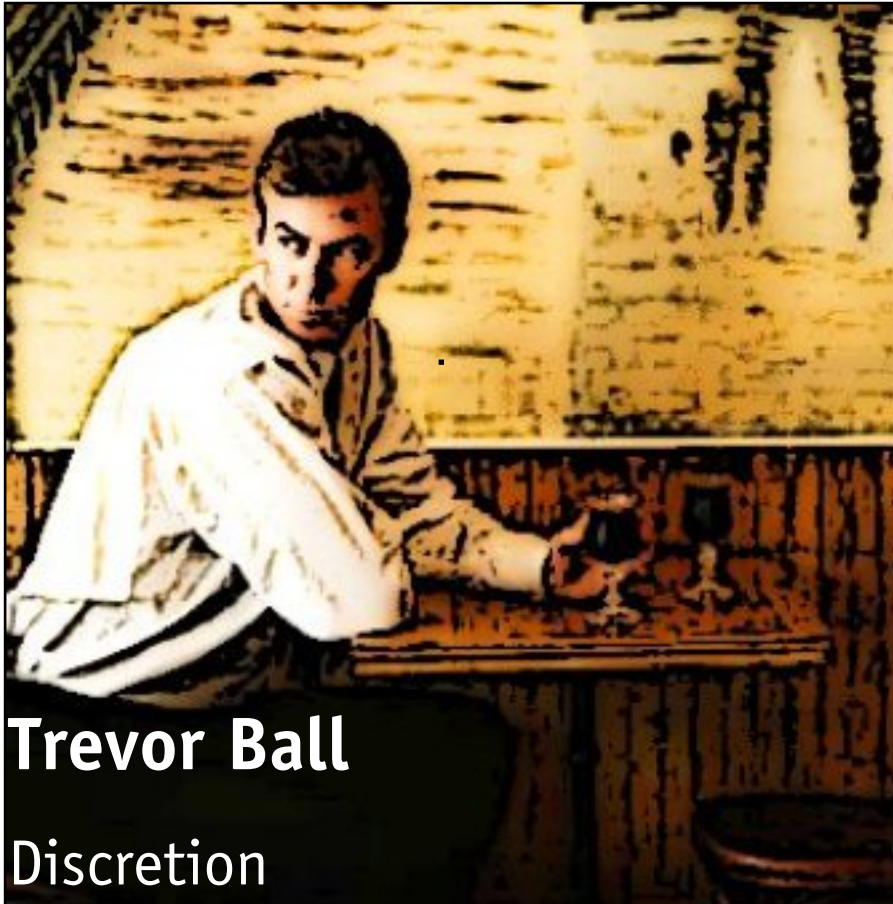
I went down to the Pumpkin that night and there he was waiting as if he expected me. 'I've

got your ID mate. Do you want it?' he says like I'd just walked out the door five minutes before.

I haven't moved in with him yet and I'm still looking out for my Mum but we've got plans for next year when I go back to finish media studies. I know it's not exactly a happily ever after ending but mate this is the twenty-first century after all. What do you expect?

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John Bartlett teaches professional writing at Deakin University and works as a freelance editor and manuscript assessor. When he gets time he likes to write short stories and is addicted to chocolate. His first novel 'Towards a Distant Sea' was released in 2005.



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## Trevor Ball

### Discretion

**“Discretion, that’s the secret to this business, you have to be discrete,”** proclaimed the boy in the suit, as he sat down and helped himself to my Whopper Burger and fries.

We had played eye tag for only a limited time, taking turns at throwing looks and catching stares. Feeling free, and with nothing else to do, I invited him over with my coy, come hither look. Although perplexed by the boy’s opening line, and his intrusion into my Meal Deal, my ego soared, assured that even in an unwashed, dishevelled state, I could still catch a man.

“Right, I’ll remember that,” I replied, unsure of what else to say, to my pretty stranger. He was a couple of years younger than I, well built, and made in Scotland, as far as I could tell. He was a handsome talker and I liked the sound of his voice.

“What’s your name lad?” he asked, sounding like inspector Plod.

“Trevor,” spilling the first name I could invent, and as the fates



would have it, was no alias, "And yours?"

"Simon, like in 'Simon Says', but I'm saying nowt," he declared, as he slurped my Cherry Cola, "'cos I know how to be discreet." He filled his face with fries, "You don't tell nobody your business, you can't trust no one these days."

"Obviously," I agreed, amazed at how quickly this grinning imp had devoured most of my lunch. I was muted by hunger and disbelief.

After a very pregnant and laboured pause, he gave birth to a question. "Do you like my suit jacket?" he asked with his whole face. He was so eager to be pleased.

"Yeah, I like navy blue," I lied.

"It's Italian, unnatural fibres, not cheap," he said with obvious pride, "I'm very metropolitan you know."

"Metropolitan?"

"Very international me, stylish."

"Really?"

"Aye, look at me shoes, best leather, it's genuine panda, from China, one of a kind."

"Really!" attempting to sound impressed.

"The shirt's silk, do you like it?"

"Yes, very stylish."

"Real nice, cost more than 20 quid! It feels nice too," caressing his white shirt, "Do you want to have a feel?" he invited with a mischievous grin.

"No, no thanks mate, she'll be right," I replied with as much antipodean masculinity that I could muster on a empty belly. Although my curiosity was aroused, the puritan queen in me screamed caution. "*This boy is N.Q.R, he's Not Quite Right!*"

"You're an Aussie aren't you? I'm good with accents, I watch Neighbours, never miss it. I like that Kylie. I can do the locomotion." He started moving to the music in his head and then burst into song, "Come on, come on, do the locomotion with me, come on baby do the loco..." I quickly interrupted his little kareoke number.

"Actually, I'm a Kiwi," I said with subdued dignity as I looked around to see if his performance had drawn attention, hopefully by someone with food.

"What, like the fruit, small, furry and green?"

"Yeah, something like that." He eyed my large, green, backpack, resting after several weeks around Europe.

"Nah, with a bag like that on your back, you're more like one those Ninja turtles. I hope you didn't go to Greece, they eat turtles over there you know."

This boy may be mad and a junk food hog, but I decided that he was free entertainment and I relaxed to enjoy the show

"Did I tell you that I was in the building trade?"

"No."

"Well I'm not. I'm not an architect or anything like that."

"Right," attempting to hide my bemused confusion.

"I met one once, nice bloke, I helped him out."

"With his etchings, no doubt," I offered as the penny thundered to the ground.

"Do you want to know what I really do? Do you? I wouldn't usually tell strangers my business, but you look like you've got an open mind. You've got a nice face, honest like," he leaned forward as if to whisper, "I'm self employed, I'm a businessman, I help blokes out, I'm in stress management, I provide recreational and relaxation services."

I smiled with my renewed interest.

"I charge a nominal fee depending on the required service...you know what I mean? It's good money, but you've gotta be..."

"Discreet," I volunteered.

"Aye! Discreet!"

After a pause of no real time he asked expectantly, "Are you gay pal?"

"Yeah mate, I am."

“Thought you were, you were looking at me funny.”

“Yeah, I do that sometimes.”

“I’m not gay,” he declared with an earnest conviction, “It’s just my job. I’d rather do woman but blokes are just easier and they’ve always got money.”

I kept on smiling with my honest like face. “Must be very interesting work, eh?”

“Yeah, not every punters the same, like doing different things, variety is the spice of life, and I’m allspice. So what do you do?”

“Sorry, what?”

“To earn your crust?”

“Oh, I’m a dish washer.”

“Really, where do they plug you in?” He asked with a wicked laugh.

“Actually, I haven’t been plugged for a while,” I replied, beginning to enjoy the banter.

“You’re kind of cute,” he said as he fingered my onions rings, “You could earn a bit of money with looks like that.”

I went coy and changed colour.

“The punters like them young, how old are you pal? Seventeen, eighteen?”

“A wee bit older than that.”

“Really, you must be a midget then.”

“Thanks!”

“I could teach you a few tricks, earn a quid or two, you only need to do a few punters a week and you’re loaded. It’s better than cleaning up for some fat bastard in a dirty kitchen.”

“Yeah, well, how many fat bastards would I have to do, eh?”

“It’s all in the advertising sunshine, I do well ’cos I take pride in my appearance. I look classy, don’t I?”

“Yeah, real classy.” My tongue surfed the inside of my cheeks.

“Well,” with despondency in his voice, “At least I’m not like some of those dirty junkies on the street. Smelly slags. They’d do anything and anyone for a packet of smokes and a hit of

something nasty. I look after myself, make sure I look good, I shower and shave and I don’t do drugs. No, I don’t shoot up, I suit up!”

“Yeah, best to stay away from drugs, eh.” I agreed, [unless prescribed by a qualified psychiatrist]. I surveyed the restaurant and wondered if Burger King had a doctor in the house, drugs for my stranger and fries for me!

“Come on,” he said, pulling at my woolly jumper, “I can give you a free demonstration on how to pick up a punter.”

I pondered his curious invitation for a moment, and before the puritan queen in me could stamp out any fun I might have, I had picked up my pack and followed this strange boy, out of Burger King and onto the Piccadilly parade.

\* \* \* \*

“Okay, now remember, you gotta be discreet,” he said loudly to beat the noise of the pigeons, and the passing people, “If you look like you’re on the game, you’ll scare the punters off. Right, now you stand over there.” He pointed like some Hollywood director to a spot some distance away. “Now you just watch me.”

I looked on as he leaned against the dirty glass front of Burger King, next to the poster advertising Double Whopper Burgers with extra cheese. He struck a familiar pose, that nonchalant James Dean stance, with one leg bent touching the wall, while the other held ground. His pelvis moved back and forth gyrating, no doubt to some Kylie track still playing in his head. He had a seriously sexual look on his face, lips pronounced, his eyes fixed on the passing parade like a hunter in a zoo, no flicker of humour in his well practised smile.

My eyes, distracted for a moment, caught the city crowd. Almost running, in black and white and dirty greyed colours, as if escaping from the falling sky and closing time in London. I looked

hard for the punters, rejecting the odd smile from the passing men I considered too handsome to be paying trade. The craziness of this adventure filled my brain with euphoria. Who needs skiing in the Swiss Alps when you can have a sleazy afternoon in Piccadilly.

“Oi, you, look at me, I’m over here,” yelled my instructor, obviously annoyed at my loss of concentration. In moments, no more than seconds, this discrete boy had attracted some attention. I looked on, held back my manic urge to laugh, as the pigeons had surrounded him like some old statue. “Come over here, it’s your turn,” he demanded. I stumbled forward, clutching my pack. “Now, did you get the look on me face, did you?”

“Yeah, that kind of sexy, constipated look,” I said grinning as I relaxed my guard some what.

“Wha... you taking the Mickey?” he challenged with a disturbed look on his face, thrust too close to mine for complete comfort.

“Sorry it's just a...”

“A joke, right. Well leave the jokes to me, okay? This is dead serious pal, you got to get the look right, or else you’ll starve, not that it would do you any harm to lose a bit!”

“Thanks!”

“Now do you think you can do the face?”

“Not sure but I’ll give it a go.” I held my head back, swallowed my cheeks to expose the bones and pressed my lips tight as if sucking on a bitter fruit. It was a face worthy of a Vogue cover.

“That’s not very sexy,” he said with clear disdain, “Put your teeth back in pal, you look like me gran in the morning and she’s been dead for years. To look sexy, you gotta think sexy, right?”

“Right,” I replied, beginning to feel like an apprentice in a whore factory.

“You gotta think sucking, you gotta think ...”

“Yeah I get the idea,” I blurted out. The puritan queen had put a halt on the ensuing lewd details.

She had agreed to play along but please no vulgarities. “Okay, I’ll give it another go,” I relaxed the look and thought about sex – my dark, sordid, sexual history, of hot encounters and drunken escapades with strangers. I remembered moments of awkward manoeuvres, of flinging arms and legs and failing mechanisms and too many missions, bloody impossible. I thought about the lessons valuably learnt, like that Deep Heat is a crap lubricant and that creamed honey in pubic hair is not very sexy.

The things I had done just to have an orgasm would even make the Pope laugh out loud. The more I thought of my misadventures, the more of a giggling mess I became. The pigeons critiqued my performance, bitched and scattered.

“Stop laughing, you nob,” yelled the boy, “sex is serious!”

“Sorry, but I don’t think I can do this sober,” I answered, recovering as the memories of my far from serious sex life began to fade.

“Well, do you want to go for a pint then?”

“Beer!”

“Aye, we could go to the White Lion, it’s not far, might be a few punters there and drinks are free if you play the game right.”

My taste buds, too dry for too long, jumped inside my throat, “*Beer, Beer, Beer,*” they chanted, “*say yes,*” they yelled, deafening the mumbling doubts of the over cautious puritan queen.

“Yeah I could do with a beer.” I agreed, hiding my excitement of future intoxication. I threw my pack onto my back, losing balance for a moment.

“Do you want me carry your pack for you, free of charge like,” he offered. I quickly declined and succeeded in my third attempt. Looking and feeling like a turtle, I ventured forward.

\* \* \* \*



My senses sucked in the frantic surroundings and fuelled my crazed euphoria. Diesel and dirt invaded my nostrils, screaming cars and a thousand conversations all merged in my ears, as some grand symphony, while the schizophrenic neon lights danced in the twilight, for me alone.

My guide led the way. He said he had a preference for back alleys and so after walking against the current of the ever expanding mass of people, we hit upon a dark and dubious lane.

"It's just down there and a bit to the left." His voice gave away a lack of confidence in his navigation skills.

"Are you sure, 'cos you know, any beer will do!" My taste buds had taken over my vocal chords.

"Yes," snapped the boy in defence, "Well, maybe it's a little further down to the right."

We walked down the lane, past graffiti stained walls and vacant cardboard homes, without speaking for a time.

"Does your mother know?" he asked as I cautiously followed behind.

"Know what?"

"You know, about you being..."

"In London?"

"No, you being a queer and all."

"Yeah, she knows, I told her just before I left home."

"How did she take it?"

"Don't know, I boarded the plane straight after."

"My mum would skin me alive if she knew that I..."

"Was a queer?" I challenged.

"No!" he protested loudly, "I'm no queer, OK?"

"Sure." I slowed down my pace.

"It's just me job, it's just how I get to live in London, OK?"

"Absolutely."

We carried on in an awkward silence, like

some old married couple after a tizzy fit. Maybe it was not so wise to raise such issues with a strange man, down a dark alley, on a late afternoon in London. I kept a little distance in case serious running away was required. I had become somewhat lost in my orientation and obviously so was my guide.

"Are we there yet?" I chirped, trying desperately to bring back the comic banter.

"NO!"

"Are we are there yet?"

"NO!"

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"Are we..."

"No, but it's not so far," Simon replied with a smile.

\* \* \* \*

The bar was dark, dingy and empty, except for a few pissed pensioners and a hostile looking barman. It stank of disinfectant, tobacco smoke and old men's pee. The jukebox with it's exploding lights and blaring beat of "I'm too sexy", struggled to create anything remotely sexy. In the corner a man in a pink striped shirt, that barely covered his expanding gut, danced a little, and smiled as he leered at me through his thick rimmed glasses.

"Are you sure that this is the place?" I asked nervously. It was difficult not to hide my disappointment. It was not the private gentleman's club with Victorian décor, that had formed in my head. It was not the elite establishment that catered only for the select, wealthy homosexual gentleman. No, it was just another pub and at this time in the afternoon, it was very tragic.

"Aye," said Simon, "It's early yet."

I went straight to the bar and ordered my beer, guzzling the amber liquid right down. My taste buds, wet with the stuff, cried out for more.

“Oi, where’s mine? Make it a Guinness, a pint,” demanded the boy.

“A Guinness!” My hand went down to my pocket and started counting coins. Enough for a half-pint for me and a whole pint for him. It is a cruel world some days.

“Aye, consider it the cost of your tuition.”

“Right, tuition.” Obviously my burger, chips and onion rings did not go far towards tuition fees.

The barman kept me waiting for our second round. He had no other customers. I suspected that he was perfecting his shite service, before the imminent rush.

“The punters will start getting here soon,” said Simon as he surveyed the dimness while delicately sipping his stout. “Aye, any time now. Us boys, we sit upstairs, in the mezzanine bar, while the punters stay down here. It gets real bitchy up there, us boys fighting over the punters. Some are big tippers and live in big fancy houses. Some are right vicious wankers. You gotta be choosy now days.”

