Leaves of Acid – Part II (stories)

THE HALF-CREATURES OF THE WOODS

A TALE.

The rhythm of the train. Outside, the world is green and growing greener, we're country-bound to idylls and adventure. Away from the grime and gripe of the senseless city, to clean air and serenity, to listen to bird-songs and silence, to wash the sordid TV jingles from our brains. Sweet Sylvie rocks beside me, adoring and adored. Our child will grow among grasses and winds, the bowl of the sky his cradle. His will be smells of life, passing and renewing, the keen scents of spring and the slumbrous fumes of summer, not the sad stink of men jailed in geometry. We're country-bound and green is everywhere. And I'll write my novel, it may be good, you never can tell. The rhythm of the train. You never can tell, you never can tell.

Sylvie. I love her till I'm useless.

Here it is. The station painted rustic. The stationmaster, a furtive fellow, peers nervous from the shadows. Sylvie's smile draws his greeting.

'Do we ride the bus?'

'You ride the bus', he says, pointing to infinity.

Our house. It nestles on the side of a hill. I've seen it before in my imagination. And yards away, a minute's stroll, the first trees of the woods.

Sylvie and I, ensconced in each other's warmth, while I listen to the wind playing with my thoughts.

Nonchalant and leafy in the afternoons, I wander in the woods, breathing the trees. I follow secret paths known by unknown feet, discovering flowers and insects, birds that study me askance, a throbbing rabbit, a sleepy snake. A creek where I slipped and fell into my boyhood, laughing and splattered.

Mornings, in the violet gloom, I scuff along to the station. I work there, mopping the old stone floor, sweeping the creviced planks of the platform, loading and unloading, recovering spillages of wheat and coal and sundry things from beside the tracks. Something inevitably spills, since the freight trains always bunch and shudder, the trucks clashing cantankerously - as if the train is never convinced that it should actually stop at our laughable station. But I'm surprised at how much stuff goes in and out. I haven't seen the town yet - it must be bigger than I thought. Packages marked in mysterious red: THIS SIDE UP, FRAGILE, HANDLE WITH EXTREME CARE. Telling me: be careful you fool.

It's hard to extract instructions from my boss, the stationmaster. He camps in his tiny office like a sun-shy rodent, rarely emerging. After I knock, I hear him scuttling about, for minutes sometimes. Then the door opens a little. If I've been out in the sun I can't see a thing.

'What do you want?' he says, as if I'm a stranger.

'What should I do next?'

'Oh', he says. 'Put away the tarps and the ropes. In the shed, y'know'. Closing the door. As I've just finished doing exactly that, I go away for a smoke, allowing a decent interval before I disturb him again. At noon I'm off. I catch the bus, it's uphill going home.

Sylvie is often not there when I arrive. She forays into town, shopping for the house, coming home loaded with bargains: curtains, rugs, crockery, bits and pieces. Stories of the friendly townsfolk.

'Wonderful people'.

So it seems. Do decency and generosity flourish in this limpid air as wildflowers do?

In the woods, I have a sense of other presences. Sometimes a trembling of leaves, the grass signalling, unseen burrowings. A rustling in the undergrowth behind me and I spin - the ferns nodding in mute conspiracy, I missed it. Overhead a flap of wings, I look up, I could've sworn. Were they dark wings against the sun or the high, restless fingers of a tree?

The wings I'm most sure of. I heard them distinctly, if only for a moment. Something moved. There is no wind. Something dark against the sun. But reflecting, I'm uncertain. In this teem of life there is no finitude. In any moment a million movements, I'm a poor knower.

This has been happening for days.

I'm sitting by the pool where the tortuous progress of the creek pauses for its reflection and mine. Studying tadpoles. Those black wings again. I look up slowly, having accepted my bafflement.

'Hello'.

A voice. I'm deranged. I thought it took longer than this for solitude to bend your brain.

'Hello. You don't see me. But I'm real. In a sense'.

Other voices. Tinkles of jollity.

'It's good to have someone to talk to'.

'Who are you?'

'Call me what you will. I'm a half-creature'.

I call him Blackie, for the wings.

'We're all half-creatures'. A chorus.

'What's a half-creature?'

‘What you see. What you don’t see’.

‘Well, I’m…’

‘We know you’.

‘Because you know us’.

‘Shall we explain?’

‘I hope so’.

Once, they say, they were inhabitants of the town.

‘This is our state of exile. We were banished’.

‘We’re here but we’re not here. We are figments, even to each other’.

‘We see but we are not seen’.

‘We hear but we are not heard, except by those who know us’.

‘We have thoughts and hopes and sadness. But we can make no impression, not even on the eye. However we aspire, we can only drift. We yearn in vain. Our selves have been stolen’.

‘But how did this happen?’

‘The town is controlled by the filthy triumvirate’.

‘The Judge, the Mayor, the Keeper of the Books’.

‘Those who offend them are banished to the woods. As half-creatures. No one hears of us again. We’ve ‘gone away’, they say. We are remembered and forgotten. They pretend it didn’t happen. A conspiracy of fear’.

‘But what did you do? To incur such punishment?’

‘I thought my own thoughts’.

‘I frowned when they smiled’.

‘I smiled when they frowned’.

‘I didn’t laugh at their jokes’.

‘I cast aspersions’.

‘I deciphered their code’.

‘I stole their thunder’.

‘I loved the daughter of the Keeper of the Books. A fragility blonde’.

‘That’s a crime?’

‘No, but she loved me. That’s a crime’.

‘I called their bluff’. Blackie’s voice. And I thought for a moment I saw him smile, but it was only a glimmer of sunlight.

And they’ve gone. I’m alone again on the slurried bank. Pondering my sanity.

‘I’ll talk to Sylvie about it’.

I feel a bit awkward telling her, like a child with a wild story. ‘Half-creature’. I stumble over the word. Trust her!

She says yes, but for a moment her eyes resist, an attempt at indifference which sends me into a spin.

‘No one in the town has mentioned it. And they’re so open, those people’.

‘Not even a murmur?’

‘And friendly. Not a word’.

‘They must be afraid’.

‘They don’t seem to be afraid of anything’.

You’ll see, I promise her.

And what of the terrible three?

It’s getting worse.

She’s met the Mayor. Apparently he’s jolly and benign.

I asked the stationmaster. I caught him in the sunshine. He was blinking and grinning furiously.

‘Have you heard of the half-creatures?’

‘Ha ha,’ he said, jokingly.

‘I mean are they real? Do you think that they’re real?’

‘Ha,’ he said, half-jokingly, and disappeared with his ferret’s smile.

Something is wrong. What began as a barely-noticed sprig of doubt in the forest of my equanimity has become a plague of nettles that threatens to engulf me. A growing uneasiness, in other words.

I went to town with Sylvie, hoping for the best. How they feted her! Her happiness cheered me up somewhat, but, though I tried to remain in the background, there seemed to be, behind Sylvie’s back and over her head, such curt looks and sullen intimations. Directed at me. Who else? I came home hoping I was paranoid.

And the bus-driver. What else to make of that?

It was twelve o’clock. I was about to board the bus for my daily journey home. The bus-driver shook his head.

‘All full up. Full up, no room.’

‘But it’s empty.’

‘Emptiness is a danger sign.’

Hiss-closing the door. The bus lurched and rattled away up the hill, leaving me tasting dust.

Well, I’m forearmed with warnings. Blackie and his friends have sketched me a stark image of the terrible three and the fearful thraldom of the other townspeople.

‘They can be charming, those three dark men. Charm is the poison they pour in your cup.’

‘They need to be evil.’

‘Otherwise, life is futile.’

‘The game is over.’

‘And the others, frightened or naïve, will always lend a hand or a blind eye.’

‘So be wary.’

‘Something to remember. Those old men abhor … what they once saw in us, what they now see in you … call it passion. The heat of emotion. That is their special hatred. That swells their venom. Since their own fires have long ago died.’

‘When a young girl stirs the embers of their lust, they feel their lack. They know their emptiness. Then they are most dangerous.’

Can it be? I’m both afraid and curious.

I’ll get to the bottom of the matter, soon enough. Sylvie’s received an invitation.

‘I ran into the Mayor. He was with his friend – the one with the quaint title.’

‘The Keeper of the Books? Sounds menacing to me.’

‘Well, they’ve invited us to dinner. They said they really want to meet you.’

‘I’m sure.’

‘Of course, we don’t have to go if you …’

That hint of vexation in her voice again.

‘No, we’ll go. I must. I think.’

The Mayor’s house is a dark prospect. To gain entry you must clang at the huge iron gate and pass the scrutiny of a twitch-eyed lackey. Then a long crunch up the gravel path. Somewhere close, a rasp of dogs, barking and whining. The wind moans in the formless garden.

Inside, the wizened three greet us both with mock bonhomie. The only other person present is a shabby servant, who takes our coats and then awaits instructions, staring at the floor.

‘Would the young man like to sit at the head of the table.’ Stated, not asked.

‘Bring the food and wine.’

Sylvie sits there, radiating warmth. The skeletal trio crowd around her, as if trying to soothe the cold ache of their bones. I shiver. Even ignoring me, they draw my heat also.

I see why I’m placed at the head of the narrow table. On my right sit the Mayor and the Keeper of the Books; on my left, the Judge has interposed himself between me and Sylvie. They all crane towards her, leaving me out. I can’t catch her eye, as at least one of them has her engaged in conversation all the time.

The Judge swivels his head from Sylvie to me and back again. He has one facial expression for her and another for me. Having tried to turn me to water with his cold eyes, he turns back to Sylvie and I see the beginnings of the contortion that passes for his smile. When his gaze returns to me, I see the friendliness dying in his face like a fading apparition.

‘The young lady tells me you’re interested in philosophy.’

What else have they discussed? I assent, cautiously.

‘Petitilism. That’s the tune we dance to here.’

‘Those of us who think in tune.’

‘And how is our sylvan nymph enjoying her meal?’

‘It’s delicious,’ murmurs Sylvie. My glare is dispensed with, being unmet.

My own food is tasteless. Poison occurs to me. After the main course, before the dessert which I attempt to refuse, I broach the subject.

‘I wanted to ask you about the half-creatures.’

They all turn to look at me, as if I’d said something unspeakably rude. I don’t dare to evaluate Sylvie’s expression.

‘Half-creatures? Is the boy twisted?’

‘Or dangerously deluded?’

‘Are we to be slandered by bodiless voices?’

‘Don’t listen so hard to the wind sighing in the trees, that’s my advice.’

‘Learn to dance. We’ve many a merry tune.’

‘Have some strawberries.’

The meal is done with, finally. Wine glasses replenished.

‘Time for the men to adjourn to the smoking room.’

‘Can you amuse yourself, my little one?’ The Mayor solicitous, leaning very close to Sylvie. ‘You may inspect the works of art, as I promised.’ There are pictures hanging on the walls.

I’m ushered into the smoking room for the hard word.

They surround me. A verbal attack from three sides. To keep me spinning.

‘Are you ill?’

‘Are you delirious?’

‘As to your delusions.’

‘Forget them.’

‘Don’t listen so hard.’

‘Respect the law.’

‘Have a cigar.’

‘Don’t side with criminals.’

‘Don’t fool with figments.’

‘A man must learn not to bite the bread that butters him.’

‘Respect the law. Be lawfully respectful.’

‘Your wife is delightful.’

‘Respect your wife.’

‘She has a honeyed middle.’

‘And remember …’

‘No big ideas.’

‘Petitilism.’

‘Keep it in mind.’

‘Forget your figments.’

‘Your wife is delectable.’

‘Respect your wife.’

‘And as for yourself …’

‘Remember …’

‘One illness leads to another.’

‘When you’re really sick, you’re just as likely to get worse.’

I don’t feel so well, come to think of it.

I know Sylvie’s worried about my state of mind. I’m worried about more than that.

Yesterday, we went into the woods together. I had a notion. If she could learn at first-hand the predicament of the half-creatures …

The signs were everywhere: the quivering grass, the trembling ferns, the far-off flap of Blackie’s wings. They didn’t speak. I waited all day. Sylvie enthused over the swoon-scented flowers and the startling birds. Her laughter danced in the dappled light. I waited and waited, growing confused. I ended the day forlorn.

Today, Blackie was quick to explain. I had barely entered the trees, when he alighted somewhere near my shoulder.

‘I know you’re disappointed.’

‘But why did you avoid us?’

‘We can only talk to those who know us.’

They’re all around. A phantom gallery, consoling me.

So I’m alone in this enterprise, whatever it is. I have another question.

‘I’ve been wondering. Is there any way…?’

‘To become ourselves again?’

‘To be reinstated?’

‘Unlikely.’

‘It’s possible.’

‘If someone persuades the terrible three.’

‘To change their minds.’

‘Soften their hearts.’

‘Consider our plight.’

‘Review our punishment.’

‘A risky undertaking. That evil threesome like things just the way they are.’

They’re leaving.

‘Farewell.’

‘So long.’

‘Be careful.’

They’ve gone.

Where is this? Am I invited or lured? The Town Hall, it must be, a damp collection of stones riddled with rooms of conspiracy and lichen, rooms like this where they plan persecutions. The panicking flicker of candles and the three of them a muttering huddle; small, vicious men amplified by their huge, hulking shadows, looming and shuddering on the walls and ceiling. Their faces censored by shadow. The light draughty and uncertain. Voices whose authors I can't see.

'There is a way.'

'If you insist on your misconceptions.'

'An old law.'

'Rarely invoked.'

'You meet the Town Champion. At the festival. In combat.'

'If you win…'

'Your figments are freed.'

'If you lose…'

'Then you loose.'

'Still the grievance is settled.'

'And then the dust can settle.'

'Are you satisfied?'

'Are you frightened?'

'Will you meet the Champion?'

Obviously.

I've agreed, God help me.

I'm the champion of the half-creatures. The woods ring with their encouragement. But I know they're hoping, more than anything.

'Of course, we don't dare expect…'

'Even if you win…'

'Hush,' says Blackie. 'You see, my friend, futility is our daily lot. We hope cautiously. Hope can be the dizzy skid we ride to resignation. Resigned, we die.'

And the Town Champion?

'Some of us knew him slightly. A simple enough fellow, though he has a dire reputation.'

'The strongest of his generation.'

'Young men pit their strength for the honour.'

How do we fight? With what weapons?

No one is sure.

'There have been no contests in living memory. We have only fables. Stories of gore.'

'Fables are hard to verify.'

'They say the Town Champion has never lost.'