“I’ll remember that.” My second beer went down filling my belly with a wet warmth. My mind went into a comfortable haze and I was lost in thought, relaxed in the over familiar tragedy of yet another gay bar. After four weeks around Europe, this was almost a home coming. I looked at my new companion, still surveying the room expectantly, and wondered what place he called home.

“You like me, don’t you,” Simon announced as he caught me looking. He moved closer and almost touched my stray hand.

“Yeah, we get on okay,” I cautiously replied.

“Well, I like you too, I could even fall for you!” It may have been the beer which made Simon squeal affection but his intentions were clear.

“I thought you weren’t queer!”

“I’m not, but I might make an exception.”

“Thanks, you know how to make a boy feel special.”

He looked reflective for a moment.

“We could get a place.”

“A place, for what?”

“Aye, a place, me and you, a little semi detached in the suburbs.”

“Um, right,” I had thought that he was offering something quick and easy and forgettable, but somewhere this boy had made giant steps into Gaga Land. I suspected that it was he that was a little semi-detached and had recently escaped from some Scottish suburb.

“We can look after each other, we could take turns!”

“What?” I doubted very much that it had anything to do with household chores.

“Aye, take turns with the business, one week on, one week off like. Work from home, it’s shite out on the streets in winter, it gets real nasty.”

“You mean doing...”

“Aye I mean doing the business, in the privacy of our own little palace.”

“Oh.”

“I like you, and you like me. I’ll even let you do me for free.”

“Between the punters?” What an offer.

“Aye we can keep each other warm in the frosty mornings.”

“Um, yeah, that’s an idea.” With hot porridge for afters no doubt. Although only slightly affected, the wild adventurer in me, bowed and exited, as the over cautious puritan queen pushed forward, screaming, “*enough is enough is enough!*”

“I’ll have to think about that,” I said with a forced smile.

“We could go shopping at Marks and Spencers, and ...”

“Simon.”

“We could go dancing or just stay home and watch the box.”

“Simon!”

“Aye?”

“Simon, I need to go to the loo.”

“Well I’m not stopping you, it’s over there.” he pointed towards the Gents in the darkness. I picked up my pack and started to move.

“Eh, I can look after your pack,” he invited.

“No, she’ll be right mate, she’ll be right.”

I never made it to the Gents, with it’s grinning, top hatted, silhouette on the door. It gave me a wink as I took the exit instead and left the White Lion and Simon behind. I wasn’t quite ready to play his game of Simon Says. Walking quickly, I stopped only for a moment to look back. Had my little adventure come to an end? Yes, the boy was not in hot pursuit. I laughed out loud, what a way to waste a Friday afternoon.

\* \* \* \*

Six months later, in the Gents of the Blue Oyster Club, a notoriously queer night club in Edinburgh, I heard a strange and yet familiar Scottish voice calling out from behind me, “Eh, Kiwi!”

I turned to find Simon standing there, in front of the exit door. Stunned for a moment, with slowly rising anxiety, I asked loudly, in my own head, “*Has he followed me after all, secretly stalking me, all the way to Edinburgh!*”

“Simon, isn’t it?” I replied in cautious tones.

“Aye, but the name’s Stuart, actually. Simon was my alias, it was just a name that went better with the suit.”

Gone was the navy blue blazer and the silk shirt. Instead he wore tight fitting blue jeans, a thick black belt, big black boots, and a white tee shirt which showed off his many attributes, which I hadn’t fully valued when we first met.

“So what brings you to Edinburgh?” I asked suspiciously.

“This is my home town. I am Scottish you know!”

“Oh yes, of course, Simon.” I was beginning to feel embarrassed about my quick exit.

“It’s Stuart.”

“Stuart, sorry. Sorry about leaving without saying goodbye, it was just ...”

“Och, forget it,” he said firmly, “Please, just forget about it. Was all shite anyway.”

“The thing is ...”

“I told you to forget about it. It was all shite. I wasn’t on the game at all, so don’t tell me mates that I was, alright?”

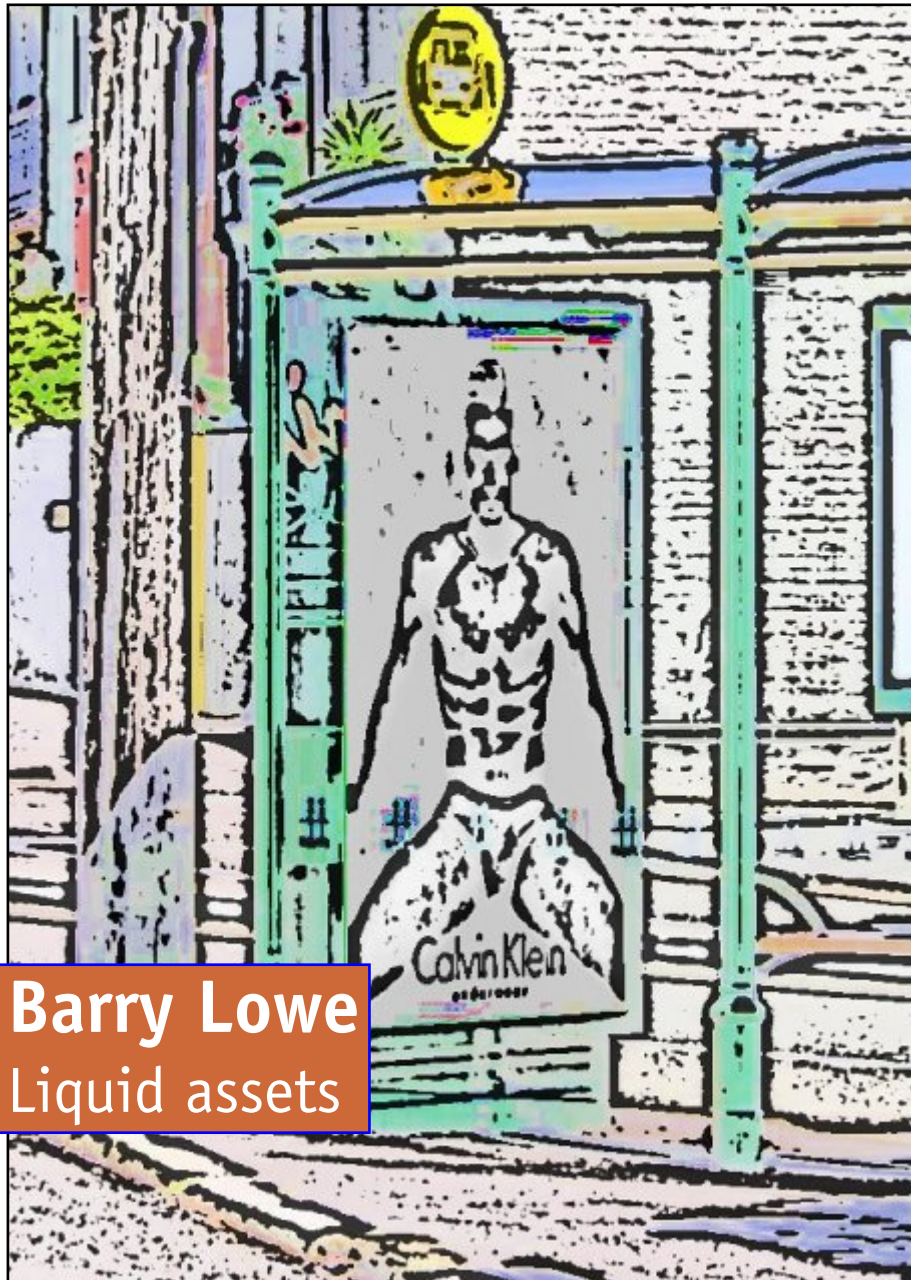
“Right,” I quickly replied.

This was not to be a friendly reunion. He moved away from the door so as to let me through and as we passed each other with our bodies close, eyes fixed on the other, I gently touched him on the shoulder and whispered, “No problem Stuart, I know how to be discreet.”

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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.





**Barry Lowe**  
Liquid assets

Modified photo ©2007 L. McKinnon

**Menken was a queer cunt.** I don't mean in that all-encompassing we-are-family new age definition shit. No, I mean in that pre-PC way – bent, oddball, downright deviant. Lots of people said so. Not me though. I thought it. But never out loud. After all, Menken's me mate.

The problem, if you can call it that, came to a head with the appearance on bus shelters of the Calvin Klein ads for yuppie men's underwear. You know, the impossibly good looking guys with stomachs that make washboards puke with envy. Impossibly good looking and impossibly up themselves.

- I reckon I could have him, Menken said one night when we were fucking about waiting for the bus to take us into the city.

- No way! Sometimes Menken went too far even for me, though in

all the years I've known him I've never been able to prove him wrong.

We went to school together. Near city high, once a slum, now yuppified and fuckin' trendy. Didn't make our lives any the better except some of the rich dudes moving into the area liked rough trade and Menken used to get his cock sucked for pocket money. He had more ready cash at school than any of us.

Sometimes he'd take me along and some old guy would chow down on my unquenchable teenage hard-on while his mate tried to tame Menken's. All I ever wanted to do was get down on my knees and take care of Menken myself.

I broached the subject. Once.

- Nah, mate, he said. We're mates. And mates don't do that sort of thing.

Although time did not lessen my ardour for Menken, my drive for gratification grew less relentless and, perhaps, more discerning. Not so, Menken. His single-minded pursuit of orgasm left few orifices unplanted with his seed. It seemed only mine would remain fallow.

I'd even attempted subterfuge by lingering at one of the sex shops he frequented in the hope his fragrant cock would be pushed through the glory hole that a considerate management had cut in the walls of its video booths.

But wouldn't you know it? Menken hears about a great new hot spot and decides for the first time in a millennium to break his routine. I consoled myself by suctioning dry the overflowing gonads of a good half dozen or more that were poked my way.

Never point a cock at me unless you intend to use it.

So, I guess you could say Menken and me exuberantly celebrated our youthful sexuality. Only difference being I was on the lookout for love which had scrupulously avoided me up to that point. And Menken thought love was irrelevant. Obsession was okay but that wasn't love in his book. It was a perfume. Anyway,

Menken's obsessions lasted only as long as it took him to impale them on his dick. Usually closing time. Sometimes he'd stay over but he would always leave before breakfast.

- I hate all that kissing and shit before they've cleaned the stale come off their teeth, was his excuse.

The only exception I'd ever know him to make was Ada, the Aboriginal tranny who was partial to Menken. Menken had gone over to Ada's and stayed not only for breakfast but for lunch as well. That was when things had been rotten at home. His old man spewed out this filth about Menken's "lifestyle" which he'd found out about after some less than discreet yuppie poofers in the area began turning up at the door to be serviced or left unambiguous monetary messages on his old man's answering machine. I told Menken to get a fuckin' mobile.

His mum had long since departed with the local Halal butcher and the final shreds of his dad's self-respect.

Menken spent the occasional night over at my place when his dad was particularly bad and Ada was unavailable. Mum wasn't pleased and said he'd have to sleep in my bed as she didn't want him disgracing her new lounge, even though it was a good five years old by then. Hell, we didn't mind. We loved the idea but even though we'd both seen each other's dicks, shit, had seen them pumping their juice down paying throats and up the occasional slack-sphinctered ass, we modestly wore our not-quite-as-upmarket-as-Calvin BVDs to bed. We'd watch a Dolph Lundgren or The Rock DVD on my piss-weak bleached-out-colour telly, super-market DVD player perched precariously on my old-fashioned dressing table. But even washed-out colour was enough to feed our imaginations and in no time our BVDs were down around our ankles and we'd be stroking ourselves as Dolph or The Rock flexed their pecs and generally beat the shit out of the bad guys. They had what I

badly lacked - ATTITOOD.

We'd shoot our appreciation into wads of tissues that I'd sniff and suck while Menken had his morning shower. Then I'd secrete his at the back of my socks drawer to take out and fertilise my fantasy until the stench became too much and my mother complained.

The one time I ventured to touch his balls while he was ejaculating to an old Billy Idol music video he just removed the offending intrusion with his free hand without missing a stroke. He did it kindly but politely and I was not offended. I never tried it again.

Now here he was telling me he could have the guy in the Calvin Klein commercial.

- No, you fuckhead, he protested. Not the guy in the ad.

- Well, what then?

- I can have the Calvin Klein ad itself, he roared.

- What's so original about that? I said. Anyone can have that ad. All you gotta do is smash the glass in front and take out the poster. Shit, it's happened all over the place already.

- I mean have in the biblical sense, he said.

- You're gonna fuck the poster?

- Doesn't take you long to get it when you take your brain out of neutral.

I told you Menken was a queer cunt.

He whips out his old fella and rubs it near the model's bulge and lizards his tongue across the glass about the height of the model's face. I nearly shit myself with laughing but slowly Menken's dick's getting hard as he smears it across that rippling stomach and ... shit, I've got a hard-on just watching. Menken doesn't stop for anybody not even the cars that whiz past shocked yobbos screaming "faggot" before screeching away for fear of catching whatever it is Menken has. He's lost in his fantasy world while me, jackshit scared, attend to my own needs with much less upfront honesty by sticking my hand down the front of my jeans.

He shoots his contempt across the "typical

example of American cultural hegemony", I don't know where he gets these expressions from sometimes, and his anger oozes its way to the footpath leaving a snail's smear across the glass. I shoot my frustration into my underwear and my hand.

- Come on, mate, Menken says as he flicks his last dribbles against the shelter seat and signals the oncoming bus with his free hand. He's still zipping up as he pays the driver and from the censorious glares of the passengers. I'm paranoid they can smell the stickiness that is starching into my boxer shorts and the flecks I've wiped off my hands onto the seat of my jeans.

- Fuckin' poofter wanker bullshit, Menken says in a voice too loud as he opens the bus window and spits viciously at the defiled inanimate advertisement. People cringe and I'm fuckin' stoked that Menken has this effect. And that I'm his best mate.

- Don't ever sell out to the bastards, he says. Promise me that.

I readily agree without having any idea what it is I'm agreeing to. Later, in a darkened back lane, I remove the damp BVDs and discard them in a nearby garbage bin.

- Don't you know anything? he says as he quickly retrieves them. Someone'll pay big bucks for those.

He stuffs them in his back pocket. Later at the pub he parlays my stinking undies into a large cash advance from some gullible stockbroker-type punter who thinks they're Menken's and who goes apeshit over how fresh the deposit is.

The punter disappears out back toward the shithouse to savour his blue ribbon stock and we lose track of him until later that night when, pissed to the gills from our sudden excess of wealth and its equally sudden demise, and scrounging for enough to get us into the Taxi Club to wile away the boring early morning hours, Mr Gullible turns up at Menken's side with



a shiteating, scrub that ... with a come-sucking grin, and makes him a take-over offer which in our current financial state is much too good to reject. With a bit of less-than-subtle manoeuvring and a shareholders meeting it's decided, a little reluctantly I can't help but notice, that my few worthless assets are also included in the bid.

That's how I end up in this fuckin' awesome BMW accelerating along the back streets with a frenzied (unlicensed) Menken at the wheel and The Gullible One strapped in beside him with a pained grin strapped to his face. At the Point Piper penthouse I do my duty and fuck the ancient arsehole but the more angrily and enviously I do it the more he wants. It takes forever in my booze-fucked state and he grunts out his satisfaction that he's getting his money's worth. Menken watches TV on the other side of the huge bed while Gullible and me go through the motions.

At the conclusion of the deal my stocks are found wanting and as Menken completes the takeover I wander off to the bathroom where I soak off the stench of gentility and wealth. Then finding the door to the bedroom locked, I can take a hint, dripping my newly minted working class aroma onto the plush carpet I wander naked around the penthouse marvelling that anyone could possibly want, let alone use, all the conspicuous consumption strewn about the place.

I try watching a bit of TV but finding that too stupefying I opt for a passionless wank, realising my cock will not be called upon again tonight. I dump my sneering load in the crack at the back of the sumptuous velvet lounge. Sleep avoids me, having gone home early or else still partying at the Taxi Club. Fuck it! That's where I want to be now. The stench of prosperity is suffocating me. As, I guess, it must be suffocating Menken. But when he hasn't emerged an hour later I get dressed and pocket a few of the artistically scattered trinkets that Gullible would never miss

and enough small change for a taxi.

Menken doesn't get in touch for over a week. I call round to his old man's but he doesn't give a stuff where his son is and is pleased he hasn't been home. I tell him to pass on a message and leave. Pleasantries are not something you swap with Menken's dad.

When Menken does finally turn up at my door I punch him playfully on the arm and chiack about. To no effect.

- Aren't ya comin' in, mate?

He just holds out his hand. I realise he wants his cut.

- Hey, you're not angry about that? I was gonna share. It's just I haven't seen ya and I didn't want to leave it with ...

- All of it, he says coldly.

I give everything to him and he stands there weighing up the extent of my thievery. I'm pleased with myself and expecting some sort of acknowledgment of my achievement.

- You stupid cunt, he says and turns away.

- Menken. Mate, I whine after him.

He comes back, thrusts a handful of notes in my direction.

- Your share from the night, he says and for a second I see the old Menken. Then he's shut off as surely as someone pulling their venetian blinds against a family secret.

Menken disappeared from my life after that and everything became rather lame and aimless. I even applied for a job as a brickie's apprentice but the hours were fucked, the money was shit and the blokes on the job were cunts. I packed it in after a fortnight. Money hadn't been the problem, shit I could get enough to take care of myself flogging me ass or me dick. Nah, it was the boredom. Without Menken ...

I just sort of drifted into it full-time, I guess. One day you're doing it in the back alleys for pocket money the rain beating against your ass while you're buried up some old geezers

sphincter that's got about as much tread as an old fan belt and, well, the brothel and home visits look very inviting after that and I could work the hours that suited.

I even started going to the gym because I figured early that a fuckin' trim, taut and terrific body was a goldmine in this business. Okay I wasn't the best looking dude at The Ranch, as the establishment was named, we had more heifers than bulls, but I had the best fuckin' body and my abs and pecs looked just as good, in fact better, toward the end of a long night than the drug and sex-fucked faces of the beauties.

I was doing all right. I had new friends, and new interests, although an ad for Calvin Kleins at a bus shelter was enough to give me an instant smile and a simultaneous hard-on.

It was an "out call." I knew that address. After I'd phoned the agency to report in that I had arrived safely I noticed a tasteful business card, which had been used for doodling messages, with Menken's name on it. Under it, in embossed letters, was the name of one of the city's prime stockbrokers. At least now I knew he had a career.

I recognised him immediately although good food and expensive drink had gone to his face as well as his waistline. He was still, however, an attractive man. He stared at me as if struggling for a moment, then smiled.

But there was no time for reminiscing as the man we had dubbed Mr Gullible all those years ago wanted to get down to business. He sat naked, like an insidious spider, in a large chair. He would direct the action from there and join in as soon as he had been sufficiently excited. This was not the way I had ever envisaged making it with Menken.

Menken was about to excuse myself from the fraught arrangement when Mr Gullible snapped out instructions and for an instant before he obeyed I saw the humiliation in his eyes. I was

ordered to my knees before the god of a man I (had once) loved. And idolised.

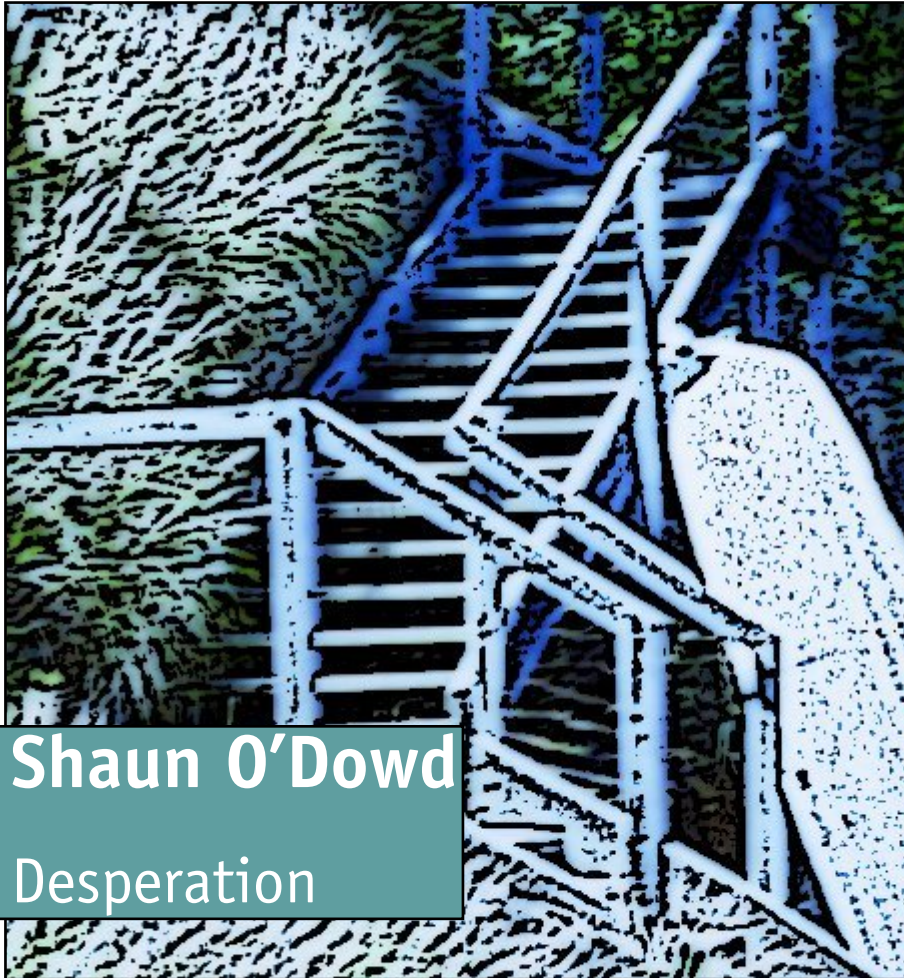
I was ordered by the arachnid to unzip Menken's fly. Reaching up to unbuckle the belt and pull down his trousers I glimpsed the source of Menken's mortification: the indelible Calvin Klein emblazoned on the waist band of his boxers. The symbol of all he had once despised.

I smirked at the memory of his naive teenage pontifications. As revenge Menken brutally used my mouth, spurting his stored loathing across my face to drip contemptuously from my cheeks and my hair as it did from that defiled billboard five years before.

But I don't hold grudges and it was a profitable evening for me. All I pinched this time was Menken's business card. I've got a lot of money lying around doing fuck all, seems such a waste, and for a while now I've been thinking about investing. If I could ever find the right sort of broker

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## Shaun O'Dowd

### Desperation

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**Hugh Evans was dateless and** desperate.

He'd sent out four messages on GayOnline and three on Man-Action and had received a grand total of zero in reply.

Zilch.

Thursday night and not a sign of sex on the horizon.

Friends had told Hugh to be patient. People turned on these hook-up sites and left them running while they did other things. Why did guys go online to meet up, Hugh wondered, if they were all busy elsewhere?

He sighed, stood up, headed into the kitchen and poured himself another glass of wine. Seeing his reflection in the window, Hugh thought he wasn't ugly. He was sure his face was nice and sensitive. There was plenty of hair but perhaps his body was a little too slim.

Maybe he should exercise more. He knew that his biggest worry, though, was his age. Approaching 40, Hugh's worry that he had never had a coherent relationship niggled his mind like a dog worrying a bone.

All the older guys he knew were either partnered off or, if single, had tales of significant past relationships to relate.

He'd had a couple of brief relationships some years ago. And there had been the occasional fuck buddy here and there, all of them long since gone.

Now he felt like time was running out and that the best years of his life had gone. The number of guys who put "no over-35s" on their profiles worried him. His own said 35. But Hugh felt that he could get away with 33. Plenty of people had told him that. That was something.

He sipped his wine, sat down and fired off two more messages. "Hi, how's ur nite going?"

Nothing ventured...

The TV burbled away in the corner like a chatty aunt.

Hugh wondered if he was caught in some kind of desperation feedback loop. He'd read how happy and confident people always attracted attention. Others were drawn to them no matter what they looked like,

Maybe guys could smell desperation and stayed away. And the more they stayed away, the more desperate you became.

The desperation feedback loop.

Hugh wondered if he was trapped within its enfolds, like day old pizza in Glad Wrap.

A "new message" icon flashed up on the Man-Action screen.

Hugh clicked it. It was from someone called "pigspray":

Hey, nice pic. U look hot. Me 9" Top. I like pig play, bb, felchin, watersports n fistin. Wat u in 2? Give me a holler.

Hugh stared at the message. What was pig play? And did "bb" mean bare-backing? And this guy liked fisting? Geez. Hugh knew he got nervous when even a medium-sized cock approached his arse (he suspected this was another issue he had to deal with).

He clicked on pigspray's profile. It said pretty much the same thing as the message. In his pic, pigspray didn't look too bad. His cock was huge. Nice face. But there was something sublimably unhealthy-looking about him.

Hugh tapped a reply: "Sorry, only looking around, maybe some other time."

Hugh wondered how his friend Puki did it. Puki ruled the web waves like a Queen of Queer sites. He devoured men like footballers devoured a Sunday afternoon barbecue. Hugh suspected Puki had been fucked by 30 men this year alone. How Puki's body took such constant punishment, Hugh could not understand.

There was no doubt Puki was exotic-looking, though. Malaysian by birth, his annoyingly smooth, brown body was accentuated by muscular bulk from constant working out. His shirtless profile-pics were, quite simply, dynamite. They often lit a fuse of interest in men that, on consummation of the deal, made their loads explode.

Actually, Puki would be performing at The Club tonight. That's why Hugh hadn't seen him on MSN this evening. Hugh thought maybe he should head into Surfers. Maybe he'd meet someone, even if he hadn't picked up at The Club for more than a year.

He was pouring another drink when his friend Owen rang.

"Hey Hugh-boy. What are you up to? Had a good one up you today?"

Hugh chuckled. "No, afraid not. I'm not doing much. Just being rampantly ignored on the dating sites."

"That's no good. We'll have to fix that. Want to go and prowl for talent at the usual hole?"



"Umm, I don't know. I have to work tomorrow."

"It's cheap drinks. The place will be pumping."

"Oh, well, fuck. Why the hell not? Alright."

"Don't ever be a hostage," Owen said.

"You'll fold faster than a drag with no hairspray. I'll see you there in about half-an-hour."

"Okay."

Hugh changed and rang for a taxi. As it pulled into the driveway under his unit, he switched off MSN but left the hook-up websites running. If all the guys online were away doing something else, he might as well do the same.

Fifteen minutes later, Hugh entered The Club. A sweeping staircase led down from the Surfers Paradise glitter strip into the basement level nightclub, offering a full view of everyone as you came down. Of course, if the club was a bit quiet, everyone down there looked up to see who was arriving.

This was not the case tonight. People clustered around the bar, eager to get their \$2 drinks.

Hugh saw Owen and strolled over. Owen lounged lankily on a dry bar propped against the wall, coolly eying off people in the club. He smiled and said hello as Hugh approached.

"What did you do today?" Hugh asked him.

"Not much. I worked this morning.

Something funny happened, though. This lady and her husband came in for lunch. I sat them down and got their orders and meals all right. But when I came over with the cracked pepper, I had a slip of the tongue. I asked them if they wanted 'shit' pepper."

He and Hugh laughed.

"Not much else happened. Oh, I went round and gave Travis one this afternoon."

Owen's regular fuck buddy.

Hugh let his resentment out. "Am I the only one around here not getting any sex at the moment?"

Owen chuckled. "Well, there are plenty of bods here. Who knows what will happen. Go and get yourself a drink."

"You want one?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Hugh waited patiently for a gaggle of gays to clear out of the way and then ordered the drinks. Vodka for himself. Might as well hit the hard stuff while it was cheap. Owen had moved to their usual position by the rail that encircled the dance floor.

Hugh took over the drinks.

"Anyone interesting around?"

"It looks like the usual sluts."

Hugh noticed they were all kind of familiar. He supposed he'd seen most of them before.

There were some twinks in a booth across the dance floor, a group of lesbians was gathered near the bar, a couple of couples lounged on the couches and there was a token loner here and there. Hugh reflected that, on the odd night when he came in by himself, he was the token loner.

He didn't see anyone particularly enticing.

"Hey," Owen said. "That little guy looks nice."

Standing by himself at the far end of the club was a young guy, shorter than the rest. His body was lithe and short blonde hair topped a boyish face.

"Owen, he hardly looks out of his teens."

"He's so small," Owen said. "He looks like a jockey."

"Maybe he likes riding."

"Yeah, like riding my cock."

They both giggled.

"Oh look," Hugh said. "It's Puki."

Guys glanced at Puki's smooth, muscular body as he weaved towards them.

"Hello Nana, hello Owen."

Puki always called Hugh 'Nana', even though they were practically the same age.

"Hi love," Hugh said. "Shouldn't you be ready now?"

"Yes, Nana, but I scored a tradie this afternoon. He kept Puki's pussy occupied till late." Puki giggled. "But you know me, I can whip up Fak Toi in a flash."

"Who was the tradie?"

"Just a regular."

Puki's eyes were diverted. "Oo, Nana, he's a bit hot."

A stocky man leaned against the bar. Puki liked his tradies.

"Why don't you go and talk to him?"

"Oh, no, Nana. I'm too shy. Mee Fak Toi might later."

"Oh, hon. Just go up to him and say, 'hello, I'm Puki Mak. What's your name? Would you like a drink?'"

"No, Nana."

Hugh and Owen exchanged glances.

"Ok, Nana, Owen. I have to get ready. You are staying for the show?"

"Yes, hon."

"Good."

Puki headed off towards the dressing room.

"I can't believe he's such a shy boy," Hugh said. "Yet when he's Fak Toi or online, he's fearless."

"I might buy the jockey a drink."

"What? Where is he?"

"He's just bought a drink. I think he's drinking Bacardi. I'll wait till he's ready for another one."

"I supposed he is kind of cute. I wonder if he has a riding crop."

Owen, smiling, went and bought the next round.

Hugh glanced around the club. That guy over there was a bit cute but he wasn't quite right. The angle of his neck was all wrong. Hugh sometimes wondered if he sabotaged himself by being too fussy.

Soon, the dance floor was cleared for the show.

The DJ's voice boomed. "And now, welcome

to the stage, your exotic Asian princess - Mee Fak Toi!"

Mee Fak Toi strode fluidly onto the dance floor.

Hugh was always impressed by Puki's transformation into Mee Fak Toi. His stocky frame was corseted into she-curves that would have made a Victorian-era woman wince. There was no doubt Fak Toi had great legs and, with ease, performed in mile-high stilettos that would have shocked a stilt-walker. She wore enough bling to make a mirror ball blush.

Fak Toi launched into an exuberant rendition of Nicole Kidman's version of 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend'. Whirling around the dance floor in one instant, she made love to a load bearing column the next. The hair on her long, auburn wig flicked and flew.

With a complicated flourish that implied the performance of several sex acts at once, she finished the number. The crowd cheered.

"You've got to admit," Hugh said to Owen. "She's got style."

"Yeah, she can really flex that Asian arse. I was waiting for the ping-pong balls to start flying."

Fak Toi smiled at the audience, bowed gracefully and glided off the stage.

"Fuck," Owen said, "Where's the jockey gone? I've lost him."

"He's over there - just come out of the toilet. He looks like he's going to the bar."

"Cool, I'll see you in a minute."

"Good luck. I hope he's not a bareback rider."

"No chance, I'll be saddling him with latex."

Owen strode towards the bar. The jockey looked up as he approached, stared at him for a second, and then smiled.

Hugh saw Mee Fak Toi floating through the crowd - a vision in burlesque. She smiled at people as she passed, winked at Hugh, and glided up to the bar, right next to the bulky tradie. She smiled and flicked her hair at him.

The tradie swigged his beer and grinned. Within a minute, he had bought her some sparkly stuff in a long-stemmed glass.

Hugh knew it was only mineral water. Fak Toi didn't drink. But she liked to cultivate a persona.

Owen seemed to be doing well with the jockey. They smiled and chatted.