I'm alone in this. With the moral support of a bunch of figments.

I've seen him. I was meant to, I presume. He came walking along the road in front of our house. A tall man, of ominous physique, ripples of strength shimmering through the air with every movement. Flashing silver from his boots and wristlets, dazzling arrows. An easy cruelty in his stride, a dagger at his belt. He looked straight ahead, fearing nothing, flex and unflex of gleaming muscle, his vocation indubitable.

'Do you think you can match him?' That's the question.

'He's big.'

'Immense.'

'He's versed in weaponry. Trained to the minute.'

Will I plead and flap with broken limbs in the pool of my blood, testing his mercy?

No! I'll bring him down! The half-creatures will be heard.

'He's big and strong, and mean and long, a yeoman brute with brutal hands – but I'm quick, I'm lithe, and my rage is deep: I'll curdle 'im with murder!'

The half-creatures must be heard. I'm determined, fatalistic…

But the waiting wearies me. My courage wanes.

A dread has been stalking me, like the shadow of that huge man. I've tried to stay ahead of it. My legs are jelly. It's tomorrow…

The day has dawned. The morning is hypnotic. I'm instilled with a faint beginning glow of resolution, as the sky is coloured with the coming sun. There's strength in my legs again. I'll curdle him if I can.

I'm the champion of the dispossessed.

At the festival. An ebb-tide of merriment sucking at my new resolve. Two striped tents, away amid the colour and chatter of the townspeople, and a raised arena, green-roped like a boxing ring. There we meet. Sylvie is here somewhere. After this, we'll clear the brambles from our bed and salve our bruises with our mouths.

The Judge, the Mayor, the Keeper of the Books. Grim little tyrants rubbing their parch-dry hands.

The festival is sited on the fringe of the woods. Meeting half-way. In the trees the half-creatures are watching their fate enacted.

I'm ushered into my tent. It's gloomy inside. I have an attendant who instructs me in gestures. A bulky suit to put on, made out of some kind of fur. A long wooden staff. This is all right. This suit must provide some protection, some softening of his blows even if he catches me. A stout pole to wield. As boys we fought with staves, miming merry men.

Into the ring. I'm wondering how well I'll be able to move in this cumbersome suit. I need my speed.

We're announced. Cheers for the Town Champion. Silence for me. I have my own circle of support back in the trees. We stare at each other through our eyeholes.

'Let the combat commence.' The cracked notes of the Judge.

It's happening. The Town Champion lumbers towards me, emitting a muffled roar. Our staves crash together, sounding oddly hollow. We're in slow motion. It's an effort just to move in this suit.

I feint. He swipes, pitching forward as he cuts an arc through empty air. He's awkward. I have a chance.

I've caught him a few times: rapping his ankle, reverse twirl to his shoulder, a jab to his side. I'm moving, side-stepping, circling. He chases me, ignoring the blows, carving huge, wild loops through the spaces I leave.

I hit him - a tremendous crunch. Bringing my staff down on his shoulder. He didn't flinch. And my stick seems to have splintered.

Look out! My agility is smothered in this crazy suit. I went the wrong way and he nailed me, cracked me full force on the crown of my head, snapping the end of his weapon. I hardly felt it. No wonder I haven't hurt him. A wave of relief disappears in a larger swell of horror.

I let him hit me. Nothing. He can't hurt me. I can't hurt him. We flail around in our bear-suits, pestering each other with these brittle sticks. A sideshow.

The fight is a draw. It was drawn before we started. Nothing will change. I'm hitting and hitting with all my useless anger.

I'm tired. Beginning to drag and stagger.

Grunt and thud. We thump each other pointlessly. Our movements slow and liquid – fronds of seaweed underwater. His huge muscles are exhausted. He tips and blunders towards me, I'm so slow, he grabs me as I flounder; he's falling, dragging me down under him. He lies on top of me like the oppression that he represents, breathing and heaving in his ridiculous suit. I feel as if I'm strangled in blankets; I have to kick and wriggle to escape.

Laboriously he gets up after me. We're both teetering. The weight of our suits and the weight of our efforts. We're drained, going through the motions, the final throes of the pantomime. I hear voices, suddenly. The dry cackle of the Judge, the toneless tune-master, enjoying his hoax. General murmurs of amusement.

The farce winds down to a last exhausted shuffle. I'm lying down. Playful gusts of laughter tease my buried head, but I can hear a deeper sound of weeping.

END

Hilton's Thong

My mum was wont to refer to Hilton's mum as Mrs. Gefoops. Not in that lady's presence, of course. Though she may have been held in some disdain around the neighbourhood, in her own household Hilton's mum ruled supreme. She wore the pants, in the sardonic vernacular of the times. Hilton's dad, who was odiously obsequious towards my own dad and brow-beaten and hen-pecked by his missus, I thought of as the very soul of timidity. I discovered one day that, during the war, he had been an RAF tail-gunner on a bomber flying missions over Germany. I'd seen films of such events, the sky ablaze with searchlights and flak. I could not reconcile the brave youth I imagined he must have been with his present timorous self. It was an insoluble incongruity to me, then.

One fine day, in the summer holidays, Hilton and I gained permission to go to the swimming pool together. I had just turned thirteen, he was eleven and a half; thus I was charged with a certain measure of responsibility. We went on the bus.

We swam and splashed and fooled around until the pool closed in the late afternoon. We had changed back into our clothes and were waiting in the shelter for the bus home. There I made my first mistake. The last time I went to the pool, there had been separate buses for Deakin and Yarralumla; so when the Deakin bus arrived, I said,

"It's not ours."

Deakin and Yarralumla being adjacent suburbs, sometimes the same bus serviced both. After we had waited some time for a hard-wished-for but non-existent Yarralumla bus, it became apparent that this was the case today. We'd have to walk. Luckily, I thought, I knew a short way home, so that we wouldn't be egregiously late … if we followed the road that skirted the base of Black Mountain and then waded the river at the ford …

We walked along the road. I had shoes and socks but Hilton was flopping along in his thongs, not the ideal footwear for hiking. I could tell he was a bit annoyed at me, but he didn't complain. As we approached the river, I gradually became aware of a muffled roar, growing louder as we neared. Only then I remembered how much rain we'd had lately.

My second error of judgement: the river was a raging torrent.

Unbeknown to anybody except my good mate Nick, who usually accompanied me, I often swam in that river. Always naked. Under our parental regime, we had to account for every item of clothing. Smuggling togs was out of the question, wet underpants a dead giveaway. Our hair would dry quickly, since another part of that regime was the short-back-and-sides, frequent-trips-to-the-barber haircut (which was to result in such an efflorescence of tresses when that generation became young adults).

I said to Hilton,

"We'll have to strip off and carry our stuff over on our heads."

I had recently arrived at the watershed of puberty and accordingly was resplendently hirsute. Perhaps the fact that he was still on the child side of that great divide contributed to his modesty – in any event, Hilton insisted on keeping his underpants on.

"But how will you explain them being wet?" I asked.

"I'll say I dropped them in a puddle in the changing-room," he said, which was perfectly plausible.

We bundled our stuff into our towels, hoisted them aloft and waded in.

I went a little in front, testing the depth. Hilton, though younger, was as tall as I was.

Half-way across, the water was up to the top of our chests but as deep as it would get. I was starting to think that we'd be all right after all, despite my gaffes. I was relishing the familiar atavistic thrill of being naked in the river, enjoying the insistent, sensual tug of the current.

Then, just about in the middle of the temporarily mighty Molonglo, Hilton dropped his thong.

Above the general noise of rushing water, I heard the little smacking sound and Hilton's anguished gasp behind my right shoulder, There ensued a long moment, an interval elongated by the furious mental activity of us both.

There was a line of broken water, with flurries and eddies, that corresponded to the submerged edge of the causeway. Teasingly, the thong caught and spun in a little whirlpool, but beyond our reach, even if we were to release one hand from our bundles.

"Let it go, Hilton!" I had shouted, seeing he was tempted to go after it.

According to the solipsistic ideology of our age, another's mind is a foreign country, impenetrable territory. Nevertheless, I seemed to be aware just then of what was going through Hilton's mind. He was at home, confronting the Gorgon-figure (the beloved Gorgon-figure) of his mother, who was demanding an explanation of his missing thong. And he couldn't, couldn't find an answer.

"Let it go!" I yelled again.

"I can't," he cried piteously and lunged after his thong. And immediately went plunging into the deep water and was borne off downstream.

I could see his head and his splashing arms. His effects were spreading in a widening circle around him and he was desperately trying to retrieve them, more intent on that than self-preservation. Being no great shakes as a swimmer, as I had learned that afternoon, he was in no small danger of drowning.

I got to the other side with great alacrity and raced along the bank. There was a bend in the river farther down where the current slowed and swung in closer to the edge. I climbed out along the branch of a willow and, hanging on to the branch with one hand, grabbed Hilton with the other as he came by. He was spluttering. He'd gone under once or twice and swallowed some water.

But, as we both knew, the real disaster was yet to come.

I got my stuff, got dressed, and we began the melancholy trudge home. He in only his underpants, of course.

'Thank God for his modesty,' I thought, bleakly.

Not far to go. A paddock, a couple of blocks of houses. I wished it was farther. It was dusk by now. The gathering gloom matched the gloom in our hearts. This was beyond any explanation or excuse, however wild. We were in so much trouble it didn't bear thinking about.

I left Hilton outside his place. A half-drowned kid in nothing but his underpants. Some discharge of responsibility. Oh disaster!

I must admit I was dirty on Hilton for some time after this incident, though without any conviction that I was entitled to feel that way, considering that if I had not been so stupid, if I hadn't behaved as if I 'didn't have the sense I was born with,' to use my mother's expression, the circumstance would never have arisen. And, in the years since then, I have myself, more than once, turned a small problem into a calamity, trying to rescue a metaphorical thong from a metaphorical flood.

I walked the few houses back to my place, said, “I’m back,” to my mother. Went and sat in my room and waited for the storm. Sure enough, a few minutes later, there was a hammering at the front door. “Who can that be?” My mother coming down the hall.

‘I think that’ll be Mrs. Gefoops, Mum.”

The Battle of Griffin Hill

Jimmy Wild was aptly named, according to his reputation. He was the undisputed leader of the Hazelwood hoods. At the time I was barely eleven, well under five foot tall and skinny. He was almost a foot taller, obviously strong, with curling red hair and blue eyes. I think he was twelve, maybe thirteen. Apart from his size he didn't look like a tough kid, for he spoke quietly and I never saw him swagger or scowl. He also smiled quite frequently, whereas most of his kind seemed only to laugh in derision or to celebrate some misdeed. In any case, Jimmy Wild liked me, of which I was glad without having any idea why.

The Hazelwood hoods were a gang, a kid's gang, ranging in age from, roughly, eleven to fourteen. To me they appeared to be a loose-knit group of indeterminate number – you saw them wandering the streets, on the bus, at the cinema, sometimes three or four, sometimes eight or ten. Most of them possessed the requisite equipment: a sheath-knife, bicycle chain, studded belt. And there were some casual members, and often two or three younger children tagging along, no doubt waiting for the day they could fulfill their quota of delinquency.

Anyway, I was never sure of the hierarchy, who was considered fully-blooded and who not. Or even if there was a hierarchy. Except in so far as Jimmy Wild was the leader. To tell the truth I was more intent on avoiding them than studying them.

Unfortunately, from my point of view, one of their favourite haunts was the Hazelwood shopping centre, and my mother often sent me down for the groceries etc.. I was always relieved approaching the shops when none of them were around. Not that there was any specific enmity between myself and them; in fact I was on friendly terms with most of them and was rarely harassed. But there were often one or two I didn't know and I never felt inclined to test the loyalties of those with whom I was friendly as individuals. After all, I reasoned, hoods are hoods and hoods are supposed to beat people up, or worse. On principle. My young mind was not devoid of paranoia, and I had frequent and frightening visions of getting myself beaten to death.

Hazelwood was a suburb on the outskirts of a rapidly developing city. It was an odd suburb in the sense that part of it was old: old houses, many in a state of dilapidation, ragged fences and hedges; and the other part very new: new houses, new roads and curbings, little nature-strips which were mown regularly by the government. The newer residents, including my family, were typically businessmen, office workers, younger academics from the becoming-prestigious university; the middle, upper-middle class, in short. The older section of the suburb was occupied by those referred to, often in condescension, as blue-collar workers: truckdrivers, bricklayers, labourers, layabouts. Hazelwood was visibly partitioned into two halves.

To many of the children, of course, the differences in belonging to one side or the other were profound. The kids from the 'other side', out of whom were drawn the members of the Hazelwood hoods, referred to us as 'posh'. It was almost mandatory, when in the company of their mates, for kids from the so-designated lower classes to disparage their 'posh' counterparts.

These differences were exacerbated, efficiently reinforced, at school. There were only two primary schools in the area: Hazelwood Primary, where I and many of the Hazelwood hoods went, and a smaller Catholic establishment. Our grade was divided into

three classes: ‘A’, ‘B’, and ‘C’. The ‘A’ class comprised the children who had a future, including a few bright ones who might ‘go far’; the ‘B’ class was an open proposition, there were some ‘with possibilities’. The ‘C’ class was made up of no-hopers, the kids who could never expect to be anything better than road-makers or ditch-diggers and who would probably drop out of school as soon as it was legally permissible, if not before. These were the general, specifically the teachers’, attitudes.

Thus the lives of many ten, eleven and twelve-year-olds were predetermined.

It was not hard to understand the resentment felt and displayed by the kids of the, this time literally, lower classes; for he whole arrangement was manifestly unfair. Categorized as ‘dumb’, they were forced to go to school because they were too young to do anything else, and once there they were told that if they did not try to learn their lessons they would never get anywhere, when they knew that the teacher knew they were never going to get anywhere anyway. Why wade through all those numbers and words that were the very symbols of their degradation?

Personally, I never felt ‘posh’ – my mother was always saying we were ‘up to our ears’ in debt, she couldn’t afford to buy me a school blazer, I often had holes in the soles of my shoes. We owned for a while an old, frail car that didn’t like to go out in cold weather. Visiting my better-off schoolmates I invariably felt like an intruder in their sybaritic mansions. But being in the ‘A’ class and the fact that my father wore a tie, albeit untidily, was enough to make me a natural enemy of the Hazelwood hoods.

Yet, although I came from the right side of the tracks, I might have had a more harmonious relationship with them, were it not for an engrained attitude of mine that I could neither dislodge nor coherently define, even to myself.