Hugh tried to stifle a feeling he was being left behind. He gulped his drink like someone gagging for cock. The vodka seeped into his blood and he felt himself starting to relax. He let his body sway slightly to the music.

The tradie had a hand on Fak Toi's thigh. She giggled and wiggled her hips. Then she straightened, pulled a phone from her little diamante-encrusted handbag and spoke into it.

Owen brought the jockey over to Hugh.

"Hugh, this is Conrad. Conrad, this is Hugh. I'll be right back. I have to take a slash."

"Hi Hugh," Conrad said and smiled shyly.

"Hello, how's your night going?"

"Good, and yours?"

"Good."

"So," Conrad said and hesitated slightly.

"What do you do?"

"Um, I'm a property writer for the Southport Sun."

"Oh, that's cool."

"Thanks. It's okay. What do you do?"

"I'm an apprentice jockey."

"Oh! Um, really?"

Conrad stared at Hugh. "You know, Owen looked like that when I told him, too."

"Oh, um, I think it's only because it's a cool job. You want a drink? It's my turn to buy a round."

Hugh went to the bar and allowed himself some giggles.

Mee Fak Toi had her hand on the tradie's shoulder and was telling him something. Then she spotted Hugh and came over.

"Nana, did you like my show?"

"Brilliant as always, hon."

"Thank you."

"How's it going with the tradie?"

"He nice. He will come and see Fak Toi's show on Saturday."

"Saturday? I thought you were hooking up with him tonight."

"No, Stewart was on phone before. I meeting him tonight."

"As Mee Fak Toi?"

"No, as Puki."

"What?"

"Nana, you get so confused. Fak Toi has her tradies and Puki has his."

"Huh?"

Fak Toi giggled. "Puki get his man-pussy filled with tradie cock. Fak Toi fills tradie man-pussy with her she-cock. That's the rules. Tonight is Puki's turn."

"I can't get over all the sex you get. How do you do it?"

Hugh saw Puki's shyness appear under Fak Toi's sassy makeup, like someone unmasking at a masquerade ball.

"I hide behind Fak Toi and the computer screen, Nana."

"I think I'm jealous at all the sex you're getting. I get none."

"No, Nana. Don't think like that. You have lots of friends. I have no friends on the coast. You and maybe Owen. I always think people don't like me." A little smile lit Puki's lips. "All I think about is fucking. I think I'm addicted. I want a human life, not a nympho life."

Hugh thought about this for a moment and said, "Well, if you enjoy what you do, maybe that is a life."

"Maybe, Nana. I like it. but I don't want fucking to take over my life."

There was a beeping from Fak Toi's bag. She pulled out her phone.

"Message from Stewart. Got to go, Nana. You have a good night. Talk to you tomorrow."

Hugh gave her a light kiss on the cheek.

“Okay, hon.”

He took the drinks over to Conrad and Owen.

Conrad soon went to the toilet.

“So, do you like him?” Hugh asked Owen. “He seems very cute.”

“He’s nice. But very young. I think he’s gagging for a relationship.”

“And you?”

“I want to feed that hot arse with a good injection.”

Owen looked at Hugh’s expression and laughed. “I don’t know. See how it goes.”

They had a few more drinks and then, hand in hand, Owen announced he and Conrad were off.

Hugh declined a lift home and felt a burning pain in his chest as he watched them go. The desperation feedback loop circled in his head.

He sculled his drink and bought another. Then another. And another.

The night blurred into series of remembered moments, like fading pictures in an old photo album.

Dancing mindlessly on the dance floor. Hanging out with a cute Maori boy (how they met was curiously absent from the photo album). Leaving the club. Waving at the doorman. Walking down a street. The Maori boy saying, “And then my aunt said it was an elephant.” A grassy, semi-lit hollow behind the beach. Black sea. White lines of surf. The Maori boy’s cock in his mouth, thrusting. Hugh’s throat involuntarily gagging. The Maori boy’s hands on his head. A sighing moan. A period of blankness. Waking up on the cold grass. The Maori boy gone. A brief stab of loss. Sitting up. A moment of panic. No wallet in his pocket. That Maori cunt. A moment of relief. Finding the wallet in the grass. Standing up. Auto-pilot to the taxi rank....

The next morning, Hugh vomited twice before he went to work. He had a very seedy day. During the odd quiet moment, he felt little

stabs of bitterness. Why hadn’t he thought to get the Maori boy’s number? He wasn’t even sure of his name. Hugh supposed there was no chance of anything happening. The Maori boy had deserted him.

In the evening, Hugh headed home and was determined not to switch on the dating websites. Maybe he was becoming addicted to them.

His determination lasted a full half hour. The desperation feedback loop played soundlessly in the room.

His mobile phone beeped. Probably Owen.

The number was unfamiliar. Hugh opened the message.

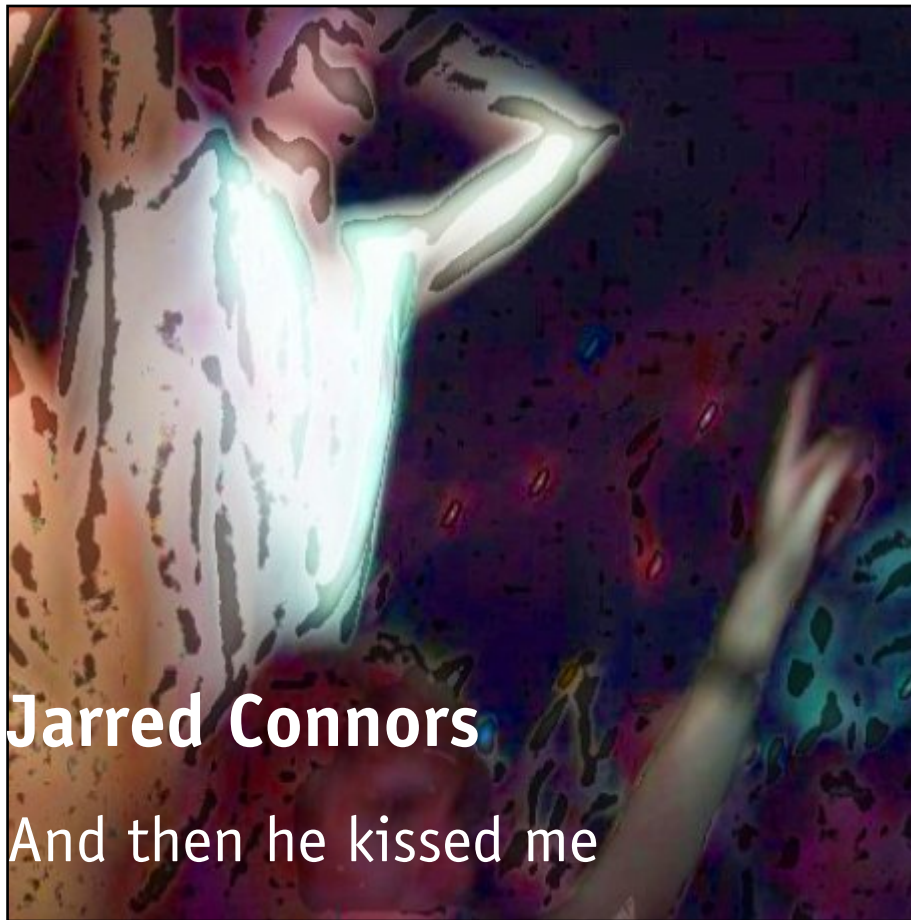
Hey Hugh, its Aaron. How r u? Cldnt wake u. Didnt want to leave u by beach. Went to get friend but u gone when i got back. Passed out in his car n slept all day lol. Had a gr8 nite. Wat u up 2?

A smile on his face, Hugh started texting a reply.

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Shaun O’Dowd began his career as a journalist for a North Queensland newspaper before small town life drove him to the edge of insanity. Shaun escaped to Brisbane and became a Queensland tourism and travel writer, touring the state and writing nice things about it. By night, he could be found at the Sportsman Hotel either propping up the bar or performing retro drag numbers at bemused patrons. After being unceremoniously dumped by his day job, Shaun now works for a Gold Coast online investment magazine where he spends his days in a perpetual state of confusion.. [spodowd@hotmail.com](mailto:spodowd@hotmail.com)





## Jarred Connors

### And then he kissed me

**After six hours spinning, the dj** resorted to an anthem or two to pump up our flagging enthusiasm and to warn us that the night was nearly over. We took his cue, and once more returned to the dance floor to sweat and spin, whoop and holler – looking simply fabulous (of course) in what few clothes we were wearing that year. Some got a little desperate as the e started to wear off and Mr Right failed to emerge from the dance floor haze but mostly we furiously danced and danced until the dawn light slowly started to appear in the big bay windows. On a night like this, Kylie topped out the set, and we collapsed on the floor – amongst the sweat, cast-off glitter, water bottles and rubbish – as the music died. After twelve hours of loudness, we were suddenly able to hear ourselves speak, and banter erupted from everyone. We were all high; tired, wasted, shot – still tingling but not yet buggered.

The dj found some Cole Porter; smooth tunes to ease the void left by the withdrawal of the booming bass line. As the lush orchestrations washed over us the house lights slowly returned and we all saw each other in a new guise, the shattered/up-all-night/party-boys-at-8am look. Phillip had made a new friend, Mike (I think); they looked like they weren't completely appalled with each other now the drugs had eased and they could actually see who it was they'd picked up from the dance floor melange. It was Phillip's first big party but it was Mike who looked like he shouldn't be out after 10pm. As the morning light strengthened, they seemed to become even more animated and happy; they had a glow about them as they plotted today; I wondered, could this be an actual romance? Surely not, a few hours was all bit quick, even for modern boys.

I was there with Trevor, my partner of a few years now; this though, was probably our last dance party as Trevor's big 4-0 loomed close and we were basically thinking decorum and discretion. We'd only agreed to come to this one at the last minute; mostly, on my part anyway, to keep an eye on Phillip, to make sure he didn't do anything silly, but in retrospect I'm not sure I'm yet grown up enough to be a chaperon, and anyway he's hardly foolish and no doubt well able to make his own mistakes, if he wants to.

So as we all decided it was time to face the daylight (and sleep), another dance party became legendary for its (unsuccessful) conquests, (unrealised) drugs, and (unbelievable) dance tracks; abetted no doubt by our (mostly unreliable) memories of what actually happened.

My brother Richard, who doesn't normally bother to speak to me, rang to say dad was in St Vinnies.

"They're doing scans and saying it's serious

but not critical. He was asking for you, so I'm letting you know."

"Thanks." There wasn't much I could add to that.

"Helen and I are going up tonight, but you can visit this afternoon... If you want, I mean. Visiting hours are from 2.30."

"Thanks, I'll get away from work early and go this afternoon."

There was an even longer pause on the line.

"Are you doing ok?" This is my brother, asking me if I'm doing ok. The same brother who was making jokes about me at a family wedding reception last year. 'And he said, Don't you dare touch me with that big thing,' over-loud, to his mates, in a lisping camp voice, and the group broke into raucous laughter. I was sitting with Aunty Flo, who also heard at least the punch line, and tried to change the subject, bless her. I got up, walked over and stood toe-to-toe, face to face, and said, in my best butch voice, 'Infantile dead-shit. Grow up someday... please!' It was all I could think up at the moment. I turned and left before it got even uglier.

"I'm fine. Worried about dad, of course. Did they say how long he'd be there?"

"A few days only, if it all goes to plan." Silence returned.

"OK, thanks for the call. Please let me know if there's any more news. I'd appreciate it."

"Ok, see you soon. Say hi to Trevor." The line went dead before I could react to his first ever mention of my boyfriend of six years.

Trevor: our first date was at a rock concert; the Blue Angels were particular favorites of ours. We'd forgone seats to stand in the pit right up front and had got there early to try and hold some space; but it was already packed, at least down there. On time, the crowd surged towards the stage as the band made their entrance; a busy roadie or two, followed by Cosmo, the

drummer, and Rosti, the percussionist, all in near darkness. There was a few drum runs, some guitar chords, and then lights as they started in with 'No shame'; an inspired choice with its long instrumental intro. So the band was well warmed up when Vince came on stage about 10 bars before he had to sing. The crowd, suddenly in full voice, welcomed him on. Being so close to the stage meant we could feel the bass pushing on our chests, and as the band went into the vocal part of the song, I looked down to check on Trevor. He was po-going beside me, his eyes closed. I tapped him on the shoulder and gave him a thumbs up and a yay.

The band moved into 'Jamestown rock' and on to 'Little Joe'. The keyboard player (Sister Mitch) was doing wicked work tonight. But when I next checked Trevor it occurred to me that he probably couldn't really see very much of what was happening on stage. He was height challenged (don't say 'short' to his face) and I doubt he could even see the band (only few metres away from us) despite the music being absolutely overwhelming.

I leaned over to him, and yelled, "Can you see anything?" It was also very possible he couldn't hear what I was shouting right into his ear.

He smiled and yelled something back to me; I thought I heard a 'not a problem' or something like that, but it might just have been the shrug of his shoulders that gave me that impression. He went back to trying to see through the crowd but I was thinking that this wasn't fair. I wanted him to have a great time too, especially because it was his idea that got us here tonight.

About ten people away from us, a girl had climbed up on her guy's shoulders and I wondered about getting Trevor up on mine. I tried to point to the shouldered girl, but it was unlikely he could see them either so I squatted down a bit and pointed to my thighs and my shoulders. He didn't get it at first, then a big smile went across his face as he finally

understood. He was so damned cute when he smiled like that.

He looked quizzically at me, "Are you sure?" I imagined he was saying. I nodded my head and waved my arms towards my chest. The music thundered around us non-stop as the crowd swayed and danced in time.

"Come on, get up here!" I yelled vainly into the crescendo that ends 'Johnny's home'. Neither of us were at all sure about how to get him up on my shoulders, but after one failed attempt, he stepped on my bent thigh with one leg and managed to swing his other leg across my shoulders. He wasn't really heavy, and I stood up with ease. He wrapped his legs around my chest, leaving my arms free, and tried to balance himself with his hands on my head. I grabbed his legs to hold him there. It worked ok.

The band had finished 'Johnny's home', and Vince was mouthing off those peace and goodwill inanities that he sometimes does in between songs. I guess he's ok, but sometimes his rubbish is just that. Cosmo, on drums, prematurely tapped in the next song, 'Only on Thursday', their current hit and an absolute favorite of Trevor and me at the time.

Trevor half stood up when he identified the song; and he waved his hands above his head with glee. I was thinking, he'd better not try po-going on my shoulders, but I held his shins and it seemed safe enough.

He bent down and said something in my ear. "Thanks," I think I caught, before he followed the band by mouthing the opening vocals to the song. His knees were about the height of my shoulders and his thighs about my ears. Being this close to our favorite band while they played our favorite song was very much like heaven for me; helped in big part by my recent desire to spend any time with Trevor, with or without music.

The next song was a slower ballad, 'Safe from harm'. Trevor sat further back for most of this

song, and the balance wasn't as good. I moved my hands up to his knees and held on a bit, just in case. It felt wrong and I was a little concerned he might fall; not that we could go very far, the crowd crush hadn't let up that much and it was still very packed at the front of the stage. He squeezed my hand which I took as a confirmation that all was ok and that he was having a good time. I tried to look up and see his face but couldn't turn my head around far enough.

As I turned back, my head brushed his crotch and realised he could have a hard on. Perhaps that's why he'd been sitting back, so I couldn't notice. Initially, I didn't know what to do (if anything) but I was amazed to think he'd got a hard on while on my shoulders; it seemed a very intimate thing to happen, especially in middle of a crowd like this. Was it just the music, or it could be us, being close like this?

The band moved into 'We are now', and the music soaked into and through us. I was still so pumped with how great the night was. Trevor was still sitting back, so I reached back somehow and grabbed his bum and push/pulled him forward. His thighs came ahead and I could feel his crotch pressing into the back of my head again. I gave him a thumbs up, to reassure him this position was better for me, and we went back to listening to the band. After a while I knew I could feel his hard on pressing against me. As I nodded my head in time with the music I knew I was bumping his cock.

He seemed to be enjoying it as he wrapped himself around me. I moved my hand higher on his thighs. He was bouncing about freely, and we were both became very immersed in the music. I got a hard on too, but no-one in the crowd would have known because everyone was moving and dancing about. Trevor might have seen it, but he wouldn't be looking down; it was dark there anyway.