After all, Jimmy Wild always greeted me with a grin and with most of the kids who went to my school I was on an amicable mate-to-mate basis. Even Billy Towns, who wasn’t too fond of me, declared his hostility more in demeanour than anything more direct. He looked more daggers than he threw.

Billy Towns’ dislike of me stemmed from an incident that occurred about a year before. That was not long after my family shifted and I started at Hazelwood Primary. The bell had rung for the end of recess and everybody was straggling back to the classrooms. I was walking along beside Billy Towns, coincidently as far as I was aware. He was a year behind me at school but about the same age and bigger and considerably stronger.

He jumped me. To my complete surprise. But I think it was a premeditated move on his part. Even as I hit the ground, I glimpsed him in memory, watching me, brooding.

Considerably stronger – hell – he had me in a fearsome headlock. For a few moments the pain eclipsed my senses.

I was biting my lip, trying not to cry. Then Billy’s voice rasping in my ear,

“Give in? Do ya give in?”

“No,” I spluttered, audible or not, and applied my own feeble headlock.

Whether I hurt him a little or just disconcerted him, he loosened his grip slightly and I almost got away. We rolled over a few times and he got a proper hold of my skull again and I responded in kind, as best I could. There was the inevitable circle of spectators around us, Billy’s mates urging him on. I thought I heard:

“Kill the la-di-da poofta!” but my ears were ringing.

“Give in?”

"No," through a mouthful of dirt.

Much as I wanted to and close as I was to tears, I knew if I gave in I would be branding myself a weakling, easy prey for the tough kids to pick on whenever they felt like it. But Billy's headlock was compelling and I didn't think I could endure that dreadful pressure for much longer. The dialogue was the same:

Give in? No. Give in? No.

He was panting in my ear and his grasp slackened, fractionally. He was tiring.

Sweet mercy.

I summoned my last ounce of puniness and squeezed his head. Knowing I couldn't hurt him, not the way he was hurting me. It was a psychological ploy.

He reacted by nearly wrenching my head off.

"D'ya give in now, ya mug?" Hoarsely.

"No," I said automatically. I was sick and dizzy.

He gave it away. He let me go and stood up, and so did I, trying to disguise my shakiness. He gave me a quick look, which was meant to convey a 'you're not worth it' type of contempt, but there was a distinct uncertainty in his face.

Billy and his mates trooped off. One of them patted him on the back, consolingly, for in a way he had lost the contest.

"If it'd been a real fight you would'a killed 'im. Anyway, I bet his head hurts for a week." It did too, but I didn't confide it.

No teacher had bothered to intervene. I went to the toilet and washed my face and hands and gave the toilet as my excuse for being late. Which was accepted by Mr. Fraser, our teacher. Although from what I gathered afterwards a fair proportion of the class had been watching the skirmish through the windows. Billy and his friends all got the cane for being late. That was the usual pattern, the kids already segregated, already the elite, already the no-accounts. (Not that the pattern *always* extended into later life – in some instances quite the reverse.)

The idea was of course that the only was to influence the dumb little brutes on the lower levels was to punish i.e. cane them. Like many a thoughtless solution to many a human dilemma it had an inverse effect. Each caning was regarded by the children as a minor badge of honour. The more 'cuts' you got, the more kudos.

Oddly enough, Mr. Fraser, who was in charge of the 'A' class that year, was quite free in his wielding of the implement. He caned me regularly, mostly for minor infractions such as talking during lessons. Without malice – he believed in discipline. And it was effective, at least in my class, for many of my schoolmates were in awe of that wicked stick.

It was Mr. Fraser who was indirectly responsible for my developing a degree of intimacy with some of the Hazelwood hoods. Through football, rugby league. Early in the year, March or April, my first full year at the school, Mr. Fraser, before maths, addressed the class,

"Hands up all the boys who want to try out for the school football teams."

The football teams were categorized according to weight. We were expected to fit into the five stone sevens or the six stone sevens. I would have then just about qualified for a four stone sevens side and had never played football regularly before. So I didn't put my hand up; thinking 'maybe I'll play footy next year.'

As it turned out, you had to play anyway. Those not selected in the representative sides were divided into ‘house’ teams, and every Wednesday afternoon you played, willing or not. You needed a note from a parent to get out of it.

Mr. Fraser loved rugby, I’m sure he much preferred it to teaching. He was the coach of the 6.7’s. On the first football afternoon, apparently not satisfied with his potential line-up, he prowled the grounds watching the house matches as well as his own possibles versus probables. As I came off the field, mired and tired, Mr. Fraser collared me.

“I need a boy who can tackle for fullback. I want you.”

Thus I was recruited, and spent two winters, first in the 6.7’s then in the 7.7’s, tackling, getting battered round the head by boots and knees and trodden on all over by metal sprigs. Generally enjoying myself.

Of our team about seven were either established or aspiring hoods. Since we had a fairly good side, and since rugby was the only school activity from which most of them gained any gratification, our team spirit was buoyant and constant. On the field, in the changing sheds, on the bus or train when we played away, we were all mates.

One of our players was Michael Towns, Billy’s older brother and Jimmy Wild’s closest henchman. Michael was already going on thirteen when I was ten. He never passed the exams and advanced grades only as his age became an embarrassment. Not that he was witless – he regarded schoolwork as a waste of his energies. He was quite unlike his brother: Billy, big and blustery; Michael, slight and shrewd.

It was he who first told me that Jimmy Wild was Catholic.

“He’s a mick, you know, but he’s OK.. And the best bloody knuckle-man there is.”

Another of our team was Maxie Mathieson, a tall, rangy boy who played front row forward and was very handy with his fists. He was an expert at the short rip to the body, which left an opposition player spluttering on the turf and a bemused referee blowing his whistle.

Maxie was an old mate of my best friend of those years, Troy. Troy was an orphan, a country boy who had been sent to live with his grandmother when his parents died. He was neutral, not really belonging to either of the Hazelwood factions.

He lived a few houses away from me and we spent most of our time together adventuring. At the bottom of our street was a farm where cattle roamed and a creek meandered. The owner had lived there all his life and stubbornly resisted the inducements of property developers. If you walked for a few hundred yards in the other direction the houses stopped and the bush began, gum and wattle, a fifty-year-old pine forest, a river, and beyond that a whole uninhabited mountain to explore. Our favourite haunt was the river where we went permissionless and swam naked, and dove into the water’s thrilling embrace from selected limbs where it was clear and there were no snags to impale us. Little strips of sand that we sprawled upon, and wrestled and laughed, cavorting like two little Crusoes.

(All gone now. The farmer died or gave in or maybe got his price. The paddocks, where once we trod noisily to inform the snakes of our coming, are houses and flats with a small area of token parkland. The creek, where we enticed yabbies from their muddy retreats and cursed the leeches, admired the graceful ibis and fled from the sinister plover, has disappeared, presumably piped underground. The forest where Troy and I killed our first snake, a baby copperhead that we stole from a kookaburra and bravely battered to death and proudly brought home as a trophy, is now a fashionable golf course. The

mountain, once a wilderness of trees and boulders with a rutted, dusty road that straggled to the summit where one found a few rotting planks and a rickety fence known as a look-out – a place visited only by an occasional tourist for there was nothing to see except on one side more mountains and trees and on the other the spreading stain of the city; the mountain now has a television tower on top, with a car park and buildings, and an approach road that one can skim up in minutes. And the river, into which the willows wept, has changed colour; its banks are denuded and dotted with picnic benches and signs saying 'Unsafe for Swimming.')

Maxie Mathieson was a fringe member of the Hazelwood hoods. He was an independent type of lad, disinclined to play second or third fiddle to anyone, even Jimmy Wild. Nevertheless he went along of some of their jaunts.

Their activities consisted mostly of vandalism and petty theft, with the now and again spice of violence. They wrecked phone boxes so methodically that it was close to impossible to make a public telephone call anywhere in Hazelwood. They hurled rocks through the windows of shops, schools, sometimes houses. They smoked cigarettes and drank beer, imitating adults. They pilfered. Other kids' bicycles, morning milk deliveries, shirtfuls of useless items out of shops. Occasionally one of them would succeed in stealing a car (a big deal), which would end up battered and abandoned, since they were better at stealing them than driving them, and they weren't too skilled at the former. They threatened a lot, parading their power like little stormtroopers, and when some foolish kid did not respond with the appropriate fawning terror they beat him up. At the swimming pool, they would pick on some little wretch and dive-bomb him until he was properly terrified or half-drowned. And they talked often and fervently about 'getting the Griffin Hill mob.'

Griffin Hill was a desolate place, a tiny ghetto. It was literally a small hill, a mound, jungled on all sides with scrub, trees and wild long grass, that gave no hint of habitation. It was situated on the edge of Hazelwood, flanked by the farm and the loop of the river. Two dusty trails led to the top where the people lived. The hill was soon to be bulldozed flat and 'developed,' so that nobody who could afford not to lived there, and the population was small, perhaps a dozen families. The houses were old and falling apart and there were several shanties, squares and rectangles of corrugated iron, occupied by temporary or permanent vagrants.

Despite the size of its population Griffen Hill boasted its own juvenile gang. There were only about six of them, I think, though I didn't see them often as a group. They forayed into neighbouring suburbs, avoiding Hazelwood itself, no doubt not wishing a direct confrontation with the Hazelwood hoods.

However Lou, their leader, was unafraid and walked the streets of Hazelwood by himself. He was fifteen, already out of school and unemployed. He was six feet tall, angular but erect, and known to have beaten up several grown men. Such was the fear he inspired in other children that they spoke of him in whispers, as if he might suddenly materialize and snuff out their life with one of his large, terrible hands. 'Lou' wasn't his real name – his parents came from some distant, mysterious country, Hungary maybe, and spoke little English. Lou was no master of the language himself.

The first time I saw him at close quarters was a Friday night. I was on my regular mission to the fish and chips shop. I walked in and he was there, leaning huge and casual at the counter, eating a hamburger in gulps. I noticed the scars on his face.

"Have one of Gino's hamburgers, mate. They're triffic." His tone was genuine.

I glanced around the place, hoping he wasn't talking to me.

"They're great, mate. Have one."

"Yeah I will, next time I can afford it, Lou."

"You know my name." He was leaning over me, seeming about three feet taller. "How come you know my name?"

"Everybody does."

"What they say 'bout me? What you heard 'bout me?"

"That you're a real tough guy."

"Ha." He smiled in a crooked, crazy fashion. "You heard right, mate. That's me, a real tough guy." He seemed to be talking to himself, turning over the expression in his head.

He banged me on the shoulder.

"OK. See ya, mate," and sauntered out.

I had a more unpleasant experience at the shops soon after that. It was quite late, growing dark. I had come out of the grocery and was crossing the small ornamental courtyard next door to it. Two boys I knew by sight only blocked my path. Billy Towns was behind them, spectating. Farther away, Jimmy Wild was sitting on a low, brick fence, having a smoke.

"Shopping for Mummy, eh?" said one.

I was searching for an answer when the other one spoke.

"Ya can play footy but can ya fight?"

"Mummy's boy."

They went around in a little peripatetic circle and then came towards me, shoulder to shoulder. As they advanced, they were chanting, while I stood transfixed hanging on to the box of groceries. Were they serious or joking?

"We're the Hazelwood boys, brave and bold,

Oughta be, oughta be, dipped in gold!

Mummy's little nit, Mummy's little nit…"

That line was somewhat garbled but I think that's what they said.

"Oughta be, oughta be, dipped in …"

The rhyme was OK.

They were right in front of me. Waiting for me to cry or plead or make a run for it? Or throw a punch so that they could give me a deserved hiding?

I felt petrified, in the original sense.

Jimmy Wild intervened. He didn't move, merely called out.

"C'mon, leave 'im alone. He's a good kid. He can't help it if he's smart."

'Thankyou Jimmy!' I said, without uttering a sound.

I set off hugging the groceries, grateful for my skin but vexed and uneasy. That was it, my engrained attitude, the axis of my fear, fulcrum of my anxiety. There seemed to be an unconscionable gulf between myself and these kids, the hoods. Even as children their violence was deep and constant, they brooded on it. The cold venom of intentional cruelty, the pleasure in another's terror – these things I couldn't understand at all. It confused and alarmed me.

Anger I understood. I remembered a day on the footy field … a kid, the opposition's best player by repute, emerged from the pack after a clever, weaving run. Only me between him and a try. He spread two fingers of one hand V-fashion and speared at my

eyes. I averted my face just in time, gripping him by the shoulders. He launched an enormous kick aiming between my legs, I swivelled just enough to take the boot on the inside of the thigh, still hanging on to his sleeve. Our forwards caught up and he was safely held and had to play the ball. I went back to my position, enraged.

Next time he got through he was well wide of me. I came across at three-quarter pace, kidding, letting him imagine I couldn't reach him. He was at full speed, streaming for the line quite certain he was clear, when I took his legs away. It was a hard, low, vengeful tackle.

For him a moment of appalling surprise, for me a moment of exhilaration. The wind went out of him as he hit the ground. The ball trickled away and I picked it up, ran it upfield to get my team onside, passed it to our five-eighth. Looked back – the kid was motionless. 'Christ, I've really hurt him. I only meant …'

I felt nauseous, ashamed.

He recovered in a few minutes and played out the match, though he didn't try to get past me again, always passing the ball, sometimes to one of our blokes.

The rest of the game was a joyless affair for me also, despite the fact that we won.

I thought there must be something wrong with me. My antipathy to violence was obviously not shared by others, except those children so timid that they feared anything physical. I didn't mind it rough, but to deliberately harm (or maim or murder – I knew adults did these things) another being, and to glory in it afterwards … no … it was an incongruity in the nature of the human that I couldn't resolve. It frightened me.

Even Troy felt differently.

We had a fight one afternoon, which began over a senseless squabble about the rules of an improvised game of basketball we were playing on his front lawn. He began punching me in the face. I delivered a few obligatory pokes to his stomach, trying to play my part, but I could no more have planted my fist in that well-loved visage than I could have leapt the breadth of Australia.

The non-event was halted when Troy's grandmother called through the window that his tea was ready. Troy went in for his tucker and I walked home with my problem.

If I couldn't fight, others could …

The battle of Griffen Hill was rumoured before it occurred.

Michael Towns told me:

"Jimmy's gunna fight that long streak Lou. One out."

Maxie Mathieson said mysteriously,

"There's gunna be some blood up on Griffin Hill."