During the band's last number ('Crusader') Trevor's movements were close and slow and

deliberate and he was perfectly in time with the song. As the song finished, he collapsed surrounding my head and I reached up to hold him. The band went silent, the crowd went ape-shit, and Trevor yelled in my ear, "That was the best I've had ever!" I turned, smiling, and caught his face, which was somewhere between naughty and smoldering. And so I'm thinking, 'How can I work this so I can stay with him tonight?' Fantastic music, perfect concert and a sexy man all at once. Bliss.

As we drove away from the car park we were both singing concert songs. Neither of us could sing in tune, but that wasn't important. As we stopped at the lights on the Conrod Road, I wondered out loud on what now.

"I'm still pretty hyped. What would you like to do? I think I've got beer at my place."

"Who'll be there?" Trevor had developed a strong dislike of Martin, an overweight English backpacker, currently bunked down with us short term.

"They were all going to Rosalies but they're probably back by now," checking my watch. I added, "Unless they scored!"

"Martin wouldn't know a fuck in a brothel! That's if he's ever met his dick, which I doubt!"

We both giggled at that thought as we traveled on through ever more darker suburbs.

"Why don't we swing past my place, I'll grab the beers, and we can go somewhere... Aw, I don't know. The mountain, or down to the beach. A swim?"

The thing about hospitals is, well, they're there for the sick. And that brings its own baggage. Dad was 68, and had been having trouble with his chest for some years. He'd found a good GP who insisted on having it fully checked out and finally diagnosed left main syndrome; treatable mostly, but it'll probably get him in the end.

He was small. I never realised how small



until I saw him in that hospital bed. His skin was gray and slack about his face, his arms looked thin, wasted. Gone was the healthy, fit father of my childhood. He was connected to a green glowing monitor with several wires and pads; a pattern moved string-like across the screen, generating meaningful information for someone, I hoped. The monitoring paraphernalia made it look like he was in a spider's web; like a captured insect.

There didn't seem to be very many blankets, and what he had was draped to one side heading for the floor. It suddenly occurred to me that he was alone (mum had gone 2 years ago) and that he was very vulnerable here, in this place. I stood at the entrance of the ward for a few seconds, maybe a minute or two, coming to terms with him, here and captive. Nurses and others bustled about the ward, doing important things. My heart sank as I realised his fragility, trapped here in hospital. Seeing him like that seemed to make most other issues rather petty. I took a big breath and approached him in a much more generous frame of mind.

"Hi, dad. How are you?" He looked up and saw me. Something passed over his face, I couldn't tell what.

"Moss. Good of you to come. I asked Richard to call you. We should talk about some things."

"That sounds very dramatic. I spoke with the doctor on the way in, he says you'll be back home tomorrow or Wednesday."

"Sure, that's what they say. Still, I'm not doing much while I'm here and I need to sort out things sooner or later."

"You shouldn't worry about anything but getting your strength back. No-one wants you to do anything else." I reached over to touch his shoulder in reassurance. Even now he didn't like being touched, or perhaps more accurately he still didn't like me touching him. I somehow doubt Richard would've ever put his hands on him.

At the bed next door, with more than the regulation 2 visitors, laughter erupted, and the patient broke into a coughing fit. We all went quiet for a bit while he worked it through and calmed down.

"So are they treating you ok?" I did want to know. "Pretty nurses, waiting on you hand and foot, every moment of the day and night, good food... I am joking. Is it sort of alright?"

"Yeah, yeah. There's no problems," he thought a bit, "But now, I need to get my affairs in order. I need to know what you'd like after I've gone."

"Nothing. I've got everything I want, and some. I don't need anything, dad."

"I do want to leave something for you, something you'd like to have," his eyes were suddenly deep and clear; serious. "I know I haven't been as good to you as your mother was, but..."

"Dad, I'm ok. There are others who have needs more than I. What about the grandkids?"

"True. There'll be some money, I'm sending it to Vanessa's kids for their schooling. Is that ok? There won't be a lot anyway I imagine. Not after the medical stuff. But I do have an idea to leave you something."

"Dad, please don't worry about it. But you must tell us if you run short. We can all help if you need cash. Getting better is the only issue, and that's up to you, alone. It's the only thing you need to do. I mean it."

"Whatever," he said, "I've talked to Frank (his brother, my uncle), and he's agreed that I can pass on granddad's library to you. Would you take care of it?"

"Of course, dad. But only if you want to. They're some very beautiful books there. I've always liked them." My grandfather had obsessively collected for many years; some would now be antique and maybe even valuable.

There was a pause as we both thought through the conversation. He changed the

subject. "Next time bring Trevor." And then, an afterthought, "But not while Richard's here though. I don't need a war right at this time."

I reacted. "What is going on here? First Richard, and now you, are suddenly acknowledging Trevor. For years you've all ignored him." It was sort of out there before I realised. I didn't know he even knew Trevor's name – let alone want to invite him over for a family visit.

Dad looked alarmed, "No, no. Nothing's happened. We were all talking about things yesterday and Trevor did come up. You two have been together for a while. It's time we faced it properly." At last, we're an 'it'.

And that's when I realised how much everyone was shaken by this hospitalisation. This is the same man who said, on learning his middle son was a nancy boy, 'Well as long as he stays out of sight in Sydney, it doesn't matter.' No longer out of sight, my boyfriend and I were suddenly being welcomed into the heart of my family.

As we came around the final curve, the city stretched out in front of us. We'd decided on the mountain lookout.

I parked, unlatched my seat to give me more leg room, and tilted it half way back. The city glittered through the windscreen; it's like we were in lounge chairs at a panorama window. Trevor got out for a piss, and came back to the car, shivering and rubbing his hands. He tilted his seat back too.

We talked about concerts, footy, and other inanities while chugging back the beers.

After a silence of a few minutes, "Great idea, letting me get up on your shoulders. Wasn't too heavy?"

"Nah."

"I got to see Vince, close up, in all his glory, red leather packed lunch and all! Boy, does he put it out there?" He was laid back, relaxed, his

hands behind his head.

"You did seem to be enjoying it." I was alluding to his stiff concert cock, would he pick that up?

"I did, the climax was unbelievable!" Now who's alluding? Caught in my own trap.

The moonlight, the city, this man; near perfect. I wanted him to kiss me, right now.

I looked around to stare into his eyes. Two can play that game; he stared back and held my gaze.

"If I kissed you now would you be offended?" My heart raced at his proposal.

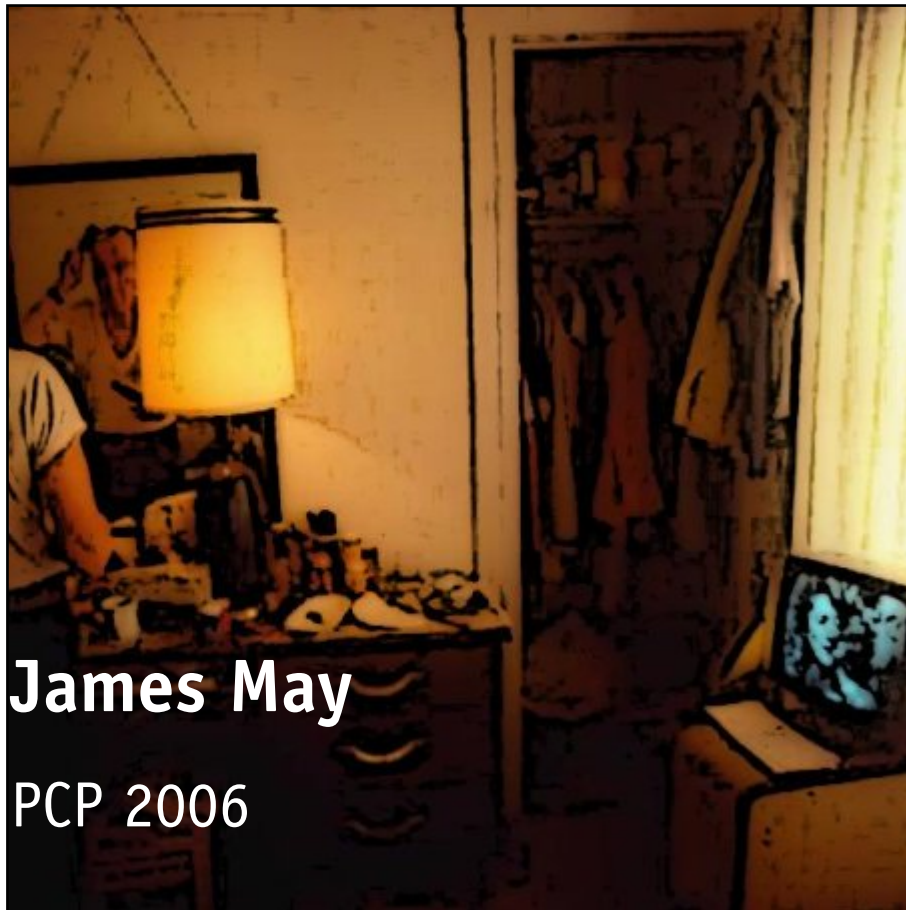
"I'd be very disappointed if you didn't," I said, throwing everything overboard. "And now would be a very good time to do it."

"Come here," he said. And I did.

And then he kissed me.

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Jarred Connors these days hails from country Tasmania, if there is such a place. His otherwise unexciting life has recently been overturned by an episode with a large neighbourly (in that's where it came from) bull bent on heterosexual procreation with Mabel, his house milking cow. The bull, Selwyn George Charles III, scored and Jarred is now considering wither pink or blue for the new household nursery.



## James May

PCP 2006

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**It's strange, watching yourself fade** away; it started two months ago with a dry cough. It was nothing suspicious, it just never went away. Then the fatigue set in. I was too tired to clean the house, do the dishes, climb the stairs. Eventually it was too hard to get to the shop; it was like wearing concrete shoes. I was too exhausted to cook so I asked a friend to bring food to the house. My appetite was fading fast; everything turned my stomach. I spent most of the time on the lounge with a hot water bottle and the heater turned up; it was so cold that Winter. I couldn't sleep at night; I woke every few hours, drenched in sweat. I had to towel myself dry, change the sheets. I told myself it wouldn't last, there was nothing to worry about.

Now I'm standing in a hospital room. It sends shivers up my spine when I look in the mirror. A cluster of cold sores festers over my lower lip. It cracks and bleeds when I smile, so I don't. I've lost ten kilos, my

frame has shrunk. I look like an elderly man trapped in a child's body. There's no tone, no curves; the bones are jutting out of anorexic limbs, the ribs push tight against worn layers of skin. I turn around in the mirror like a deformed mannequin in a shop of horrors. From behind, there appears to be no buttocks; just two stick thin legs and a deflated mound of flesh – it hurts to sit down. I wear two pairs of underwear to hold my pants up.

The taste of chemical reflux rises and falls in my throat, burning my chest as it slides through the windpipe. The nausea erupts when it hits my stomach; like drinking a bottle of scotch and smoking a hundred cigarettes. I remember a Louise Hay book; 'You Can Heal Your Life.' I repeat one of the mantras over and over. 'I love you, Jim. I love you. I love you, Jim, I love you.' It feels ridiculous but I carry on. 'Fake it till you make it', the author says. I imagine the scabs on my mouth shrinking and falling off, the cells of my immune system getting healthier, stronger – my cheeks filling out, eyes wide with vitality.

When I'm out of breath, I clench my teeth and repeat a different mantra. I say the words 'Fuck you' over and over, thinking of the family I'm estranged from, junkie friends waving needles like magic wands, the sleazy men I swindled drinks from in gloomy bars – the men who slobbered over my wretched body, whispering vacuous compliments and hollow promises.

I fall to the floor and throw up the medication – the drugs that might 'save' me if I can keep them down. Seems to me, the nausea and vomiting is the rage churning inside, screaming to be heard. There's no privacy to scream in this place. I wash my face in the sink and resume the mantras till I'm too weak to stand and the nurse wheels a trolley through the door.

I have a private room here at The Austin; my own Infectious Disease unit. I was in the eastern suburbs when the pneumonia took hold – the ambulance drivers plucked me off a friend's kitchen floor; delirious, hallucinating searing flames and raging infernos. They thought I was drugged or psychotic. I was dumped on the

doorstep of the emergency room and the nurses tied me down with restraints. Another methamphetamine casualty, they presumed. It took them a few hours to realize it was PCP; an AIDS related infection.

The Austin is a modern hospital with state of the art facilities, all the creature comforts of the middle class. Sunlight streams through the fifth floor windows. The room is polished white, sparkling clean; just like a waiting room in Heaven. A view of the affluent suburban sprawl stretches before me; leafy streets, renovated homes, neatly paved roads. I'm afraid to leave this hospital yet desperate for freedom. It's a mysterious new world out there – the old one is lost in a fog of fevers and sweats.

I'm too weak to leave the room; I can barely take a piss on my own. Time passes quickly under sedation. Day transforms to night so gently; I have no idea what the hour is. I close my eyes and retreat beneath the covers, clutching pictures of Christ, angels, Jesus and Mary. I hold them over my body as my temperature rises and I throw the blankets off, saturated from head to toe. I calm myself with prayers and deep breaths. I'm not the only one here, it seems. I'm watched over by something; I see flashes of light, shadows in the corner of my eye. The room takes on a mystical quality. An energy fills the space; we make contact – it frightens and inspires me all at once.

The ambience is disrupted by the entry of a nurse; ready to draw blood, administer drugs, take blood pressure. I don't tell her about my secret encounters, she'd have the shrinks up here in a second. I feel sick when the needle plunges into my vein – I turn away, cringing. A wound appears on the skin, a bandage is pasted over the bruise. It tears the skin when I peel it off. I wonder where all the blood goes, how many chemicals are swimming through my veins, what it's doing to my mind, body, spirit? I don't feel the same since they put me on this stuff. My moods are out of control; pins and needles are biting my feet, my skin is so itchy I could scratch till it bleeds. It's claustrophobic; I could climb the walls, tear someone apart. This



is what I was afraid of; I swallow a valium and slip into the silence.

I wake to the smell of antiseptic; a cleaner drags a mop back and forth across the tiles. It's 6.30 am, she closes the door. The day starts early in hospital. I scan the room with medicated vision. It looks like home now; shoes and clothes are strewn across the furniture, the table is a mess with photographs, magazines and chocolate wrappers. The flowers in the vase are starting to wilt; the water hasn't been changed for days. It smells like a sewer. A nurse barges in briefly, introduces herself in a foreign language and leaves. Most of them are foreign casuals passing through. I try to make conversation – ask where they're from, how they came to be here, how they find nursing. Sometimes they're friendly, sometimes they're rude, sometimes I feel too vile to deal with them. I roll over and pretend to be asleep.

The breakfast never inspires me. We get regular milk, concentrated orange juice, stone cold white toast, cornflakes, weetbix and instant coffee. It's hard to swallow after a dose of 15 tablets each morning – it tastes like cleaning fluid. Apparently the virus becomes resistant unless you take every tablet on time each day. The nurse watches so I don't flush them down the toilet. The tablets come in different colours to make them appealing like jelly beans; red, orange, purple, yellow. Some are tiny, they get lost under your tongue. The big ones get stuck in your throat. I let them take the food away; I can't stand the thought of vomiting again. It's savage vomiting – it feels like your stomach lining's being ripped out. The spasms continue long after you stop heaving. I fear never eating again.

Winter turns to Spring and I can make it downstairs to the cafeteria. I'm in Heaven – lattes, foccacias, freshly squeezed juices. I order sandwiches, cakes, milkshakes; anything to put weight on. The customers balk at my scabby features; a scarecrow physique, bare foot and draped in an oversize gown. Sometimes a friend wheels me in a chair, just to look the part. We roll out to the garden, weaving through traffic

and smokers; soaking up the sun, the jasmine blossoms, yellow wattle, bees hovering over sprouting dandelions. Visitors grieve privately about sick relatives, nurses light cigarettes, laughing about doctors and drinks at the pub on the weekend. Life goes on.