I was afraid for Jimmy Wild's life. The next time I saw him I was tempted to ask whether the stories of the impending confrontation were true. But he grinned at me in his usual relaxed fashion. 'He'd have to be nervous,' I reasoned. Lou was bigger and older, he'd beaten up men!

"How's things, Jimmy?"

"Never been better, mate. Never been better."

They must have been kidding me, I concluded, hoping.

It happened all right.

Bela, a boy in my class, related the tale to me and three or four other enthralled boys in the boys' toilet. The way he told it, his own exploit was heroic in itself. He'd slipped out

his bedroom window on the appointed night, gone up to Griffen Hill and installed himself in a tree.

"You know Jimmy Wild, don't you? Geez, he punched the hell out of that big wog."

(Bela, you cam guess, was of foreign derivation himself.)

The two gangs, Hazelwood and Griffen Hill, were also in trees, an invisible audience. Jimmy and Lou met in a clearing. It lasted an hour or more.

I saw it. As Bela spoke I saw it in my mind, as vivid as a memory, as if I'd actually witnessed it. The moonlight, the shadowy grappling figures, the fists, the blood.

Lou started well, confident, hitting hard and connecting. But Jimmy Wild kept coming, those sturdy shoulders bunched and determined. Lou started to bleed and swing wildly. Jimmy, cruel and precise, kept punching. Then Lou was down, spitting teeth in the grass. Cheers from the trees. He lurched to his feet and Jimmy was at him again, hammering havoc. Lou went down again, up again, then down flat on his back. He rose, staggering, looking the wrong way. A blow to the side of his head, and he teetered. Another and he was over, somehow struggling up. He was fighting for his pride, all he possessed. Jimmy Wild's fists were merciless, Lou's face a pulp. Lou punched at nothing and fell over. Laughter. "Give it to 'im, Jimmy!" It was at least a minute before Lou rose and Jimmy dropped him again. This time he didn't get up. He was unconscious. The Hazelwood boys departed merrily, pausing to spit on the prone form in the grass. Then the Griffen Hill gang emerged to inspect their fallen idol.

The news was that Lou was in hospital and had amnesia. Couldn't remember a thing. Jimmy Wild's reputation was much enhanced.

The boys were still chattering, discussing details, when the headmaster, Mr. Pullman, stuck his head in the door.

"What are you boys up to? Back to the classroom."

Even Mr. Pullman had his informants. An institution in institutions, I suppose. Some days after Jimmy Wild's demolition of the hapless Lou, he interrupted classes for a special assembly of the school.

Mounted the rostrum, imperious as usual.

"It was come to my notice that a fracas took place in the Griffen Hill area recently, and left one boy seriously injured. I sincerely hope that no boy from this school was involved but I suspect that some of them were. When I know who those boys are, they will be dealt with severely."

I noticed some smirks among the ranks.

Mr. Pullman may have moralized for a little while, a practice he was fond of when his audience was captive and murmuringly silent, but I wasn't listening. Obviously no one was going to incriminate anyone else. What was Mr. Pullman's ineffectual cane to Jimmy Wild's fists? The headmaster never mentioned it again.

The episode of the big fight was legend before Lou remembered his name.

I ran into Lou not long after he was released from hospital. Outside Gino's fish shop, in fact. His walk had changed, he seemed to shuffle, and he was bent forward from the waist as many people much older are. His eyes were hazy and he seemed harmless, so I spoke.

"Hello Lou. How're you feeling?"

He looked around, vague, searching, until he found me.

"Lou. Why people call me Lou?"

I was wondering if his condition was permanent.

"My Dad and Mum gettin' new house. We gettin' new house."

He was already wandering away as he said it.

I hadn't seen (well, that's not strictly true, I hadn't spoken to) Jimmy Wild since the epic battle. My feelings about the whole thing were ambiguous, and I suspected that it had deep-down made me even more afraid of the Hazelwood hoods. Anyway, whether out of practice or out of fear, my proficiency at avoiding them had increased. Inevitably though, I walked around a corner and there he was, followed by half a dozen followers.

Jimmy Wild looked sunnier than ever.

"Gidday, mate."

"Gidday, Jimmy."

With most of the others I was more or less friendly – they lounged and loitered as usual. Except Billy Towns, who was glaring silently at me. It had grown to be a habit with him.

Normally I would have just passed on but curiosity got the better of me. I paused.

"I heard about the big blue you had with that fella from Griffen Hill."

"Yeah." Matter of fact.

"Put 'im in hospital."

"Yeah, I fixed 'im real good. He had it coming, the bloody smart-arse wog."

I was looking for any hint of remorse. There was none.

After that I found I never liked Jimmy Wild quite as much as before.

Harry and Jim

Harry was an alcoholic. He had viewed the world through the bottom of a glass for so long (and what a blurred and murky outlook that had been) that he had shamed and shocked himself, his family, his friends; he had lost, forfeited, his home, his loved ones, and his position, however humble, in the world. And deserved it all.

Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic. But Harry had been given a second chance and for that he was grateful beyond measure.

Why? What crazed demon lived inside him that had made him tear up everything that was valuable and fling the pieces to the four winds? He had lived in a nightmare and visited his nightmare on those he loved best. Even Rebecca, sweet Rebecca. Would she ever forgive him?

Harry didn't know. Advance, one day at a time.

Harry had come back from WWII with a bit of a limp and a medal. It had made a man of him. A man who could hold his nerve, a man who could hold his drink. The same day he was wounded he'd lost Charlie, the best of all mates. The leg played up now and again. He had recurring dreams in which he saw Charlie again, large as life.

He married the girl who had waited faithfully for him. He had a life that brimmed with opportunity, a good job, a sound marriage. They were blessed with a daughter, a beautiful child of golden ringlets and enchanting smile, who adored him. She was the apple of his eye, the spring in his slightly lopsided step.

When Rebecca was born, however, there was some complication that Harry had never understood too well. It meant that his wife couldn't have any more children. It also meant that … that what they used to do together had become unpleasant for her. She resisted him. Kindly, but she resisted him. Harry confided this to his mates one evening over a few beers, and after that, often, too often, they made little jibes about it.

"Have another, Harry. No sense in rushing home to a cold bed, is there?"

That had hurt him.

Harry worked for years as a storeman in a large warehouse and worked diligently. When the foreman gave notice of his retirement, Harry quite reasonably anticipated a promotion. He was the logical replacement and everyone expected it. He was passed over. The boss called him into the office.

"I hope you're not disappointed, Harry. We would like to have you as foreman but unfortunately there's a lot of paperwork involved so we decided to get someone in who had some clerical experience. You're a very valuable member of our team, Harry, and just to prove that I mean it, you'll find an extra ten shillings in your pay packet from next week."

That had hurt him.

He'd had some problems, some disappointments. And perhaps he didn't like facing up to things; perhaps he was a bit fond of forgetting about his troubles.

He had no real excuse; he knew that now. There were plenty worse off than he.

He began to dread getting up in the morning. Just when or why it happened he wasn't sure. When he began to swear at his wife, he surprised himself. When he began to resent, even envy, Rebecca – her beauty and confidence – it rattled him.

'Not a lost weekend, a lost lifetime.' He always liked to insert that saying when he spoke at AA meetings.

He remembered, and would never forget, the morning his wife and daughter finally left him. He was unemployed, aging, and the bottle was shaking crazily in his hand.

His wife said simply,

"You're sick again, Harry. Go back to the doctors."

Rebecca, still oh so pretty, spat at him. In those same blue eyes, where once dwelt adoration, were now contempt and rancour.

"I hate you! I never want to see you again, you smelly, disgusting old man."

Harry had never experienced such pain. A bullet-splintered femur was nothing in comparison.

God intervened. He who had punished, now helped.

Harry hadn't had a drink for four years. He was healthy enough, considering his age and history. A reborn man. Now he wanted only to atone, if that was possible, and to help others whenever he could. He was an assiduous member of his local AA organization, an inspiration some called him. A call from a drunkard in distress and Harry was the first one there.

Harry believed in sobriety and God, in that order.

* * * *

It had been a bad day for Jim. He woke up in the afternoon, shaken awake by that unholy trembling that inhered in some mysterious location deep inside him. He couldn't hold the first drink down; it came up mixed with blood. Hell.

Sometime, a third of a bottle, later, when his brain was able to function, he knew again with certainty that he had to get off it. Death awaited him. A promise, not a threat. All the little demons in his room were jeering and pointing to his fate. The voices, the hatred. There was a cacophony of accusations in the shadows that surrounded him. Ah, the mess of his mind, the mess of existence. Have a drink.

Jim needed help.

He had a number that pious little chap from AA had given him. He rang. And pleaded.

Harry didn't take long but by the time he arrived the booze had worked its magic and Jim's frame of mind had improved considerably.

The crumpled figure in the doorway smiled, exuding a sympathetic understanding that Jim found sickening.

Jim disliked the familiarity, the presumption.

Jim had attended the occasional AA meeting. Not the sort of thing one could sit through stone sober. The endless mouthing of inanities, the smug pride in cheating the bottle. Christ, what a bunch of snivelling hypocrites!

Nothing worse than a reformed drunk or a converted Catholic. This fellow – 'Harry' was it? – was, as Jim recalled, both.

Still, he was in no mood to be alone.

They faced each other across the table, Jim drinking whisky, Harry sipping coffee.

"It's hard, Harry, isn't it?"

"Yes Jim, it's hard. But not impossible. If …"

"The long march to eternity."

For some reason Harry felt a little nervous. Most alcoholics he could at as if through a window and see himself, but between himself and Jim there was a translucence that confused him.

"Do you want to stop?"

"Of course I want to stop. Why do you think I called you?"

"Nobody can do it alone."

"Don't you believe me?"

Was this the same man who had been begging not an hour ago?"

"You can't do it alone, Jim. God will help you if you let Him."

"Ah, have you not heard, Harry, God is dead."

Harry felt a twinge of anger.

"Oh I see. Forgive me, old man. I see God is alive and well and living in your delusion."

Harry sat transfixed and silent. He wanted to leave. But he was here to help, if he could.

"Oh, have a drink. I don't like to drink alone. It's supposed to be a sign of alcoholism, isn't it? Ha ha."

"I don't drink, Jim. I am an alcoholic. Have you asked yourself why you drink?"

"Cogito, ergo I drink," replied Jim, tapping the conspicuous dome of his forehead.

Harry was blank and uncomfortable.

"If you don't want help, Jim, then there's no point …" Harry had half-risen from his chair.

"No please …" Jim reached for Harry's arm, managing to look hurt and pathetic. Harry managed to feel sorry for him. Harry had kidded and promised himself and others for so many years. He had no right to condemn this man for doing the same.

"Advise me, Harry, advise me."

"Well, first you have to admit to yourself that you are an alcoholic …"

"Malgre la nuit seule et le jour en feu," Jim was muttering into his drink.

"… that you are an alcoholic …"

"Yes, Harry, I'm a drunk. And proud of it. Why have all the great men of history been drunks? Because we are the sensitive ones, Harry, the conscience of the world. The shylocks cower before our curses. We are the vanguard of the new truth, but you sold out, Harry, you sold out."

Jim thrust a glass of whisky across the table. Harry stared at it, pointlessly.

"You refuse my hospitality?"

"I don't drink. One is too many and a thousand not enough."

"Spiel, Harry, just spiel. We belong to the worldwide fraternity of drunks, you and I. You are in the company of gods. Gods among men, Harry. Think on that."

Harry too thought of drunkards as a fraternity, but to his mind it was a brotherhood of the broken, waging a war it could not win, in desperate need of divine intervention.

"… beset by a Pallagonian madness on all sides. That is why we drink, Harry, we must, we are obliged. As women and lunatics obey the phases of the moon, so we obey the call of truth. We rage against the dying of the light. You don't understand, do you?"

Harry shook his head. He felt numb. He was staring into the glass in front of him. It reminded him of something. He would leave soon, he couldn't understand this man, there was nothing he could do. Proud of being a drunk?

Harry was confused and Jim was bored.

A game commenced. Jim made the first move. Harry didn't even know he was playing.

"Got a family, Harry?"

"Y-yes."

"You hesitate. Your wife run out on you?"

"She left me. She had no choice."

"Any kids?"

"I have a daughter."

There was a slight glistening in Harry's eyes.

"Oh, you poor fellow. I have two. Both sluts of course. This is the world we live in, Harry. All the girls of today have the morals of alley cats. It's enough to break a father's heart."

"But Rebecca isn't …" Harry thumped the table. He hadn't done that in years. The whisky jiggled.

Rook takes pawn and check. Jim was devising a mate. Harry was upset; his throat felt sore as if he'd been crying. The game was beyond him.

"It's always a woman, isn't it? As our friend Lowry said: how can a woman understand the perils, the importance of being a drunkard?" Pronouncing his 'p's with bespittled emphasis. "And you with your daughter running loose with the scum of today …"

"Rebecca isn't!" Harry had shouted. He was trembling. He wanted, God help him, to punch this man.

"Ah Harry, don't kid yourself. They all are. You can't even say the word. Sluts, Harry, just sluts and whores."

I am an alcoholic, I am an alcoholic, I am an alcoholic …

"No decent girls left. All whores. Even Rebecca …"

No, don't hit him, no!

"… even Rebecca …"

Harry didn't remember taking the drink. The glass was empty. Checkmate.

Jim was grinning at him. Harry recognized the fiendish smile. He'd seen it before, in a mirror. He realized something but the thought disappeared, dissolved before he could grasp it. Anyway, it was too late.

"Well maybe you're right, Harry. Maybe Rebecca is a good girl." Jim was pouring two drinks.

Sometime later, Harry knew he was drunk. Jim was saying something about life being a walking shadow and a pool player. Harry fell asleep.

* * * *

Harry opened his eyes to an overwhelming shame. He was a failure and a coward. Rebecca would never forgive him. Not now. There was still a little poison in the bottom of the bottle on the table. Harry took a swig, then another. It tasted awful. Jim was snoring on the couch. Harry watched him for a while, wondering about nothing in particular. He couldn't see clearly through the tears in his eyes. He left the house in search of a pub where he could hide.

Jim came to in the middle of the horrors. There were indefinable insects and real terror everywhere. He tried to stand up but he had no legs. There was a pressure in his head that promised to kill him. He crawled towards the kitchen where he had a bottle secreted under the sink. His 'consciousness bottle' he called it, in lucid moments.