I'm healed by every ray of sunshine, every moment flat on my back in the grass beneath a shady gum tree – a stark appreciation for life. Is that what I'm meant to learn from this – how precious life is? I promise the universe I'll never take it for granted. The scene swirls about like a daydream – as though my head is spinning from a wallop or the medication swimming through my system; four sedatives a day; all is calm, all is quiet. I look up to the sky and drift away on a cloud, floating through space. I imagine running away from here – the hospital, the drugs, the tests, but I'm too scared to run; this is home now.

I should get back; Damien will be here soon. He said he baked a chocolate cake – my favourite recipe. It's a blessing in disguise, the way things turned out. He was about to leave before the pneumonia. He had enough of the confusion, the guessing, the waiting, unfulfilled expectations – he had enough of us. He was still at my bed side as soon as I woke – ready to give it another chance.

We're closer than ever now, sharing the cake; the rich chocolate sauce, the delicate cream – laughing, sighing. He has so many qualities I couldn't see before. I was blind, self absorbed, depressed. We talk about AIDS, medication, side effects. We used to talk about whether AIDS was a conspiracy; did HIV really exist, who was making all the profit?

He can't face me for long. He seems nervous, distracted. I ask what's wrong; I say I can handle it. He saw the doctor today; he only has fifty T Cells. He has to decide whether to take the cocktail – a decision he never wanted to make.

You can wait till you nearly kark it and let them decide for you, I joke.

He turns away; he doesn't want to end up like me, that's for sure. Once upon a time we were healthy, we were HIV positive, that's all. Now I

have AIDS and he doesn't. He used to find me attractive, now he's repulsed. I'm offended but I put on a brave face as we sit in silence. I tell him he shouldn't come to the hospital if it makes him uncomfortable. He doesn't offer a response but I know it's what he wants.

He's only here through obligation, I realize. We were about to part company, remember? He says he's exhausted with family trouble, health, emotions – he'll be back in a few days. He leaves me with an article he was given by a therapist. I feel smacked in the mouth as I read. It's about a young woman from an alcoholic home who hasn't learned to give or receive intimacy. She can't let her barriers down, she can't see the connection. She's destined to a life of solitude.

I lay there, trying to pin my feelings down. Do I love him, do I just care for him? Is it friendship, something more? I don't want to hold on because I have AIDS. How does he feel? It's hard to tell, I'm not a mind reader. I don't want to lose him but I guess it won't kill me. I'm over the emotional struggle, the awkward silence, being taken for granted. One minute I'm in love, then I feel nothing.

The next few days I'm taken for tests; wheeled about the hospital on trolleys, squinting at fluorescent lights, rolling in and out of elevators - so many injections, delirious; in and out of consciousness. Cat scans, MRIs, Ultrasounds; it feels like an experiment in a science fiction movie. I feel trapped - taken hostage by people I don't trust. There's too many visitors to keep up with in between; shrinks, dieticians, students, physios. The doctors visit regularly to check my adherence to the medication. They tell me how silly I've been; refusing pills, avoiding blood tests. I'm only alive thanks to a pharmaceutical company. They stand at the foot of the bed, arms folded like mafia hitmen, telling me horror stories about the AIDS virus.

There's no time to rest. I'm going mad, getting sicker in this place. I can't sleep, I can't eat, the phone won't stop ringing; relatives I haven't seen for years, offering condolences. I'm

so tired I hold the receiver with my eyes closed. I have a dialogue with myself while they talk about nephews, nieces, aunts and uncles. Do you know who I am? Do you know I'm a faggot? Do you know I have AIDS?

I escape to the garden when I can; my secret place - rolling about the weedy grass, the clovers. A Father Christmas floats by, a dragonfly hovers close and darts away, a gentle breeze caresses my face. I close my eyes and think of that night, seven years ago when I was fucked without a condom; the pleasure, the pain, the sero conversion. The flu lasted two weeks; I broke out in hives, my breath smelled of death. I knew things would change; I was contaminated, alone forever. Then I met Damien, my first positive friend. Damien was different to the others; he was kind and sensitive. He was gentle, angelic. His voice was tender, honest. It didn't turn me on for some reason. Maybe he was too nice.

My eyes open and I face reality – is he coming back? Is it too late? Have I acted too slowly, stifled by a fear of intimacy? I panic for a second, feeling empty, abandoned. What if he's gone? I crawl to my knees, wiping the grass from my gown. I lift myself like a crippled man, feeling like I've been hit by a truck. I climb upstairs, stopping at the chapel. I'm alone aside from a woman sitting quietly in the corner with her face buried in her hands. I flip through the pages of a prayer book, reading messages of love, blessings of hope. The wind whistles outside, the branch of a tree scrapes the window like a spirit trying to claw its way in. I feel like I don't belong, I don't deserve to heal, no one will hear my pleas for help. I close the book and flee the room like a banished leper.

Back on the ward, my mother waits, sitting in the corner with a book. She flew in from Sydney the other day. I can tell she's been smoking; the smell lingers in the air. She's had too much coffee, her yellow fingers tremble. The conversation is stifled, masked with casual comments about the view, the weather, the public transport. I'm too tired to pay attention or be cheerful. I need peace, which is hard to say – she offends so easily and holds a grudge for

days. I tell her I'm not being rude, I'm just exhausted. She turns away, wounded. I reassure her; I don't blame you for this. I'm glad you're here.

She wants to know why I'm unhappy, what did she do? I tell her she didn't do anything; it's not about her.

I know you're angry, she says, I can feel it...you think I'm a terrible mother, don't you?

I tell her again, she's not to blame. It's not your fault I have AIDS, it's just...

Just what, she demands?

I speak calmly, cautiously. It's not your fault, but the life that led me here – the homophobia, the alcoholism, domestic violence, all those years; the persecution, the neglect; where were you, do you remember? She recoils in her seat. I go on – the stress of being 'the parent', phone calls all day long, the insults, the abuse, the manipulation.

I'm not an alcoholic, she protests.

Here we go again. Am I a liar? Did I imagine it all? Her denial confuses me. I feel like I'm going mad. She'll never accept the truth, it's like talking to a brick wall. We reach another stand off. She scowls as though she can't stand the sight of me. I'm not the son she loves; I'm ugly and miserable. She wants me to leave and come back the way I was; handsome, healthy, full of vitality.

I'm going for a smoke, she says, throwing her book down.

I feel angry, dismissed. She always makes me angry. Why bother? I want someone I can talk to, someone I can trust, I need a parent. I try to relax but I can't let go. We need to face this; I can't be well until it's out of my system. I won't be sick for her or anybody. I sit up defiantly, chest tight, short of breath. I'll tell her everything; it'll ease the tension, we can wipe the slate clean.

The sun goes down over the city, the lights shimmer in the streets below. The traffic flows silently like space ships glowing in the dark. The moon is high in the sky. Night has fallen. My

mind is still busy. I rehearse what I need to say, anticipating her response. The ward is quiet, the room is cold, lonely; she's still not there. I roll over and slide beneath the covers. Time passes, the corridors are empty. It's late; I drift in and out of sleep. She's not coming, I realize. She can't deal with it. Our conversation will have to wait; some things never change.

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James May is an aspiring writer from Brisbane who prefers Melbourne for its cafes, culture and cooler weather. He's a student of the professional writing course at RMIT and has had a few short plays produced and a handful of articles published. His main passion is writing scripts for theatre, although he also enjoys shopping at Vic Market, three dollar pizza at the Lucky Coq in Prahran or a home cooked meal with friends. He writes about queers, HIV/AIDS, dysfunctional relationships and inner city misfits and spends the rest of his time working on a novel, hanging around op shops and filling out forms at Centrelink.



## Tim Miles

### Flight

Base art. ©2002 Broderbund ClickArt. [modified]

**A disheveled mother dragged a screaming** child along the aisle. Harold sighed with relief when they scurried past. They were the last passengers. The window seat next to his aisle seat remained empty. He carefully laid out his notes on the spare seat. The two-hour flight from Sydney to Melbourne would give him the chance to prepare for the interview. But just as the flight attendant commenced the safety routine a young man emerged from the toilet and headed in Harold's direction.

Harold pretended to read the notes while eyeing the shoulder length hair, sleeveless white tee shirt and black leather pants.

'Oh no. Please let him keep walking.' thought Harold just as the young man lifted his sunglasses, looked at his boarding pass and then at Harold.

'Sorry, mate. Mind if I jump over?'

Harold just managed to grab his notes before the young man



slumped in the adjoining seat and turned towards him.

'Jesus. Slept in. Didn't even have time for a crap till I got on the plane.'

Harold politely smiled while looking around for an empty seat. There was none. He felt queasy in the stomach. Not so much at the thought of the young man's bowel movements – but that anyone could have a large red heart - shaped tattoo on his left bicep with a black arrow piercing the middle.

'Dying for a smoke. No bar service on these early flights, I guess.' The young man kept talking as if Harold was a fellow traveling companion. Didn't seem to notice that Harold's black suit, white shirt and striped tie belonged to a different species – the professional class.

'God, that was some gig. Fucked my brains out.'

Harold wondered how some people went through life without caring about who they talked to and what they said. At thirty-five, Harold was a measured man who couldn't understand what it was like to be someone other than himself.

The young man stared at the gray clouds outside the window and closed his eyes. His head fell on Harold's shoulder, leaving Harold in a predicament - to touch the hair seemed too intimate. So he let the head stay there. And lifted up his notes and pretended to read while enjoying the the feel of his thick silky hair against his shoulder. Surprisingly felt comforted.

Looking at the heart tattoo, Harold decided to call him Mr Cupid. Mr Cupid reminded him of Florian when they first met. But no longer. Somehow the six-year relationship had destroyed the first blushes of attraction. Mr Cupid stirred and lifted his head from Harold's shoulder, causing him to drop his notes on the floor.

'Sorry, mate. Must be fuckin' hard to read on these planes.'

He looked at Harold's perfectly ironed Ralph Lauren shirt and Armani tie.

'Off to Melbourne on business? You look like a lawyer.'

'Close. Accountant.'

'Bean counter. All that paperwork – stuck in an office all day. Not my bag.'

'And you?'

'Left high school after four years and have worked for my dad ever since. He's made a motser building crap units. Doesn't pay me. All in the family business.' Mr Cupid stretched his legs and kneed the seat in front. Took no notice when the woman in front turned around and glared.

'But I've had it. Want to make my own money. Do it on my own. Just like dad did when he came to Oz without a cent to his name.'

'So what are you going to do?'

'Start a business in Melbourne. Not sure what yet. Figured I had to get away from Sydney to do it. Dad's sister is going to put me up till I get established. But whatever I do it has to have something to do with people – helping them in some way. Bricks and mortar give you muscles in the arms but nothing in the heart. Say ... do you help people with your bean counting?'

'I help them with their tax returns. Does that count?'

Harold looked at Mr Cupid's boyish face and waited for a smile. The deep brown eyes seemed incapable of irony.

'Do you help them to cheat – like claim the airfare as a tax deduction when they're really going to see a footie match?'

'Not really. Just a little tweaking of the facts – when there's a loophole.'

Harold thought about the white lie. The two-day trip was for an interview with a recruitment agency for a job based in Melbourne but he'd told Florian he had a meeting with an interstate client. A new job in a different city would be an excuse to end a relationship that had turned sour.

'Say, you married?'

Mr Cupid pointed to the wedding ring on Harold's left hand.

'Yes.'

Harold remembered the commitment ceremony when the civil celebrant's words about enduring love matched the feeling deep in his heart.

'Kids?'

'One. A boy.'

Another white lie. Well! Louis was a substitute child.

'You planning on marriage?'

Despite the stubble on his cheeks, Harold guessed Mr Cupid was in his early twenties – and too young to be married.

'Of course. I'm Greek, aren't I?'

Harold started to read his papers again. Mr Cupid fell asleep – this time with his head against the window. He was still asleep when the plane landed and taxied to the terminal. As soon as the 'tighten seat belt' sign went off Harold stood up and took his briefcase down from the overhead locker.

Mr Cupid was still asleep. Harold was not used to helping other people with small gestures. But the young man seemed so helpless. A wave of pity overcame Harold as he remembered the times when he too was at the mercy of a stranger after a night's debauchery. He touched Mr Cupid on the shoulder.

The eyes slowly opened and he looked at Harold like a schoolboy who had been busted for sleeping in class.

'Uh. Thanks mate.'

Waiting at the taxi rank Harold looked behind. He had beaten most of the passengers to the front of the queue. He checked his mobile. No message from Florian. And plenty of time to go to the hotel to freshen up before the interview.

Just as he was about to get into the taxi he saw Mr Cupid dragging a suitcase and looking

bewildered at the length of the queue. 'Fuck – I'll never make it.'

He spotted Harold and asked.

'Hey, mate can I share your cab?'

Harold thought that Mr Cupid's outfit, now enhanced by a baseball cap, belonged more to a rock concert than the city.

'Sorry, but I'm going to the city.'

'That'll do.'

Without asking Mr Cupid opened the back door, threw in the suitcase and jumped in. Harold told the driver the hotel's Collins Street address. Turned around and asked Mr Cupid where he wanted to get off.

'I'll get out with you.'

Outside the hotel Harold paid the driver and looked at Mr Cupid, waiting for him to say 'thank you' and head his separate way.

'Say mate, do you mind if I make a call from your room. Forgot to recharge the mobile.'

Harold hesitated. But was swayed by the innocence of young adulthood that cried out for protection.

In the bathroom, Harold cleaned his teeth, straightened his tie and combed his hair, while listening to the phone call:

'Two? Ok I'll be there. Now what's the address again?'

Harold came out from the bathroom to find Mr Cupid writing the address on the hotel stationery.

'Would you like a cup of tea? I'm going to make one for myself.'

'No, thanks mate. But do you think I could have a shower? Big ask but I'll be quick. I've an interview at Carlton and I can't go to my aunty's house until she gets home from work this arvo.'

Harold tried to imagine what kind of interview. And remembered his own. He was prepared but had intended to go over his responses to the selection criteria one more time. 'Oh well! Ok but don't take too long. By the way, my name's Harold.'

Harold extended his right hand. Mr Cupid's handshake was rather limp, reminding Harold that he was no business person.

'Steve. Thanks mate.'

At last the real name. He would have to drop the 'Mr Cupid'

Steve didn't bother to undress in the bedroom. Just took his clothes off, threw them on the lounge and strode into the bathroom. Harold pretended not to look but peeked at the bubble butt and finely shaped chest, arms and legs. The kind of body that comes from hard building work rather than gym work-outs.

Harold turned on the radio. Listened to the news while the running water from the bathroom lasted a few minutes then stopped. He waited for the door to open but it seemed to take an eternity. He opened the door slightly and poked his head through the opening. Steve was lying naked on the bed.

'Come over here, mate.'

Steve motioned with one hand while playing with his cock with the other. Harold stood next to the bed.

'Take your clothes off.'

Mr Cupid seemed to have transformed into an authoritative adult. While averting his eyes from Steve, Harold slowly took off his clothes and continued to stand. Steve patted the empty side of the bed and Harold cautiously slipped down with his back to Steve.

'What do you like doing?' Steve whispered into Harold's ear.

Harold didn't have to answer. He groaned at the touch of the hard cock against his arse. Stretched his hand behind and was relieved to feel the cock was covered with a rubber. But probably would have continued, rubber or no rubber. By now he was well on the path to whatever danger and excitement a stranger could offer.

When it was over Steve kissed him on the back of the neck.

'He's a good lover.' thought Harold. 'And it's been a long time since ...'

'You OK?' The voice was more considerate and caring than that of the Mr Cupid Harold left behind on the plane.

'Yes just surprised. You seemed so straight.'

'I like to please ... girls or boys. It's all the same.' He turned Harold around and kissed him on the lips.

'Cuddle me. I always like a hug after sex.'

Harold was cautious about the intimacy. A kiss and a hug were more like the comfort of a friend than casual sex with a stranger.

'I'll get your clothes.'

Harold went into the lounge room and picked up Steve's clothes. Pressed them to his face and savoured the smell of youthful sweat. Then returned to the bedroom and handed Steve his clothes.

As Steve pulled on the leather pants, he winked at Harold.

'Shit, I needed that. How do you think I'll go?'

'Go?'

'I'm applying for a job at an escort agency. Couldn't do it in Sydney - you know what Greek families are like. My dad expects me to work in his building trade forever and my mum to marry a nice Greek girl.'

'Should I pay you?'

'No. That was practice. And makes up for the cab fare. So was I all right? Anything I need to change. I'm more used to chicks.'

Harold was about to tell him to cut his hair and shave but stopped. That was the kind of thing he would have once said to Florian. A few months after they first met.

'No nothing at all.'

'Cool. They told me in the agency that most of their clients are married men.'

Harold wondered whether to tell him the truth - but then again another white lie wouldn't hurt.

'I've got to get moving.'

'Sure, mate.' Steve grabbed his suitcase and Harold opened the front door..

'Take care. Thanks for the taxi drive.' Kissed Harold on the mouth and patted his naked bum.

Harold went to reciprocate but extended his hand instead.

'Nice to meet you, Steve.'

'Cheers, mate' said Steve and headed down the stairs.

Harold closed the door. Noticed for the first time how loud the traffic in Collins Street sounded. Sat on the lounge and smiled. Strangely felt so rejuvenated that he wanted to share his good spirits with Florian. Florian answered the phone by telling him the dishwasher had broken down and Louis had peed on the carpet. Same old routine, thought Harold. "Love" was no longer in their vocabulary. At least Florian asked about the flight.

'Yes, the flight was fine. Had the next seat to myself. Gave me time to prepare for the meeting.'

He didn't bother to shower. Somehow the lingering smell of sex on his body gave him a bravado to face the interview panel. He walked out into Collins Street. Pedestrians scuttled by in different directions. Harold tried to invite eye contact – just to encourage a smile but no one seemed prepared to engage with a stranger.

Walking towards the recruitment agency, he rehearsed in his mind the well-prepared answer to the expected interview question:

'What do you think you will be doing in five years time?'

He could rattle off plenty of buzz-words such as being proactive in implementing strategies to promote the company's core values but deep inside his heart he knew this was crap. For a moment the memory of a heart-shaped tattoo flashed before his eyes and the words of a young Greek boy echoed in his mind:

'Helping people – and doing something with

a bit of heart.

Even an accountant needs to show some passion, Harold thought. He took the mobile out of his pocket and called the recruitment agency. An apology for canceling was better than giving a half-hearted interview for a job he no longer wanted. Then he called Florian and told him he'd already done what he had to do in Melbourne and would be home that night instead of tomorrow.

When the plane took off, the seat beside him remained empty. This time no one emerged from the toilet at the last moment. He reclined his seat and closed his eyes. Thought about Florian who would be waiting for him at the airport terminal carpark – listening to the car radio while Louis slept in the back seat. And planned on giving Louis a big hug and Florian a passionate kiss, instead of the customary peck on the cheek.

Louis's reaction was predictable – he would slobber all over him. But as for Florian – Harold hoped to re-awaken a love that that comes with long – lasting friendship. What he would now give him was the comfort that he had learned from a stranger – some would call it sex but for Harold the heart-shaped tattoo on a bicep reminded him that Cupid's arrow can strike inside the heart as easily as the skin.

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**Ian MacNeill**  
**Le baiser de la fée**

**Dinner with Patrick White**

**After the Musica Viva concert** (the Amadeus Quartet) I stood beside the uni acquaintance who now worked for the Council for the Arts while he schmoozed and was schmoozed by Maria Prerauer. The Musica Viva crowd still had a sprinkling of the astrakhan collared and coated. It was a freezing winter's night in the days when we still had such things and astrakhan had not yet become extinct in Sydney.

I ended up giving Mrs Prerauer a lift home and being invited in for coffee. I accepted out of a confusion of thinking I needed to know such people (she was a music critic who wrote for *The Sydney Morning Herald*), interest and fear that it would be bad manners not to.

It transpired I was required to listen to a diatribe principally against the Nazi Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Mistress of a *Kommandant* of a concentration camp, but also against some others.

I held myself very still during this, as I was, for several reasons, appalled. One of them was that I adored Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and

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was 'one of that type of young man – you know what I mean? – who cheers after every song and some even run to the stage and throw flowers'. I had had no idea Elizabeth Schwarzkopf had been the Mistress of anyone, much less the *Kommandant* of a concentration camp. Also I knew I was 'one of that type of young man' and was wondering just how many others knew – you know what I mean? I was far too stitched up to cheer and throw flowers.

I didn't know what to say, so I nodded and upon leaving gave Maria Prerauer a kiss in consolation, of *faux* rapport. She reeled back then looked rather thrilled.

A few weeks later I was astonished to receive a phone call from her. I was to come to 'a simple meal' and talk to Patrick White about Australian literature. I later learned my Australia Council friend couldn't make it so he had given Mrs Prerauer my phone number.

It was just the four of us (though Mr Prerauer tended to stay out of his wife's action) and kept simple for me. Mrs Prerauer thimble out my wine (Patrick White got a whisky) and we ate like aristocratic nuns (a slice of smoked salmon, in those days a rarity, and a slice of roast veal). Despite my hostess's efforts (she had probably been warned) I got drunk but stayed sealed in politeness and predictable responses. My moment of danger was when White, who had all but pointedly ignored me, suddenly turned and demanded, 'And what do you think of Barbara Baynton?'

My self had been racing around its innerscape delighting in reflections on the situation it found itself trapped in and fantasies of being elsewhere, or scintillating in this one. So while I felt the searching light of interrogation had suddenly been shone into my eyes, I was too drunk with the thimbles of wine and by this stage boredom and insult to be paralysed in its glare.

I came to the realisation I had not thought of Barbara Baynton very much but here was some sort of opportunity to step forth in this room at this table as myself for a moment. It was a moment more dangerous than my companions

and to a lesser extent I realised. I searched my mind for memories of Barbara Baynton. Nothing.

The pause must have extended almost into the dramatic. Then an association came to me with 'The Drover's Wife' and a tramp with a butcher's knife circling a humpy back o' Bourke one dark night in the 1890s. Just as Patrick White opened his mouth to sweep on in utter dismissal of my existence I said, 'Gruesome.'

Mrs Prerauer, Patrick White, Mr Prerauer stared at me. I sliced some veal on my plate. When I looked up to chew, Mr Prerauer (who I suspect was subtle) had just begun to smile, Mrs Prerauer's astonishment was transforming itself for the benefit of Patrick White into angry contempt and his astonishment was transforming itself into interest. 'Quite right,' he said. Mrs Prerauer's glance shot from one to the other of us as if at a tennis match then she beamed at me. Through the rest of the simple meal she kept darting assessing, puzzled glances at me and trying to draw me out. But I, who had never really spoken to her, never really did so. In this way the rest of the evening passed without incident.

In a few more weeks I received another astonishing phone call. 'Hello,' it said, 'this is Manoly Lascaris speaking. Patrick wants you to come to dinner.'

Along with everyone else who read or pretended to, I knew who Manoly Lascaris was – Patrick White's ... We had not given 'partner' its current connotations, it still felt like a euphemism for 'boyfriend'. And 'boyfriend' was obviously not right for Patrick White's ... They had been together for years. And years.

'Oh thank you,' I replied.

I was told when and where.

I had accepted in trepidation: I knew I must inevitably disappoint. With everyone else who read or pretended to, I knew next to nothing about Australian literature and I could not be witty and tell anecdotes in the approved theatre bound manner of the era and I was dreadfully shy. Silence: brooding, calculating, critical,

satiric was my medium and defence. Most people took me for 'quiet'. And I was a good audience. He though, would see through me at once. Still, one could not refuse the challenge.

In the intervening ten days I fantasised about coming into my own, Patrick's beautiful house, the wonderful food and the abundant gin or vodka and really good wine, the dazzling company, my entrée into a world – a world where I would take my place. I would no doubt move into the Eastern suburbs.

I drove. With every intention of getting stonkered, I drove. We did in those days.

I took a bottle of *Pouilly Fumé* I had found in my desperation in David Jones (the old George Street store, now gone). It was astonishingly cheap. Maybe it was too old, maybe it was not a good wine, maybe they had mispriced it (things were laxer then) most likely it had sneaked in during a hiatus in our tariff restrictions.

I climbed the steps in the dark, Centennial Park whispering and rustling as if to footfalls behind me. I noted that I could take refuge in it if things got completely awful.

After a while the door was opened and Manoly in almost ludicrously heavy black framed glasses stood there inspecting me. I explained myself and he silently stood aside to let me enter.

I entered a room full of people. There was another inspection. Behind me Manoly said, 'Patrick's in the kitchen. Would you like a drink?' 'Oh yes.'

Someone smiled at my tone and went back to her conversation.

I handed my wine over; it was instantly whisked away.

I settled myself near someone about my own age who I knew was blossoming in the theatre. Maybe Patrick had invited me to keep him company. His parents were also there, a man of the opera, a woman of the theatre, a young lawyer and a not young art dealer. I knew I could hide in the crowd. Manoly pushed a drink into my hand. Red wine. Ugh. There were those black olives sweating their oil in a crude dish and

taramasalata waiting to be scooped up on rags of that Lebanese bread stuff. I settled for anorexia and the red wine (it was quite rough to my taste but what did I know and poured from a crude jug).

The first of my fantasies had hit the dust. I had dreamt of being in a kind of Hollywood art deco interior, all shining chrome, table lamps throwing soft lights up, bare wood floors focussed by a striking rug, pictures (perhaps idealised portraits of the occupants, a major Margaret Preston, a Nolan to show how they knew) with their own little neon lamps craning to get a better look at what they lit, Lalique vases holding sprays of cymbidium orchids, Chinese planters holding cyclamen (these were not yet tiresome), cocktails – martinis catching the wonderful lights.

He was ahead of the hippy earthy pack, I'll say that for him. Soon everyone was to be pouring rough red (which these days would not seem rough at all) from earthy jugs into earthy goblets. Alienated though I already was, further years deeper in the clayey wilderness were ahead of me.

The parents of the promising young man in the theatre spoke to me in lieu of him. I had almost begun to forget myself in their kindly interest (obviously they were the only ones in the room who would forgive me for being such a nonentity) and the first effects of the wine when Patrick White swept enormous into the room oven-mitted hands clasping a smoking trough of something. He threw it onto the table, ordered Manoly to seat us and charged off.

Manoly (for a moment I saw him as a dutiful but potentially vicious Border Collie – not a good omen for my future behaviour) quickly fussed us to our places. I was at the bottom of the table on his left. Mercifully the parents of the young man of the theatre were next and opposite to me. The man of the opera was next to the mother; he had a gentle, bemused, benevolent glow in his eye.

Patrick was back with a glass of whisky and a ferocious demeanour. Fortunately, by now the

red wine I had been skolling had made me bold: I wanted to laugh. However the appalling mess he served wiped any inclination to smile off my face. I could not eat it. It was all sorts of dissolving things swimming in oil – were those carrots? No capsicum. That is eggplant. Hunks of onion. A clove of garlic surfaced and sank again. More of those bloody black olives. Oregano billowed off the surface of the ugly terracotta bowl to further nauseating effect.

Where were the slices of boiled egg, the caviar served in crystal bowls nestling in ice, their tiny silver spoons gleaming in the candlelight? Where was the soft white bread roll from Schlederer's Bakery, the curl of fragrant fresh butter, the miraculously thin slice of lemon?

A wooden platter on which sat a loaf and its slices was thrust at me. I took a slice to help me to pretend to eat the other thing. Sawdust is no doubt softer. I think it was made out of corn cobs pressed once all the kernels had been eaten then not finely ground pumice sprinkled on top. Patrick glared at us to see who was not eating. Everyone was trying. The silence was monumental. 'Very nice,' I contributed and manfully demonstrated lifting a fork to my mouth. Then I took a tiny bite of the cornboard. There was no butter, presumably as a concession to the oil sliding around our plates. 'Is it a Greek dish?' the mother of the young man of the theatre inquired, smiling at Manoly.

Oh well, there were two of us.

Others bent over their penance with the self-absorbed smiles of the supercilious.

I knew I was suburban. So I took a deep draught of the wine. I wished he would bring on another – a white. Surely he would serve something that went with white after this? Something delicate. Pheasant maybe, if pheasant was delicate – didn't they have to hang it or something? Please god, not pheasant then.

He continued to sip whisky and glare. Then he hoed into the stuff, dentures clacking. I averted my attention. Manoly was smiling at me in what I took to be a malicious manner.

The next I knew there was another commotion. Act I was rung down with cries of, 'Superb!' 'Real food!' 'I could feel it doing me good.' This latter earned the woman of the theatre a sharp glance from the mineral blue eyes but she played out her tone (whatever it had been) resolutely. The terracotta bowls and trough were whisked away. More wine was poured. I asked for white.

The second course was a beef daube and edible though there were not really enough potatoes (boiled whole in their skins). My request for white had been patently overlooked. Anyway I enjoyed the daube. It strengthened me and I was able to be more part of the occasion.

The whisky must have made its way to White's limbic system for he was now waving his earthy goblet and interrogating in order to muster subject matter for his diatribe.

It became clear to me what the dinner was about: audience. We were merely an audience for the Sybil of Centennial Park. I felt hugely relieved.

'And I suppose you've been feeding that woman after her performances?' he screeched at the man of the opera.

'Yes, Patrick. Dame Joan has kindly consented to come over for supper after a performance or two. We keep it very simple, as you know. She wants to relax after a –'

'Saw her in *The Carmelites*, didn't we Manoly?'

'Yes Patrick.'

'Dreadful. Utterly unconvincing. The *complacency!*'

I cannot convey in print what he made of that word. In general it might be noted that he would have been a great singer himself, if he could sing. In any case he did not let his unfortunate voice stop him from performing miracles of expression.

I laughed for sheer pleasure at his theatricality, his audacity, his outrageousness.

He glanced me into submission. 'I was not moved, not for a moment. How could I be if I were not convinced?'

He did a wonderful thing with 'convinced'



also. Somewhere in it there was a snake hissing. Possibly Satan as he had been when he approached Eve.

'A Strathfield housewife in a church hall production. No understanding.'

'I think she's a Darling Point girl, Patrick,' the young lawyer said.

'I thought it was Vaucluse – it's somewhere in the Eastern Suburbs, maybe Point Piper but I don't think so.'

These examples of literal mindedness were – it was something stronger than dismissed yet milder than obliterated – intensely overlooked with a sweep of the pale blue eyes.

'A Protestant dressing up as a Carmelite for a fancy dress dance.' (Again, no alphabet could convey what he did with that final word).

'I think she might be Catholic, Patrick.'

'The Singing Housewife!'

'Now Patrick,' the man of the opera gently intoned.

'She'd be nothing without him.' Here followed an entirely unrepeatable analysis of Richard Bonyngé, about whom White appeared to know everything. He related Bonyngé's breeding and personality to his work in music. To my young ears it was brilliant beyond crediting. I was ready to sit at the feet forever.

However this was not to be.

Before dessert and after Richard Bonyngé Bob Hawke was circumspectly quartered.

Dessert was a *clafoutis aux pommes*, a good contrast to what had preceded but dry and the apples (Granny Smith) far too tart. Mercifully no wine was served with it.

We adjourned to the lounge for Act III.

White had returned to whisky. I was planning my escape, considering whether I could send a note rather than ringing to thank them.

'And you, young man, we hear you are lectured by Professor Kramer.'

I admitted that I was in one of her tutorials. But hastened to add there was another tutor as well. My mind had reeled over the possibilities of saying something clever about her but

nothing arrived.

Everyone was staring at me; more was required.

'She plays her game very subtly.' Something had arrived. I had no idea what I meant.

'Aha! That is not our impression. Professor Kramer,' he stated.

I knew I had nothing further to add.

'She's a friend of James McAuley,' the woman of the theatre saved me.

'They're all in it together, the profupials!'

'The profupials', was repeated by several with those spirit annihilating trod-the-boards laughs. The father of the boy wonder of the Australian Theatre politely wagged his head in distant tribute to amusement.

I was desperate to get away.

The Platonic monologue had turned on Professor A D Hope whose work I found repulsive but I was too far gone in fear that something further would be required of my inadequacy to enjoy the butchery ... 'The greatest eighteenth century writer working in the twentieth. Huh!' Which had become careless. Something had gone terribly wrong with the evening.

I had to move. I rose to examine the paintings.

These were, my secret inner voice suggested, 'dreary' (this word was much used in those days by those who wished to be smart). I recognised a Godfrey Miller, an Ian Fairweather, both either beyond me or too desperately seeking what would forever evade him in the case of the former or addled in the latter. To my horror I found White standing beside me. 'What do you think?' he demanded.