An eternity of twitching, twisting agonies later, Jim could think, and feel properly sorry for himself. The unutterable loneliness of the great thinker. The suffering of the true intellectual. What a farcical world.

That inconsequential idiot, whatisname, of last night had disappeared.

* * * *

No-one saw Harry for several weeks. The meetings had lacked a little lustre without him. It was the police who found him. Dead. He stank indescribably. Drunks.

Lemons Goes to a 21st

I first met R at the Prince Alfred in the company of Lemons. R had just come out of Pentridge. He later became the resident toy-boy of psychedelic Max and after that an actor in film and television. I saw him on TV recently, in a film I'd never watched before, looking much as he did the last time I saw him in person. That was at Max's in Sydney. On that occasion, we had a long and, to me, disconcertingly vociferous argument about The Doors and Vanilla Fudge, to whom, according to R, The Doors, could not hold a candle.

In the Prince Alfred, R was telling Lemons that, with his contacts, he could get a hitman for him dirt cheap. I was hoping he was as full of bull as he seemed to be on first encounter and that Lemons was having one of his recondite jokes. It was consternating – this was most un-Lemons-like behavior – but Lemons was insisting that his primary, immediate aim in life was to see DA dead.

It was the milky-skinned B. Lemons had eyes for her – she had eyes for DA. It might be the sort of preference that makes men muse on the mysteries of the female heart; still, Lemons' cause was hopeless. Even if you could sympathize with his madness – B, as well as being milky-hued in a most delightful way, was imbued with a sweetness deeper than skin-deep.

A small group of us used to congregate at Stewarts, another pub in Carlton, away from the pulsing pandemonium of the University and Prince Alfred, the main push pubs of that era. If era's the right word for such a fleeting period. The group included DA and his brother L, B, Lemons, Frank R and P, a Maori girl, who was a paragon of Polynesian pulchritude. She and I shared a little niche of entre nous, amidst the rest.

DA was a musician with whom, some years later, after he and B were wed, I had another inadvertent, how'd-it-get-to-be-so-vehement? dispute concerning Leadbelly and Doc Watson. I told him I reckoned that Doc Watson himself would not regard Doc Watson as a more significant musician than Leadbelly, but again I was pummelling a brick wall. DA, who was usually amiability personified, grew positively hostile.

Frank was English. Apparently did mathematics at Oxford. He was short, bespectacled, owl-eyed, with long, unkempt, ringletty hair and fulsome beard, both of a reddish hue. Nearly all the time I spent with him we were in the pub or at a party, where the ambient noise-level was at least moderately high. Over the years, we had innumerable conversations and I barely heard a word he said. He mumbled and whispered in his beard – you could catch the tone of his voice, a phrase or snippet here or there. He looked and talked so earnestly you felt obliged to listen, trying to piece it together as you went and get the gist before it got away. It was like doing a continuous cryptic crossword with a very short time limit. He could drive you crazy, old Frank.

Lemons wrote poems and told amusing tales, some fanciful, some recitations of his own misadventures. His supreme talent, however, was the invocation of real-life tableaux spontaneously produced. Tableaux rampant, macabre, terrible.

P's preoccupation was her freedom, or lack of it. Even her forays to Stewarts, she said , were more or less clandestine. She lived in the nearby high-rise flats with her mother, her father being absent for reasons left unsaid. There were, however, numerous uncles and cousins around who policed and restricted her activities; kept her, as she saw it, from living her own life.

Those flats, where she lived, I saw as bleak monuments to the impoverished spirit of

modernity, human packaging. Worth giving a wide berth. When they'd only been populated for a few years, two gentle souls of my acquaintance, IM and JA, were set upon in an adjacent street by a mob of a about thirty youngsters drawn from that population. IM was in a coma for some time and, when I saw him again, permanently altered. He had a long scar extending from the side of his mouth and a recurring hint of trauma in his sky-blue eyes.

P's 21st was approaching. She was having a big party. All arranged by her extended family, she lamented. She asked me and Lemons and Frank to come. She said,

"It's my party. I can invite my own friends if I want to," and her eyes shone so with the 'let's live' rebellion of honest youth that we, well I , sat enchanted, and our assent to going had the sentiment of a pledge.

So we went … up to the umpteenth floor, find the number, knock on the door.

A prop-size bloke admits us, aloofly. We troop in. P, radiant, approaching.

Casting around, the place is more spacious than I'd expected, but crowded. Plenty of heft in the crowd. There is one other white person in the room. He's lying unconscious on the sofa, variously bloodied, the blood still trickling from multiple cranial orifices.

I ask P about his welfare. A fractious neighbour who's expected to be all right when he sleeps it off, I gather.

P conducts us through the throng towards the kitchen part of the place to meet her mother.

"Glad you could come."

***

P found us an out-of-the-way spot. We sat down on the floor. Lemons started chatting

to her mum. Frank wandered off to socialize in his own elliptical fashion.

P introduced me to a couple of her younger cousins who had come over to sit with us. Meanwhile, Lemons and P's mum had struck up a lively duel of repartee, to which, as it seemed to intensify into something approaching a spat, we started to listen and partially, between gusts of pervasive hubbub, overhear. They were having what sounded like an extremely childish wrangle, some sort of dare and double-dare, each impugning the other's courage. Then, abruptly, Lemons walked over to the open window, sat on what I supposed was the sill and patting the space beside him, needled P's mum with,

"I bet you've not game to sit here next to me."

Until Lemons did this it hadn't crossed my mind that you could just open one of those windows on the cliff-face. The startling conceptual conjunction of open windows and our existential situation: three interlopers at a highly-elevated party, the vast majority of the others in attendance half-drunk rugby aficionados, many of them not so pleased as P's mum to have us there (and she seemingly getting less pleased by the moment) – this conjunction was the stuff of acrophobic nightmares.

Nothing pusillanimous about P's mum.

Soon she was sitting beside him, the two of them spanning the width of the window. Lemons put an arm around her shoulders. Then he tipped them both back a little.

"Whoa-oop"

They straightened up.

"Scared?" he asked.

"Not scared at all," said P's mum.

Lemons tried it again, more than once, appearing to lean farther and farther into the

breeze.

Flickers of consternation interrupted the studied indifference on the faces of some of the people standing near us. Some of the blokes closer to the window started to voice objections. A couple of them moved together towards Lemons and P's mum. Lemons, more precariously than I wanted to think about, held up a restraining hand while tipping back again with his hostage. The blokes stopped. Lemons straightened. They leant forward subtly. Lemons tipped back subtly. The telegraphed pantomime repeated itself.

Our little group was sitting behind some sort of pillar. I look around it to see what was happening in the rest of the room. Where, the last time I looked, had been knots and clusters and milling and mingling …most of the party-goers, that is to say all the males, had arranged themselves in lines, about four rows deep. The process seemed to happen unconsciously – it was finalizing itself as I watched – nobody looked at the blokes around him, everyone was focusing forward. The original objectors were in the middle of the front line. Thereafter, every move they made was in unison, with a precision both military and balletic.

I glanced back momentarily at Frank. He was beaming, his eyes big and happy behind his hair-bestraggled glasses, holding his drink out in front of him as if he was about to propose a toast. He was chatting away to an invisible friend. No-one was paying him the least heed. Everybody else's attention was fixed intently and intensely on Lemons and P's mum as they rocked on the window-sill.

The battle lines were drawn, indeed. Each bloke in warrior stance, legs splayed, arms with elbows cocked ready to grapple. They moved without any advance of the feet, shoulders and head thrusting forward, emitting a deep, grunting yet sonorous sort of 'ha-

oomp' sound.

It was as if each lurch forward propelled an emotional vibration, a tilting abyssward of Lemons and P's mum, who herself seemed remarkably unperturbed by the whole drama. She played her part, looking more regal than victimized.

Between each 'ha-oomp' there was an indecisive lull when the place, which a few minutes ago had been roaring, was virtually silent. No music playing, a huge hush, a very pregnant, send-for-the-midwife silence. All I could hear was someone at the back muttering in his beard, oddly audible at a distance. Thus Lemons' ultimatum, delivered in one of the pauses, was heard by every pair of ears in the flat with the definite exception of the well-boxed pair belonging to the still unconscious neighbour and the probable exception of the pair supporting Frank's glasses:

"If I go, the black bitch goes with me!"

The resulting lurch in the lines just pulsed with pent-up fury. Lemons' riposte: a surreptitious demi-grin that signified his relish of outrage provoked and another lolling back over the abyss, his arm firmly wrapped around P's mum's shoulders.

The suspense was vertiginous.

***

At very long last, the comic absurdity of the proceedings began to dawn on the participants. The relaxation spread as quickly as the original tension had arisen. The lines dissolved. There were smiles and shrugs and a few back-slaps. Lemons and P's mum popped off the sill.

In the afterglow of such a satisfactory denouement, a certain degree of bonhomie and laughing it off returned to the atmosphere. Lemons and P's mum got hold of big drinks,

clinked glasses, drank each other's health and seemed well pleased with their stunt.

Nevertheless …

Given the unresolved passions still circulating in murmurs around the flat, our only cool option was egress.

Frank had to be persuaded. He said, almost loudly,

"Why not party on?"

I bade goodbye to P, ourselves still unresolved; more probably, going on the wistful resignation in her expression, undone. A clunky descent down the shaft, then back on terra firma. And rarely, in my experience, had the terra felt firmer.

One Night as an Elvis Fan

As one slides inexorably into ancienthood, one may yet reflect on the blessings of one's historical circumstances. To be born a few years before the birth of rock'n'roll was to belong to a generation susceptible to a revelation (a deeper than intellect, experiential revelation) not possible for any other.

What was to us (well, some of us) revelatory magic is now commonplace – auditory wallpaper. Admittedly, rock'n'roll, as one discovered, was but the antechamber (or postchamber) to the inner sanctum of black magic, where one found Dionysus himself at the mike with his wicked instrument, Orpheus on the harp, Bacchus on squeezebox or washboard.

When I first listened to the hit-parade, I had to do so on the sly, quietly and intently; my listening to the radio, except in designated circumstances, being still verboten in those days. It, the hit-parade, was not crash-hot at that time, 1962, but there was, in echoes of the past … seeds of the future … something I heard, a sound, a rhythm, a something that just meant everything. A butterfly I've pursued ever since. More mystically, a groove, both cosmic and visceral, a Dionysian ecstasy if ever there was one, a witches' brew brewed by the nicest witches … and from those seeds grew psychedelic plants that effected a strange, yet encouraging, almost enough to make one hope, humanizing moment that touched millions, among the young mostly, in the Western world at least. Later, they realized they'd been tripping and it quickly became an insult, as in: you're

tripping, he must be tripping ... An opportunity, of a reconciliation between the white race and its roots, and between races, a Dionysian revelation of our common wellsprings,

was lost – a loss felt, mostly uncomprehendingly, by many; uncomprehending because, although the possibility was real, it was never really possible. Our Dionysian revolution is a long way off, involving as it does, not less than the recovery of our personal and racial and human memory, the recovery of our wholesomeness. But I digress …

Elvis is commonly called the king of rock'n'roll. If I were to have my pick (confining ourselves to the fifties) Chuck Berry would be king, Little Richard would be queen, Fats Domino, Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis would be among the courtiers. Elvis would be court jester (in this instance, a rushing-in rather than a wise fool). Bill Haley would eat with the servants. I digress further …

This is an attempt to sketch the now remote events of a night and a subsequent afternoon.

Characters: Dutch Andy, Jock, Bates, Bryden- Brown, an Irish merchant seaman, Andy's girlfriend, pub-goers, party-goers.

Dutch Andy banged the tambourine of amoral nihilism with as much fervour as, if more humour than, a Salvo might bang his or hers. Two of his main riffs were 'looking after number one' and being a dedicated coward, though he lived so dangerously you had to suspect the depth of his dedication. He was remarkably fit for a subterranean ne'er-do-well, as I saw him prove one day to a doubter of his boasting, by reeling off about thirty push-ups on the barroom floor. He was of similar colouring to Vincent (as (this is of course altogether by the by) Van Gogh wished to be known, if he ever was known, thoughtfully signing himself thus so that future generations would not have to wrestle with his 'unpronounceable' surname, which gesture was entirely ignored, with the result, as you will have noticed, that his name has been variously and contrarily mispronounced

ever since). And, you could say, they were both mad, but mad in different, nay opposite, ways; Vincent's madness arising from grief, compassion, longing; Andy mad in a vulpine, canny, defiant, sometimes hilarious sort of way.

Jock's life was like a game of snakes & ladders, without any ladders. I remember him, around this time, bursting into the saloon of the George, saying,

"I'm off the grog. Haven't had a drink since I last saw you," making it sound like forty days in the wilderness.

"But that was yesterday, Jock," I said. He rolled his eyes at the futility of it all and set immediately about the next drink, getting his mortal coil ever more shuffle-ready. He was pugnacious and often abrasive but the most dangerous thing about him was his breath, which, in an unguarded moment, could rock you back on your heels. That moment often occurred when, employing his favourite comical quirk, he suddenly thrust his very unpretty visage close to yours, saying fiercely, as you started to swoon in his high-octane halitosis,

"Kiss me quick, I'm coming."

Bates was a former biologist from Salt Lake City who believed he was Jesus.

Bryden-Brown was a tall, terrifying cat, a beautiful but troubled soul, his eyes eloquent with pain, his temper fearsome. Someone described to me how recently he'd had a dispute with some wharfie, to the wharfie's disadvantage. The raconteur reckoned that the wharfies had sent down several delegations to the pub, four men per delegation, to exact revenge, and Phil kept cleaning them up, four by four, until they gave up.

These people, along with Rhodes and Les Robinson, were the dregs of the dregs, the lowest of the low-life. Even in the George I was counselled against hanging out with such

characters and told they would drag me down and there was a grain of truth in that. I went so far down that, forty years later, I'm yet to surface. I had close and tender relationships with all of them, except of course Andy, who, as a friend, was not so much a hard bed to lie on as a bed of nails, perhaps an electrified one. I use their real names, since they are all long dead, possibly excepting again Andy, who may be still looking after number one somewhere.

So. Sydney, 1967. Andy announced one day that he had a girlfriend, unusual in itself. Even more unlikely, she was a North Shore girl.

They whirled into the blare and hubbub of the pub one night – she was brunette, shapely, blithe, dispensing smiles, unconscious, it seemed, of her slummery, though I barely spoke to her, beyond hi, surrounded as she was by wild, unkempt men holding conversations with her breasts.

It transpired they'd rented a house together, not that far from the George, in one of the less seedy inner city suburbs. A few of us went along for the house-warming.

There was a large window at the front of the place. The party was underway; a few of, I suppose, the girl's friends dancing. A record-player in the corner.

Andy proceeded to explain to his sceptical retinue what he had in mind.

"We're going to turn it into a coffee lounge, mon. See, about six tables along here, another three or four along that side, make the coffee in the kitchen, over there. Up the end we'll have a little stage for the performers."

"Who's gonna perform?"

"Opening night, mon, we've got a classical guitarist. We've already hired 'im."

"So when's this happening?"

"Next week, mon. It'll be a gas, mon." Blue eyes twinkling. There was a hint of ironic portent in that twinkle.

"You're not coming," he said to Jock, though what interest Jock would have in visiting a coffee lounge to listen to a classical guitarist was beyond guessing.

A bit later, Andy put on his Elvis record. It was a greatest-hits sort of thing but with his rockinger stuff – Hounddog, Heartbreak Hotel, Blue Suede Shoes, Jailhouse Rock. There was no That's All Right Mama, which I would've been surprised to learn that Elvis had recorded. I used to sing that song, having got it from the slinky Snooks Eaglin.

Andy played the thing over and over, dancing and cavorting with all and sundry.

"I don't care what anybody says. I dig the mon!"

The booze was flowing, the party-goers bopping, the chicks shaking it… and for a little while there I just might've had a dose of that Elvis fever myself.

* * *

A couple of days after Andy's coffee lounge had supposedly opened, I ran into Bates at the George. He had a captain in tow, an Irish sailor, full of beer and braggadocio. The bloke bought us another round, then paid for a cab up to Andy's.

In the middle of the front window was a big hole, cracks radiating out from it. Inside, the place looked like a bomb had hit it, debris and shards scattered over the floors. Piles of splinters, the remains of tables and chairs. A larger heap – that must have been the stage. Most amazingly, the walls in several places were crumbling, spilling out in cascades of rubble.

On an island of cleared floor, amidst the mess, just starting on a fresh flagon of the old

invalid port, sat Bryden-Brown, Jock and Andy, who greeted us cheerily.

We sat in a circle as the flagon revolved. Joviality reigned. Apparently, Jock *had* been there for the big opening. Andy accused him of being the author of the brick through the window. Jock denied it.

The Irish sailor and Jock seemed not to like each other. They began swapping insults, banteringly at first, steadily becoming more bellicose. Suddenly, they were into it. They were both little blokes, neither of them sober, and hopeless fighters, throwing haymakers that hit nothing, seizing each other, grappling, slipping over in the litter, but in their own minds very serious – there was murder in their contorted faces. Bryden-Brown was roaring with laughter.

I, being in those days of altogether irenical disposition, felt obliged to separate them, which I did, holding them apart, strongly advising them to desist.

"You saved my life," said Jock. Bryden-Brown chuckled.

"He saved my life," Jock insisted. "You just sit there laughing while I get killed."

The flagon circulated. The sailor sat hunched up, sulking in the corner for a while. Then he left, very quietly, apart from a parting expletive when he was safely beyond the doorway.

Some time and further mellowing later, Andy surveyed the gathering, looking us each in the eye, one by one.

"Mon, what a crew we've got here." General mirth. Exalted in turpitude. Exulting anyway.

I wondered aloud what happened to the classical guitarist.

"Ah, he's been coming around," said Andy, as if describing an intolerably tiresome

situation. “He wants to be paid. He wants his guitar back.”

“Maybe he’ll get it, mon, if he can think of a way to get his hands on this,” he added, plucking the pawn ticket from his pocket.

A Job at Darling Harbour

My superego is an eclectic magpie. If that sentence appears, at first glance, somewhat opaque, I believe and presume that by the end of this short narrative it shall have become so pellucid as to resemble a self-evident proposition.

Sydney, a wintry Thursday morning. I passed the neon clock at the top of the Cross at 6 a.m., walked down William St., through the city, over the Pyrmont bridge to the Darling Harbour railway sheds, where I worked. First day on the job.

I was, as of that morning, homeless, having expended my last resource. Not for the first time but, I was resolved, for the last. 6:00 marked the first hour of what stretched into a sixty-hour stint of wakefulness, most of it on my feet. It had become my policy when homeless to only sleep in more-or-less secure locations and, if there were none, to walk around rather than sleep in the open, so as to avoid being pinged by the police and potentially sent to Long Bay for the vagrancy to which I had demonstrably succumbed. Around the Cross, at any hour, I could be just another scruffy tourist.

Although annoyed at myself for the fecklessness that had brought me to such a pass, on the upside, I'd learnt a lot. The downside of the upside was that some of what I'd learnt was disquieting knowledge. I'd gone beyond the pale, past the invisible palisades, out onto the tundra of pariahdom.

And blessed though I was, in terms of insight, or oversight or undersight, to be living so near the periphery of society, ineluctably centrifuged there from somewhere near the hub, it was during those days that I first felt the cold, whisking slap in the face of alienation, of being made alien, being made perfidious by my own impertinent poverty; put another way: when I first learned how cold is the shoulder of the world when the

world turns against you - cry on that shoulder and you'll get stalagmites of icicles.

So there's my state of mind. Physically, I was woefully out of shape.

They put me with a bloke named Lucas, who was Maltese, thirty-seven, full of smiles. He was a ball of muscle, albeit a slight-framed and short one, being about five-foot-two (as we used to say in the days before a lofty buffoon, in a fit of positivistic pique, outlawed any reference to our erstwhile, anthropo-compatible system of weights and measures. Had he been a racing man, I speculated at the time, he would not have so blithely forgone the furlong.)

My recent street-living had left me a stone underweight, due to lack of nourishment. Given my lack of condition, I'd had half an idea of easing my way into the work. That notion was short-lived. Lucas'd come wheeling in, teetering under a big boxed-up fridge that seemed about to overwhelm him, bang it in, back for the next, fire in his eyes. A tiger for work was Lucas. I was soon flat out keeping up with him.

Come Friday I was finding it harder and harder to understand Lucas's fractured English. All the sounds I was hearing kept dissolving into wild, hallucinatory music. I was snatching nano-sleeps, leaning on this or that.

(Early the next week I'd be eligible for a sub i.e. an advance on my wages and thereafter would have a room in which to luxuriate.)

Lucas and I quickly developed a working rapport. Not hard with Lucas – he effused delight as well as energy. As I got fitter, I gradually, by tacit agreement, took over most of the handling of the heaviest things. The line we worked on comprised a train with trucks for the stations along the Sydney-Albury line. Lucas and I had the busiest end. We had two trucks, sometimes three, into which we loaded, on an ordinary day, 25-30 ton,

sometimes much more, up to around 50 ton. (When we got really stretched , they'd find a third man to help us.) You knew the tonnage because at the end of the day a boss came around to seal up the trucks and slot a card on the side that indicated the load. By way of comparison: a cat I knew from Melbourne, who lent me a couple of dollars on my first day, had a truck half-way down the line; he never got more than seven ton, he said, some days only three. Whenever I passed him, he would be sitting at his leisure on the platform, having a smoke, awaiting the next consignment. (This cat had shoulder-length, dark, crinkly hair, a full beard, wore an earring and favoured big, calf-hugging boots, so that he resembled an olden-day pirate. In reality, though, he was more prototype than throwback.)

One day, during a rare slack period, one of the bosses came along and said to Lucas,

"I need your man for a job."

When I say bosses – they were only one rung up the hierarchy from us, older blokes who had earned a uniform, consisting of blue trousers and jacket and a hat, these uniforms bring uniformly crumpled and dusty.

The bloke took me over to another line where there were five wool-bales stacked on the platform beside an open truck. He gave a hook to work with and said he wanted the bales all on the floor, one in each corner, one in the middle. Those bales are pretty heavy, 400 lb. or so apiece.

Just as I was heaving the last bale into its ordered position, another crumpled checker showed up and, surveying the truck, said,

"That's not how you stack wool-bales;' going on to explain that the proper positioning was three on the floor and two on top. I tried to point out that the other boss had

demanded a different disposition but he would brook no conversation on the matter and told me to get on and do it properly.

I had almost completed the newly prescribed arrangement when the first boss reappeared and berated me for not following his instructions. Again I tried to explain, telling him what the other fellow had said; again I was given short shrift. I set about the new configuration, the boss this time staying to watch. A few minutes later the second boss came back to check on my progress. Hooray I thought, we'll get this sorted out definitely. Whereupon, the second boss said to the first,

"This man doesn't know what he's doing!" And the first boss, whom I was expecting to defend me and explain his preferred disposition of wool-bales, au contraire, heartily agreed with his colleague, shaking his head at my ineptitude (as, in vain, I searched each of their countenances for the faintest twinge of jest or irony) then packing me off back to Lucas.

Naturally enough, I had a lot of sore muscles during the early stages of that job. I'd expected that. I'd come into it well underdone. However, my fettle soon returned. Except for soreness across my lower back, which obstinately persisted.

I knew back injuries were a peril to be guarded against. There were a few blokes around the sheds, on light duties, most of whom had done their backs. I was conscientious about lifting properly, bending my knees, using my leg strength.

Two years before, I'd had a similar experience. My friend John and I, after we'd both quit uni earlier that year, were labourers at the Board of Works, Lakes Maintenance Division, in Canberra. We were known as Moses and Goggles, for the beard I had then and the glasses he always wore.

One of our tasks was to construct low, rock walls on the sides of hills, intended, I believe, to direct the water run-off so that it ended up in the lake. John and I manned the cement-mixer together, taking it in turns to shovel in the sand and cement or to ferry the wheelbarrow of wet stuff over to the boys.

My back got sore, then bloody sore, then even bloody sorer. I talked about it to some of the others in our gang. Their advice was to just make sure I did everything with the correct technique, work though it, she'll be apples. They were right. It was like an extended version of running through a stitch. All along, I kept on carrying the cement bags two, now and again three, at a time.

So my present plan to follow the same procedure.

We had some doors to load, stacked on a pallet on the platform. They were unfinished doors, no handles or holes for handles, fronted and backed with maisonite, the texture of which I recall as I write. I was taking them off the stack, swinging round, passing them to Lucas who was whacking them in the truck. About half-way down the stack, I picked up the door and as I swung around, I felt, I seemed to feel, I mean I felt it but simultaneously my mind was inveighing against acknowledging the sensation – felt the muscles at the base of my back tearing, one after the other. Then that whole region exploded into an inchoate blaze of pain. I tried to walk away. I could barely move my feet…

For more background on my back I have to go back to when my back hit the ground. I begin to pun wantonly in honour of my friend John (the aforementioned John who was to be given the soubriquet Goggles by the Lakes Maintenance crew.) Punning was the currency of our persiflage and a purse if large may yield an abundance of currency.

Our last year of school. I was playing in a muck-around, lunchtime game of basketball.

The court was asphalt. It may have been a bit damp. I went to make a sharp dash down the side of the court, lost my footing in a spectacular fashion so that both my legs shot forward in the air and with no time to get my arms out to cushion the fall, came down with a thump, smack on the small of my back.

It hurt like blazes, but worse was a perturbing weakness I felt in my limbs, a sense of helplessness, the helplessness of an inverted terrapin.

I lay supine, looking up at a circle of sky and around its circumference a ring of faces, my fellow students peering down at my predicament, most of them with at least a polite mask of concern. Apart from one, my beautifully-minded, best friend John, who was laughing uproariously, as if he'd never witnessed anything funnier.

At the time I was merely puzzled but later felt a trifle embarrassed on John's behalf. His wonderful intellect was accompanied by a degree of social gaucherie. This troubled him, but I did not see it as a negative quality, rather a reflection of the fact that he was too sincere for his own good. (I should point out that John, were he here to do so, would probably dispute that last assertion and claim to be as mendacious as the next bod.)

Some weeks prior to this incident I had embarked on an experimental attempt, the reasons for which I confided to and debated at length with John, to talk without swearing. Somewhat to my own surprise, I'd been able to maintain the protocol over those weeks, with scarcely a lapse.

My grounds were that it was a waste of breath that only inhibited meaningful expression – for example, using the same adjective to describe everything meant describing nothing. Further, that a continual coarseness of language must entail a gradual coarsening of thought.

What John found so hilarious was that, after all my earnest dissertations on an elevated nonprofanity, as I lay there I was yelling,

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!...’

An ambulance was called. It parked on the school oval. They stretchered me into the back where I lay by myself on a board along the side as we hurtled to the hospital. Around curves and corners I could barely cling on and the strain amplified the pain. This is crazy, I thought. At the hospital I was X-rayed, then sent home with a diagnosis of severe bruising…

This time, all-a-grimace at Darling Harbour, I managed to keep my lip buttoned. Well, I can’t swear I didn’t swear a little. I might have said, “I’ve hurt my back” when Lucas looked enquiringly at me. But I was mightily resisting the idea that I’d really hurt myself. There was a solitary salt-lick nearby on the platform. (It must have tipped off the rollers.) Those salt-licks or cattle-licks, of which we got plenty, were one of my favourite items, being cubic and weighing half a hundredweight, they were just the right weight and shape for easy handling and convenient stacking. I made myself get over to it, made myself bend down to it, get a grip, and with a brace and heave as if I was lifting a barbell, tried to pick it up. I couldn’t bloody lift it. I knew then I was in diabolical trouble.

That fall at school, was it a precursor to this injury? The fall which pre-cursed me?

Lucas was full of perplexed compassion. A boss was summoned.

“You’ll have to go and see the doctor.”

The doctor was in the city. More than a mile away.

I set off with the incremental, laborious shuffle which was the best I could manage. It took me God-knows how long. The last bit was an upward gradient, which I thought was

bad until I tried walking downhill!

As I battled along, a sideshow for gawkers, I was naively encouraging myself with the expectation that the doctor would at least be able to provide me with a medical prognosis.

I entered his room. I must have been a picture of agony but he didn't see it. He stood with his back to me, looking out the window, only half turning to indicate his examination table.

"Get up on there."

The doctor was a subcontinental gentleman, which would be irrelevant except the Sellers-like lilt I couldn't help hearing in his intonation added to the surreality I was already experiencing.

The white-sheeted table was more than waist-high. Dauntingly high. I tried this way and that but couldn't persuade either leg more than inches off the floor. Eventually, by slowly sliding one arm over the sheet, I got a grasp of both sides of the table and gradually hauled myself atop using the muscles of my shoulders and arms. All the while, the doc stared out the window. Perhaps he could peripherally see my reflection for as soon as I made it, the whole effort having taken minutes, he wheeled around and said,

"You did that all right, didn't you?"