'Patrick (I took that risk), I must go.'

'Quite right,' he said for the second time to me, only this time I was not at all suse of the tone.

As I was traversing the huge stage of the lounge room Manoly entered from the wings bearing a J C Williamsons wooden tray laden with the accustomed glazed muddy vessels. He paused wonderfully to take in my departure before going to a sideboard to lay the salving jugs and chalices down. 'Oh, you are not

leaving? So soon.’ He thus turned the production into *The Mikado* with its hints of real execution in most unpleasant manners. ‘We are all just about to have tea. Coffee is so bad for you. Patrick forbids it.’

‘Quite right,’ I said. And quickly to the repertory ensemble poised to carry on the real drama after the necessary bit player had ushered himself off, ‘Good night, it’s been lovely talking to you.’

I will regret that for the rest of my life.

‘Did you have a coat?’ Patrick demanded of me as I was about to enter the dark wing from which no player returns.

‘I’m wearing it.’

‘It’s cold out there.’

Not as cold as in here, my inner voice said.

I shut the front door behind me.

I heard a peel of laughter. A concerted stagy bellow as I picked my way down the testing front path to the gate.

I stopped before I got into my car to breathe the sweet air of freedom. A tang of Centennial Park hit my nostrils. The silence of the park prevailed over the occasional distant murmur of car, the roar of a bus. I longed to wander towards its unknowable depths to render null the awful fool I had made of myself, to immerse myself in sweet oblivion. The key found the lock.

To my horror I heard Manoly’s voice. Patrick would like me to come to dinner, again.

I heard my own go high and light as I lied, ‘I would love to.’

During the following days I racked my mind for excuses. None would be more than that; I had to go, ‘chickening out’ was against my religion. But I promised myself that this would be the last time.

I was steeled for the ordeal but what would I take? It was also against my religion to turn up empty-handed. And I had to make a special effort in order to compensate for my inadequacy and awkwardness. There was no more French wine at ridiculously cheap prices in D Js, I

believed flowers were an encumbrance to hosts, the Manoly-Whites did not seem chocolate type of people though one of those wooden boxes from Personality Chocolates might be presentable – but no, I could feel his contempt ... Oh, I’d just take a reasonably expensive bottle of red. Then I remembered Bill May’s Charcuterie in Miller Street – dare I? Living way over there in Centennial Park they had probably not sampled his delicacies though they would have heard of him. I bought a slice of his duck liver *pâté* and one of his *pâté de campagne*. They looked meagre so I bought a pot of his *béarnaise* sauce for them too.

Thus armed, I trod up the treacherous path.

It was another cold night. The dogs barked out the back. I smiled at the memory of a girl complaining in a tutorial about the dogs in ... was it *The Solid Mandala, Riders in the Chariot?* licking their balls or something. The tutors had exchanged smiles. Someone else had exclaimed, ‘But Angela, that’s what dogs *do!*’ Angela had thought it ‘unnecessary’.

The door was open and there was the eternal Manoly tacitly snickering. I was dressed in a rather dramatic Army Stores navy trench coat. He made sure he led me in for inspection before helping me to divest myself of my interest. Patrick was waiting, semi reclined on the couch, bailed up in a huge armchair was a late middle-aged woman. She was staring into some mystery or torment.

‘Ah, you’re amongst us again,’ Patrick said, ‘have you been drafted?’

No, my name hadn’t been drawn in the ballot to go to Vietnam, I apologised.

‘Well Phillip is among us to escape it.’ Phillip, it transpired, was a draft-dodging American of literary training.

The nearly elderly woman was Christina Stead. I was cursing myself for not having read *The Man who Loved Children*.

She looked like an elderly zoo lion who would have been rather mangy but for the fact he had had his mane severely trimmed and very

tightly permed. It was evident he had never accustomed himself to captivity and though possibly arthritic would crouch and spring when it was least expected. She had just finished a whisky and clearly wanted another. Manoly saw to it and to Patrick's. I was again given wine (red also again) and my offerings whisked away.

Patrick was going on about War. His war. The desert, the boredom, being strafed by the Wadi something or another. Manoly came in with plates with things on them. 'We're bivouacking,' he said. I noticed my *pâté de campagne* on one of them.

Miss Stead said, 'No thank you, not at the moment,' when offered something (black olives needless to say, those stupid dolmades, salami and my contribution which were apparently to be aligned with slices of that bread). Her voice was clear, precise and her very Australian accent in the process of becoming antiquated. She deliberately lit a cigarette then drank. I am sorry to say I cannot remember all that she said that night but will carry to my grave an impression of huge strength of some very unusual kind and of a regard which was without compassion or malice, neither gimlet, calculating nor unfocussed; *I Am a Camera* comes to mind. Christina Stead was the antithesis of whimsical and self-regarding. She was not silent, she was not loquacious, she did her duty by the conversation and believe me her clear and strong voice betrayed no doubt as to her opinions. I was terrified Patrick would demand what I thought of *The Man Who ...* or even if it were studied in the University. Girls of my acquaintance had been led to read it by their High School English Honours teachers. Several, who knew my home life, had told me I ought to read it. The tone in their voice made the prospect of the book's revelations terrifying to me and when I had peeped between its covers I had found its style daunting. As was its author.

Phillip, unlike the greasy theatricals, was unimpressed by being in the Presence. He chatted on, blithely. He was very nice in his

impossible innocent American manner.

The other guests were the Duttons, over from Adelaide. Geoff was all gleaming with some joy he was ill-equipped to disguise, Nin was not. She was restless and edgy. She was wonderful to look at; the epitome of forties beauty and she spoke with warmth and vivacity. I was very sorry she was so unhappy.

Despite being denied the gin or vodka I craved, I got intoxicated on the pre dinner glass of red (it was glasses this time; the dinner service was again earthy but smooth this time – Arabia ware I would guess, popular at the time). I was fine (that is to say I was dull and polite) through the soup (celery with which I was allowed a white) but by the time the rabbit (!) was borne in (au moutarde and garlic, garlic, garlicky served with these coarse large white boiled bean things – the Manoly-Whites could not, it would seem, abide a fine texture) I was away. Mrs Dutton became a puma about to slice someone's face open with her claws and obviously it would not be the permed lion's, nor the Sage of Centennial Park's; Manoly's defence of sweetness was complete, that left the American and me and her husband.

The wine had lifted my spirits, I was looking again at the paintings glowing from the walls. One was of a biplane just hatched from an egg. 'I love surrealism, don't you?' I announced.

Phillip asked what made me say that and I explained. Everyone looked at the painting then at me. Phillip asked Miss Stead if it were true she had attended the First International Congress of Writers. She nodded and sipped her wine. 'In Paris?' Miss Stead nodded and sipped her wine. Nin asked her if she were writing at the moment and she nodded and sipped her wine. I thought I had heard of the First International Congress of Writers – some left wing/Communist thing, they were using glasses and plates with textures which weren't sandy and here I was with Christina Stead and Geoffrey Dutton, owner of Sun Books and his lovely, elegant vivacious wife and Phillip from America who seemed to be

camp and Patrick White and his .... Manoly. 'Isn't it good Thea Astley won the Miles Franklin again?' I contributed to a lull in this labouring evening.

The dormant Patrick now erupted, 'That wicked, back-biting bitch! She was a sure thing. Miss Beatrice Davis *B A* runs the thing. She's her editor at Angus and Robertson's. She makes sure her horses come in. It's fixed, it's fixed! Their tiny little sapphic circles run Lily Literature in this state.'

'I thought Thea Astley was married. I met her husband in Adelaide,' Nin Dutton said. She was sitting next to Patrick. She laid her hand across his.

I noticed Christina Stead's gaze take this in, then Geoff Dutton then me. So I said, 'She's such a sophisticated writer. Surely she's the most satiric of our writers? She's brilliant, without being great perhaps, as you are.' I looked at the two greats. Patrick looked mollified, Miss Stead waved a hand as if languidly indicating an infinity to her left and sipped her wine. Phillip stared at me. Manoly had decided we had finished with the rabbit.

He returned to the table with photographs. He hovered over me. 'This is Patrick on holiday with Geoffrey on his island,' he said placing the rather good black and white photograph in front of me. It was of Geoff and Patrick with fishing gear. They were tanned. Geoffrey looked relaxed and happy, Patrick looked satisfied. Manoly's finger rested on Geoff. I looked at him, I looked at Geoff's image. 'Did you catch anything?' I asked Patrick. His pale blue eyes flickered. I smiled up at Manoly. Manoly whisked the photograph away. He came back with another, framed. It was of a much younger him in army uniform. He placed it in front of me. I was puzzled. 'What a beautiful photograph. Of you,' I said. 'Was it taken out here?' 'Near Alexandria,' Manoly said and took that photograph away. I knew something was going on but I had only dim notions of what.

Dessert was *crêpes Suzette*. They were not done at the table. Their texture was fine and

rubbery.

We adjourned. I asked for a gin and was given brandy.

'How has Australia influenced your work?' Phillip asked Miss Stead.

'You ought to be writing! Not running this foolhardy publishing concern,' Patrick plosived at Geoffrey Dutton. 'It'll burn you up and take all your money.'

'I feel Sun Books had an important contribution to make. To Australia. Now is the time,' Geoff replied.

'What are you publishing?' I asked.

'Picture books!' Patrick answered.

'There is a market for colourful – creative books, designed by ... We have to take the opportunity now you can get the colour work done so cheaply in Hong Kong.'

'Leave it to that shyster Gordon Barton! You have your own work to do.'

'Do you feel you missed out on ... because you left Australia?' Phillip persisted with Miss Stead. Was he just polite?

Miss Stead sipped her whisky and appeared to be considering returning her conscious attention to this room and perhaps even the question. She did so. 'I am not sure there was anything to miss out on, one always misses out on something by being somewhere else. I was somewhere else.'

Patrick White said something (no doubt wonderful) in French and Miss Stead replied (no doubt wonderfully). Her French sounded very good to me (his had not). No doubt she spoke German, Italian and Spanish as well. Hadn't she been in the Spanish Civil War?

'Yes but,' Phillip said, 'you're back now. So much must have changed, I wondered if ... you felt you ... Australia – what does Australia have to offer?'

The room was intently focussed on this returned expatriate, this near ruin.

Miss Stead was not alarmed by attention. Her pale blue furious eyes retained their limp quality. She and Patrick could have been



siblings. Blue eyes, furious, tall ... she was more elemental than he.

As she appeared not to be answering, Patrick declaimed, 'One runs but always carries this dried sponge of a country with one. It will suck you up (oh *that* kind of sponge) but will fill you with its dull colours and swirling dust (here he wheezed) – Opals! Bloody opals with their slimy phosphorescent greens and cataract whites, their whorish mauves.' He appeared to be struggling for breath, wildly batted Manoly's ministrations away, sucked on a whisky and glared at the angels listening in their tiers just above the slate tiles of the steep roof.

'The Spring tides at Watson's Bay spoiled me for anything else, perhaps,' Miss Stead announced to Phillip.

We all sat stunned.

I felt it was my duty to save the evening.

'I know what you mean,' I worse than dreadfully presumed, 'you can swim – glide over the rocks you have to clamber over and oyster cuts always fester. No-one eats them now because you get hepatitis,' I warned Miss Stead.

Before she could acknowledge this kindness the Centennial Park geyser blew. 'We know about you!' he declared. 'The meat industry.'

As it was directed at me I felt obliged to respond in some way. 'Meat industry' must be some jargon of sophisticates for ... it was usually sexual. So I nodded.

'Where did you get that wine? The *Pouilly Fumé*?'

The brandy had given me some kind of clarity. '*La collection de mon père*,' I said and was astonished by the perfection of my school accent. My father had been dead for years and I had never known him to drink wine.

'Aha! We thought so. And what are they running these days - Shorthorns?'

'They've had a bit of trouble in the Gulf Country so they're trying out Brahman crosses.' I had seen a television program about this so if we were talking about the meat industry, perhaps this would do. 'They're repulsive,' I

added in case we weren't and it wouldn't.

'They pay for French wine.' With this asseveration I was more or less dismissed though I could see he wanted to add more in the way of the reproachful.

He turned on Geoff Dutton and his failure to apply himself to the Great Project, the nature of which was not revealed. Phillip asked and was informed the time was not ripe for revelations and was asked what he intended to do with himself while he dallied out the war Downunder.

Manoly disappeared, to bring in the tea, I hoped. They were talking now of Miles Franklin and how she had blossomed at sixteen and her blossoms had thus set for the rest of her life. I gathered there was much Patrick approved about her.

Manoly appeared, not with the tray but with more photos. 'Sidney Nolan.'

'I know,' I said though I didn't.

'John Tasker. He directed some of Patrick's plays.'

'Oh,' I said.

'David Foster.'

I examined the photos. They were all the one person and I was in there with them. They were a type. I had a revelation – oh, this is what they meant when they said 's/he's his type'. I got it. I was Patrick's type – thin, straight brown hair, artisticky and quietish.

Manoly saw I had got it, took the photos and exited to prepare for his next entrance.

I looked around. All were engaged in Phillip's defence of his fleeing the draft to Australia except Miss Stead. Her steady gaze absorbed me while I came to the conclusion that I had been invited to these madmen's house, not because I had hidden, astonishing depths, wonderful potential, was interesting in some way not apparent to me but because I was White's type. She saw, sipped her whisky and turned her attention to Phillip at bay.

The room became squalid; self-possession began chelating in me.

I went to the kitchen. Manoly was doing his J

C Williamsons wooden tray.

I thanked him.

He said he would see me out.

'Good night!' I declaimed as I re-entered the lounge.

No-one said 'Oh you're not going?' of course, they just stared at me shadowed by Manoly.

Something swept me: I must gain something from this abasing encounter. I strode to Miss Stead and aligned one cheek and then another in formal intimacy with hers. Her response was expert and maybe terribly kind. I turned and bore down on Patrick White. He was glaring ahead then foolishly looked up into my face. I kissed him on the forehead and smiling, considered him. His flinty eyes kaleidoscoped resolving into velvet softness; mine turned adamantine.

'Good night,' I said to the others as I trod calmly off, shadowed by Manoly.

As I stepped into the stinging freshness of freedom he called from the doorway, 'Patrick finds you a little interesting, he calls you our *farouche* young friend.'

As my feet hit Martin Road I realised I was terribly drunk. I couldn't drive across the Bridge in this state. I walked to my mother's car and sat in the front passenger seat. I couldn't drive and I feared encountering again the other guests as they made their escapes. Then I noticed a gate into the darkness of Centennial Park; it was slightly ajar.

I knew I would pass out soon if I didn't wake up so I ventured through the gate – a walk could only help, even if I had to walk for hours.

I plunged down a lawn gully into further darkness. The cold intensified and the grass began to crackle; frost. I thought the cold would help me to sober up. I was shaking.

I reached the bottom of the gully. There was a huge log. I sat on it and dozed off. A noise – a gurgling – brought me back to consciousness. What was it? Moonlight now illuminated the freezing gully. I could still not see the source of the strange noise so I got up to search.

It was a tap of a very old kind and water sparkled and ran whitish with myriad tiny bubbles from it. It was the milk of Paradise and I drank. It was wonderfully cold and pure.

It was the only miracle I have ever experienced: I was instantly sober, dreadfully tired but clear of sight and steady of hand and foot.

I made my way out of the gully and drove home.

In the two days of rage and remorse which followed I decided those two were appalling, that they entertained chiefly in order to indulge in Get the Guest, that Patrick White was mad and Manoly bad, that Miss Stead had said that thing about the Spring tides at Watson's Bay merely as something to say and that it had been rather feeble.

Over the following years I saw Patrick White several times and we kept our distance. The last was on Central Station. He was wearing a light khaki trench coat and heading west. It was an odd time of night, nine o'clock.

Several decades later I read *For Love Alone* and realised Miss Stead had not been rather feeble; the Spring tides at Watson's Bay probably had unfitted her for life elsewhere, though that she had to have.

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Ian MacNeill can hardly believe it's thirty years since the first Mardi Gras, still hopes Patrick White, Christina Stead and Thea Astley will write more books, was unsurprised when jeans sank below the navel again and gives thick white-framed sunglasses less than six months.

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