He came over, lifted my shirt, gave me a perfunctory prod which elicited an "ow," and said,

"Back to work on Monday or you get the sack."

It was Wednesday afternoon. Could I get over this in four days? The doctor took no further interest.

I hadn't been in the job long enough to become a permanent employee and was thus

unentitled to any sort of compensation or leave.

Four days! The orchestra of pain blaring away across my lower back gradually not so much subsided as broke up into smaller components; now just the string section, now the horns, now the tympani; then devolving differently, now only a nonet, a septet, a quintet; never altogether desisting, always threatening to crescendo again into full symphonic mode. My girlfriend made jokes about the proverbial coital incapacity of men with bad backs and why don't we explode the myth? So we grooved along. Each day, when ambulatory, I could extend a little farther.

Monday, I went back to work, hoping to be functional, still short of a full stride. I managed somehow, mentally concentrating on the injury, trying not to aggravate it. For example, when plucking salt-licks or boxes of some sort off the rollers, I would pick it up, turn my whole self around, stack it, turn my whole self back again, where before I would have swivelled my upper torso. I had a somewhat fearful little period, coping, but never actually confident that I would. Away from work, I found I couldn't afford to sit in one position for any length of time else my back would seize up. Lying down was damn-near impossible. I learned to sleep sitting up, propped against a pillow. Years later, I was still periodically doing it, as well as practising various contortions on various beds. Yet (to express a modulation of Nietzsche's military maxim) as with many injuries and illnesses and setbacks of the non-fatal sort, there was in this a hidden boon. The necessity of addressing such a chronic affliction taught me eventually that the sine qua non of the solution (not perfect but wonderful nonetheless) was exercise and led me to eclectically (on a conscious level, in this case) garner a set of exercises which has proved of great utility and today is still my most pleasurable chore. Endorphins (or endocannabinoids?)

and all that.

Since that job at Darling Harbour, on many occasions, whilst essaying something necessary or obligatory, complaining internally about the difficulty of the task and then, at last, it's done, I hear myself say to myself,

'Well, you did that all right, didn't you?'

Again, many more times than I could enumerate (even if I wished to), having blundered into another impasse or imbroglio, I find myself nonplussed and the universe indifferent, and a voice seems to boom out behind me,

'This man doesn't know what he's doing!'

The Suicide Sisters

I dubbed them the suicide sisters because that was their main topic of conversation: when they would do it, how they would do it, how much better life would be when it was over. There were two of them originally: Tina and Lou, both sixteen, ex-wards of the state. Tina was slight and pale; Lou was stockier, a little tubby, got around in a duffel coat. The two became three when Tina and Lou met Karen. They all stayed with Bates and me one night in that boarding-house.

The first time I lived in that house, l shared a room with old Les Robinson. When I say old, he was then in his early forties. He was bearded and toothless, which gave his smile (a smile that occurred most often in the mid-afternoon benevolence of his daily drunkenness) a rather cavernous effect. His hair was greying and cropped short, his face eroded by the winds and trials of his years. There was an anchor tattooed on one forearm and a snake, I think, on the other. He looked like a sailor, which, in his younger days, he had been.

Our landlady was a lumbering woman of middle age, who liked to spy on her tenants. She spent most of her time in her room at the front of the house, usually in the company of her friend, a slightly older woman from next door. Decked out in fifties-style floral dresses, they whiled away their days drinking gin, which they sipped out of teacups, in order to appear respectable.

After an hour or so sweating up and down the hilly streets around Darlinghurst and the Cross, we found the place. It had a ‘room vacant’ sign and looked suitably cheap. When we knocked, nothing happened. Then after a couple of minutes the curtain moved slightly and after another couple the front door opened.

"We came to enquire …" I began.

"It's not him, is it?" The landlady was eyeing Les with suspicion, if not alarm.

Les and I stood in perplexed silence, until she reassured herself:

"Oh I don't s' pose it could…" But on the way upstairs to show to show us the dingy room she turned to me again,

"Are you sure it's not him? He lived here before. He had a beard too." Beards in February '67 were not as common as they became later. (And not so very much later, come to think of it. But at that time, when I espied a bearded cat on the street in Melbourne or Sydney, more than likely it'd be someone I knew.) Still, I was soon to learn that our landlady of the oxen gait and gin-bemused brain rarely made sense. Though strangely, when it came to money and the dates when rent fell due, her mind was entirely lucid.

It was a noisy, restless week we spent there, for me at least. The adjacent room was occupied by a Polish man (I surmise he was Polish, East European at any rate) and two aboriginal women. They worked for him or he lived off their earnings, whichever. Or perhaps that was his pipedream. Every night they fought. Crashes and curses and shrieks reverberated through the house and gave me unholy nightmares, when I managed to get to sleep at all. Their arguments, I guessed from what I could scarcely help overhearing, usually began about money. He would accuse them of spending too much time parking their behinds on a barstool instead of underneath a paying customer. His English was limited but he had a fine command of the basic obscenities. Then followed a period of quiet wrangling while they had a few drinks; then the first bottle smashing, the first composure-rending scream. And on and on, the only lulls occurring, it seemed, when one

of them needed a fresh bottle or came reeling and muttering down the hallway to the toilet that we shared with them. Les snored through it all.

The landlady remained suspicious of him, scrutinizing his face whenever she saw him to convince herself that ‘it wasn’t him.’ ‘He,’ she confided to me through an almost tangible cloud of gin, was a ‘monster’ who had ‘ruined the reputation of her house.’ He must have been some character, I reflected, considering the general demeanour of her tenants.

And Les. There was method in Les’s dipsomania. Nearly every morning he was up around five, somehow or other. Neither of us owned a watch and he never flaked out before twelve.

“Wouldn’t like to be late for the early-openers,” he’d say, rolling his first cigarette and spluttering and twitching somewhat. As if he was going to work. He’d pull on his old sandshoes, drag himself to the toilet and back consulting the hallway clock en route, splash a little water on his face from the tiny basin that was the sole luxury our room afforded, check that he had his entrance fee (twenty cents for the first beer), tuck in his shirt, and off to the waterfront.

I did go with him, once or twice, idly curious. But I spent most of my days looking for work. Without success. After one such fruitless day, I wended my way down to the George to meet up with Les. He was drinking with Jules and Victor and Cyrus. Then Bates arrived, sporting his crooked grin, aphoristically declaiming, as was his wont,

“Doom, doom, doom.”

Shortly afterward, Jock turned up with, astonishingly, a young girl plastered to his arm.

This was Karen.

Jock introduced me as ‘a very good friend of mine,’ although we hadn’t known each other long at that stage. Karen favoured me with a swift glance - peeking up through cascading tresses – and a hint of a smile

It seemed inexplicable, seeing those two, at once conjoined and oxymoronically juxtaposed.

Jock: bluff, gruff, bristly in hair and beard and character, brusque in manner, a gravelly voice shot through with Gaelic brogue, a terrier with teeth like fangs, the front pair missing since a hundred scraps ago, his face pock-marked and harrowed by more than a decade of street-living; and a decade or so older than his clinging paramour. Karen had blonde, unkempt hair that fell over her face. She was swathed (or swaddled) in an army shirt much too big for her that came to the knees of her jeans. She said she was seventeen but may have been fudging a year for from what she said, or rather implied, it appeared that she had been more or less recently delivered from the tender mercies of the State; granted her independence when she was, as were others, Tina and Lou for example, quite incapable of independence and, in Karen’s case especially, inwardly devastated as she was, equally incapable of being dependent.

When first I saw her, I had the fleeting impression that she was one of those pretty girls who cultivated a windswept, messed-about look that only made her look prettier, through lacking the usual refinements of appearance. But, on knowing her a little, I saw she was doing all she could to conceal her prettiness, to cancel it if possible.

To her, evidently, the sensuous sylph that others saw, despite her assiduous disguise, was something that betrayed her… betrayed her again and again… more and more it

seemed to me, the longer I knew her, that in her eyes, that very comeliness had been the foundation on which she had collapsed, over which had walked the betrayers who wrecked her… had been the bait for monsters… the recurring excruciation - her diurnal and nocturnal lot - was so immanent in her that you knew without asking or her saying; nor did she pretend not to know that you knew, although one naturally assumed that to her the enormities were so enormous as to be unimaginable by anybody else - and who in their right mind would really want to try? She herself kept her eyes averted from reality, now as then.

And whenever you started to see her as an entrapped damsel in distress and felt a concomitant chivalric impulse, she'd give you a sign - what she said, how she said it, what she emoted - that stated, with a finality unseemly in one so young, that were you to make any attempt to scale the castle wall with the intention of rescuing her, she'd be the first to start tipping the boiling oil.

That behind her fortifications she hid sweeter thoughts and fonder emotions, you could hear in her laughter, when occasionally she forgot herself sufficiently to momentarily overlook that she was Miss Misery walking and infer from her expression, as when, every now and again, I caught her looking at me, her glance signifying that she might, just this once, be about to emerge from herself - but immediately our eyes met, inaudibly but incontrovertibly, the portcullis came clanking down.

I hesitate to guesstimate how long her attachment to Jock lasted. It probably seemed longer that it really was. Perhaps a couple of weeks. During that period I spent a lot of time conversing with her, without learning much about her in a factual sense. As I've been trying to express, a great deal of our communication was a circuitous guessing-

game of implication and inference; her saying, ‘Look, I’m broken, I can’t be fixed, and it’s not your business, anyway;’ me presuming to suggest that there might be a faint twinkle of light at the end of the tunnel she was in, dark as it surely was.

Despite her bitterness, she came across as sweet-natured, that quality in her as irrepressible as her peeping nubility. She treated Jock with motherly affection - he became for the duration a softer version of himself, his bristles semi-retracted.

Then, one night, it was over. She disappeared with ‘a bloody Yank sailor.’

The sailor was just a passing captain, Karen’s way of announcing she was moving on. Soon after she thus detached herself from Jock and left him wondering if it had all really happened, she teamed up with Lou and Tina. They became a tight little trio for a while. Karen’s next phase.

We didn’t see her in the George any more. The other two didn’t drink in pubs. They were all under-age of course, Tina very obviously so. I quite often ran into them around the Cross. On the street, in the little courtyard where ne’er-do-wells sat around, in the Wayside Chapel. They made a humourless, unsmiling threesome, only sniggering at things bleak or ghoulish. Karen, however, occasionally greeted me with that hinted-at smile which always reminded me of our first meeting. Lou and Tina had not changed their mantra one whit: suicide, suicide. So insistent on it you wandered how serious they actually were. Though Lou and Tina reckoned she was of the same mind as they, Karen said nothing on the subject. But in her typically elliptical allusions, in her compulsive recklessness, she gave you the unhappy impression that the reason she said nothing was because, as far as she was concerned, it went without saying.

I did once ask her, in an aside I knew was probably pointless, if, considering the

respect they held her in, she might perhaps try to influence the others in some alternative direction. She said,

"It's not up to me to tell them what to think."

My job-seeking had become a bit sporadic. I was out of funds. I had a bit of money coming from my last, brief job as a postman in Canberra. I'd been expecting it but it hadn't arrived. Bates suggested we hitch down to collect it.

Hitch-hiking was Bates's usual mode of travel over distances. I preferred to eschew it if possible, knowing empirically the mobile nightmares one was likely to step into. However, it went serenely. John and Graham, my erstwhile Canberra friends, took us to a party where Bates was feted as a fascinating exotic. John reckoned he hadn't known where to send the money, although I thought we'd agreed on the GPO. Probably my oversight.

Bates and I came back on the train.

Bates was pad-less, having been evicted from his last place of residence.

He described his eviction to me, complaining, as if it were an unrighteous blow against enlightenment. Like most of his tales, it was a lurid one and again, like many of them, it had an element of parable. While he only gave you the facts, if with a mystical momentum in his eyes - what those facts meant - that was the riddle.

According to Bates, he was alone in a room with a young chick who was carving away at her wrists with a razor-blade.

"What're you doing?" asks Bates.

She wants to die she says, she's cutting her wrists.

"You don't want to do that."

Yes she does, she insists.

"Well that won't do it. You're not going deep enough."

"Well why don't you show me then, if you know so much about it?"

"You don't want me to show you."

"I fucking-well do!" she says, handing him the razor-blade.

So Bates reaches over, makes the appropriate slash, blood starts spurting; the girl, abruptly discovering that dying is the last thing she wants to do, starts screaming; people come running in, an ambulance is called but no police, the girl is saved; and Bates is out on his ear, all for lifting the veil to reveal reality and, one supposed one was supposed to suppose, quite possibly curing a poor young girl of a dangerous obsession. Or…

Bates and I got a room together. On the she-devil I knew principle - more honestly, to elide the senseless trudging around that Les and I did in search of a double room - we went back to that same boarding-house. When the landlady first saw Bates, the bee in her bonnet started buzzing again. Though whether the scraggly, uneven tufts that sprouted from Bates's weather-beaten visage constituted a beard might be moot. But once again she decided it wasn't 'him.'

The room, on the ground floor this time, was at least quieter than the last one. The Pole and his ladies were nowhere to be heard. The coughing of various residents was, however, just terrible. Enough to give you mournful thoughts on the human condition.

We'd been there a few days when, one late afternoon, Bates took me aside, as he did to discuss weighty matters, and said that Jock had asked him to ask me… originally Karen had asked Jock, on behalf of Tina and Lou… in short the lot of them were presently without a place of abode and would we put them up for one night to tide 'em

over? Well obviously we would. Especially considering it was autumn by then and getting chillier at night. But was such a thing achievable without unleashing the displeasure of a rampaging landlady and all of us being flung into the street?

They all thought it was. And rightly, as it turned out. They entered (and left next morning) unnoticed, with the marvelous stealth of those who have tiptoed in great peril.

Lou showed up with a very large, very white bandage on her left wrist, which pushed her coat partway up her forearm, and a smaller bit of plaster around her right, which she held up her hand to show us.

"Cut me wrists," she said, "but they brought me back."

Everybody there, we needed to move quickly. There was a curtain across the window, but a curtain, like all the others in the place I'd seen, haphazardly dotted with perforations that might have been designed as eyeholes for prying landladies and, in any case, were known to be used for just such a purpose by our own.

So we needed the light out. Someone reckoned if we pushed the beds together we could make one big one that would fit everybody. We did that, assembling ourselves like sardines, sharing the bedding around. And lay in the dark.

Lou and Tina were rabbiting to each other in whispers. Their latest scheme. Mandies. Buy them one or two at a time but don't take 'em. Save 'em up till they'd got enough to do the job for both of them.

"So how many mandies would we need?" Lou asked the company, not so much aloud as at the top of her whisper.

"If we knew, would we tell you?" From Jock.

As Lou whispered, she made little gesticulations. You could see, in the gloom, the

moving band of her bandage, so pristine was the whiteness of it. I was hoping Bates wouldn't be moved to reprise the awful little story he'd recently told me. Instead, he whispered, quite poetically,

"You girls are really aching for the happy hunting grounds, aren't ya?"

"You'd better believe it!" From Lou, with a flash of white.

I had my two-bob's worth, putting the secular humanist point of view,

"But girls, if you do that, then you won't exist at all."

To which Tina responded,

"Cool, baby, cool." This followed by a chorus of titters which I felt, rather than heard, through the seismic ripple created as, more or less in concert, they each indulged in a momentary convulsion of silent laughter.

The topic changed. To the other side of the coin: life. Which was a drag. This was a drag and that was a drag and he was a drag and she was a drag… at some point disputes broke out about some of those insulted… interspersed with miscellaneous bickering and some childish blanket-tugging back and forth. Karen and I , who stayed out of it, lay surrounded by a storm of whispers, like hissing static.

Eventually, the whispering petered out and a general somnolence seemed to approach.

Then Jock, who was first sardine, counting from his end, announced,

"I have to go for a leak."

I started to give him directions, but he said,

"I know where it is." The moment he said it, I had an inkling.

Another peccadillo of our landlady was her late-night rambling. Long after you'd have thought John Barleycorn and Morpheus would have, between them, sealed her eyes,

she might appear in the corridor, still wrapped in her juniper-berry miasma, looking about distractedly like a bloated, sozzled Lady Macbeth. I'd come upon this apparition once myself on a wee-hours trip to the loo.

We waited with collective baited breath, listening for Jock's return.

There was a sound, something slight and indefinable, then a bit of a thud, which last I later attributed, to our considerable landlady leaning suddenly against a wall.

Then Jock was back, noiselessly through the door, as deft as a thief. Re-inserting himself under his edge of bedding, he reported,

"That was close. The old witch almost sprung me. Big trouble if she sees *me* here."

"So you've lived here before, eh Jock?"

Well, yeah, he had lived there and well, yeah, there had been a certain amount of riotous living, a bit of a to-do with the landlady. He'd had quite an effect on her – she'd found him intimidating; and you could see how Jock's faux ferocity might be intimidating if you made the mistake of taking it seriously. The denouement was the common one: threats of police and a midnight flit.

"I think she's got a thing about me," Jock summed up, percipiently.

Intermittent slumberings ensued. I was third sardine, slightly uncomfortably positioned partially over the fault-line between the beds. Karen was fourth sardine. She was lying with her head turned just a little away from me and toward her acolytes. But, sometime later in the night, when I was startled awake by a twitch which did not originate in my own being, I found her fast-asleep head on my shoulder.

The following day, the landlady did confront me. A very short, enigmatic confrontation. Fixing me balefully with her bulbous eyes, she began,

"I thought I saw…" Then, as if dismissing it (whatever it was, although, of course I thought I knew) as some chimerical epiphenomenon brought on by a pesky paranoia, she discontinued the sentence and dropped the subject.

Next time I saw any of the girls, it was Lou, on her lonesome, coming out of the Wayside Chapel as I was going in. She seemed more muted than her normal, somewhat boisterous self. Tina, she said, was in hospital, coming out tomorrow. She'd walked in front of a car.

"Only a busted ankle," she said gloomily, as if conveying bad news.

Bit after that I saw the three of them passing on the other side of the street, in indian file, Karen leading, then Lou, Tina hobbling at the rear, one foot in plaster, a crutch under her arm, battling to keep up.

Then, after my not having seen any of them for a while… I was walking along Darlinghurst Road when Karen suddenly appeared beside me, linking arms.

"Wanna walk with me?"

"OK," I said "Where're you headed?"

"The place I'm staying now. It's not far."

Turned out it was the place called the mansion. I'd heard a rumour she'd taken up with the Canadian who lived there. So it was.

We went in though a side entrance. Inside, the place seemed subtly different from the last time I'd been there. Some slight alteration in the olfactory sense-scape, perhaps.

We trooped upstairs to the room where Karen cohabitated with the Canadian, whose name was Matt. Matt wasn't the robust fellow I remembered. His face was haggard, his movements languid.

The room was dimly lit by a well-bushelled lamp in the corner. At the other end, in a kitchenette sort of area, there was a stronger light, a naked bulb suspended over a bare table.

Seeing Karen face to face as we sat down, hard to see though she was in the dimness… subjectively, she looked as beguiling as ever; objectively, she looked atrocious. Her hair was lanker, her face more wan, the dark under her eyes even darker. An après-Jock descent into even grottier degradation was hard to credit. But …

She was chewing her hair. She'd always done that. More as an inadvertently fetching nibbling at wisps. Now she was veritably gnawing a hank of it.

They were about to hit up.

"We're shooting some nembie, man. You can if you want," said Matt.

I declined.

On the table under the light there was a spoon and some capsules, the nembies, not many, maybe three. Matt went over to the wardrobe, felt around the top for the fit, found it, flicked a bit of dust off it, took it to the kitchen. Under the light you could see it was a used syringe with a bent, old needle.

He tipped a portion of the powder from the pills into the spoon, added a bit of tap water, siphoned the murky suspension into the syringe. Karen went over to the light. He shot her up, then repeated the process for himself.

While Matt was busy with his preparations, my conscience had been in high chivalric mode. I'd been mentally casting about for something I might do or say to induce Karen to think twice, to move them to consider some basic hygiene, maybe.

Karen was a bright girl, or would have been if enough light had ever come into her life

to enable that potential in her to fulfil itself. As it was, she had an awareness about her, more truly a wilful unawareness. As I thought my thoughts, she shot a glare at me. Her vibes - and zingy vibes they were - were saying; I'm exercising my freedom to do what I will and should I get some horrible infection, so much the better for that.

They were both lolling about, seemingly in a state of semi-sentience. I cut out.

Next I heard that Karen and Matt had been arrested. Something drug-related. Next that Matt had skipped bail and Karen was in Parramatta Girls' Home. Next that Karen had offed herself in her cell. The tendrils of the grapevine were really tingling with that message - I heard it from too many sources to disbelieve it. I don't recall reading anything about it, but at least one of those sources must have because, during his relation, I was struck by the phrase: 'seventeen-year-old found hanging' and I thought, 'she must have had her birthday.'

Not long after Karen departed her personal vale of tears, I bumped into Tina and Lou in the street. They tried very hard to appear pleased and amused by the event, caught somewhere between allowing and forcing themselves to smile. Mocking my downcast expression, they got in my face a bit, yelling,

"Karen's the best!"

"She did it!"

"Karen's the first!"

"Karen's the best!"

And they contrived to do a little dance, Tina merely wobbling on her single crutch, Lou bouncily describing a circle with one arm in the air. She still had a bandage on her wrist, it was coming loose… grey and fraying - surely not the same one, I thought - and

as she whirled, it was fluttering like a pennon.

Tracy

Tumbling down King St. one morning beside a partially lubricated and to-that-extent-jauntified Les Robinson, I was amusing myself by dodging the cracks in the pavement. I was reminded of my childhood and the rhymes that kids had employed when playing that game. The two most common were:

"Step on a crack
Break your mother's back" and
"Step on a crack
Marry a black." It used to amaze me that these were deemed commensurate damnations.

Les and I were headed for Sussex St.. The pub opposite the George opened at eight. Earlier we'd descended through Woolloomooloo, Les wrapped in an agony I recognized but was yet to experience. Passing a milk-bar I suggested a bite to eat.

"Not on an empty stomach," he growled in a voice even hoarser than usual.

We fronted promptly at six when the early-opener opened its doors. We'd lob at this next pub until ten, then stroll across to the George. Although it was really a case of an alcoholic ensuring he got his first drinks in, with Les it was an oddly formal process. We were present and correct at six, eight and ten, walking in the moment the doors opened. This was his daily routine (excepting Sundays) which I shared with him a couple of times during the week we lived together.

To my untutored eyes it seemed that of the regular crowd in the George about a quarter were aboriginal. In the Bunch, just up the road, I thought the mix was about fifty-fifty.

Racial jibes, light-hearted by and large, were prevalent in both those pubs. Mostly at the expense of whitefellas. Smidgens of historical pay-back.

Among the first people I got to know in the George were Cyrus – tall, amiable, patriarchically bearded, legendary, like Les himself, among the push; also Annie and Mabel. Annie was twenty-six, Mabel a bit older. Ladies who'd lived hard. Annie was skinny and frail, usually chirpy but somehow at the same time forlorn. A huge sadness seemed to inhabit her tiny frame.

Victor, with whom I remained friends for years, was another beset by an inner anguish. He had a younger brother about my age, Johnny, who was a student. Victor supported him through various nefarious activities. He used to, for example, travel up to Newcastle to sell grass to miners and factory workers.

Victor was customarily cheerful and hearty but his dark moods were very dark. He never spoke directly about the origins of his demons, the undergoings he'd undergone, but often alluded to them, mostly when talking about his protective nurturing of Johnny, as in,

"See, it's all so he doesn't have to go through what I had ta."

Victor's fits of gloom could be spectacular. One of them had a particular effect on the Frenchman. This Frenchman – at least I think he was French – he only spoke English, or some minimalist imitation of it consisting of sporadic monosyllables – was a captain; captain being the appellation given, in ironic flattery as you'd expect, to sailors who arrived in waterfront pubs with money in their pockets looking for someone to show them the sights – the sights, that is, that sailors with money in their pockets and voyages behind them are keen to see. In the George and the Vanity Fair there was another version: the

well-heeled, fleecable alf hoping for adventure on the seamy side; alfs being everybody in the world except the push; the push being a club that one could only join if one was already a member, a club in fact with no members because it wasn't a club, rather a loose collective of outcasts, outsiders, misfits. In this non-club with no members to which one belonged by mutual recognition, the accepted, if generally unconscious, philosophical attitude was a pragmatic nihilism. The simultaneous and more conscious counter-argument was a neo-pagan bacchanalianism.

Two escapees from the asylum of alfdom, teenagers, were in the George one late afternoon, talking loudly about shooting up, epitomizing uncool. They were asking around:

"Where can we find the push?" - eliciting only shrugs and indifference. (They could have been police informers or agents, types not unknown, nor often unrecognized, in that milieu, but were probably too uncool even for that.) Nevertheless they persisted. Some time later, they came over to sit at a table with me and Les, who was deep in his cups at that stage.

"Do you know anyone in the push?" one of them asked. Les clenched his fist, raising his arm like a gavel and, reminding me for an eerie instant of my father, banged the table, declaring,

"Son, I *am* the push!" The kids seemed perplexed, looking at each other as if to say, 'The old tramp is the push?' They split shortly thereafter, not to be sighted again.

Captains, then. Les was a past master at plucking them. Outcomes varied. I went with him and a Greek sailor up to the Cross in search of a tall blonde. Les and the sailor were communicating in some sort of garble that was all Greek to me. Les, who had been at sea himself for many years, had later settled down, or tried to, with a Greek woman. He had a smattering of the language. He found a girl walking the streets, approached her, very politely,

"Excuse me, love …", brought her to the open back door of the cab for the sailor's once-over. Not blonde enough. We drove on, Les found another girl, a bit blonder … not tall enough apparently, according to the captain. He found a third, quite tall, a dyed blonde – the sailor wagged his head, expressing his dissatisfaction with a flourish of his arms. Les was getting aggravated.

"What's he think? We're gunna find a six-fucken-foot Marilyn Munroe walking the streets of the Cross?"

The two of them agreed that the sailor would be better off going to the Greek club, some place I'd never heard of, where sailors could find the company of compatriots and expatriates. We stopped. Les extracted the cab fare plus a bit of commission, showed the bloke what door to knock on.

As we drove away I said to Les,

"So that's where the Greek club is?"

"Actually," he replied, "that's the Italian club. They'll give him a welcome."

My own recruitment of captains was always inadvertent. During one of my homeless stints I was approached in the street at the Cross about 2am by two white-sailor-suited sailors from the US Navy. They were young, not much older than myself. They were, one of them said in response to my enquiry, from Louisiana. He pronounced it in a lilting drawl, quite euphoniously: loo-eez-ee-anna. They were looking for somewhere to get a beer, these being the days of ten o'clock closing. I took them to the sly-grog where they

bought me beers till dawn or a bit before. They had to be back on board by six. They invited me down to their ship. I went along out of curiosity, having never been (nor ever having had any inclination to be) on a warship.

We went below deck to their very small cabin, one of many arranged in serried banks. Along the way we were hi-there-ed and hey-buddy-ed by several white-suited clones in variegated American twangs. They were returning in high-spirited droves from their night of R&R high jinks. They seemed to be universally young. The atmosphere struck me as more like that of kids coming back to their boarding-school after an excursion than of warriors coming back to man their floating death-castle.

Sorry, the Frenchman. A bunch of us, namely Jock, Bates, Victor, the Frenchman and me, piled into a cab in Sussex St. and out again at a joint in Darlinghurst known as the mansion or the castle. Once the home of some wealthy family, it was now a sprawling, ramshackle boarding-house, run by a Canadian cat on behalf of whomever owned it now. I'd been there once before. One of the residents had kindly informed me that there was an unoccupied room there that I might access for a night's sleep, if I left it neat and departed before sun-up. My benefactor showed me a crumbled-away fissure in the wall that surrounded the place through which I could enter and leave. I used to have the ability (since so utterly lost that I might doubt I'd ever had it were it not for anamnestic instances such as this) to decide beforehand how long I'd sleep and wake up after the specified period, no timepiece required. That was one glorious slumber.

It was the Canadian, whom Jock and Bates apparently knew, we were visiting. We sat in the customary circle. The gathering was effervescent for a while but quickly lost its fizz. We'd run out of everything. 'No pot, no pills, no cigarettes' as Bates used to patter, parodying 'King of the Road'. The sailor was shifting about uncomfortably, as if he'd sensed he might have landed himself in the company of maniacs. Victor, especially, seemed to disturb him. He'd been obviously afraid of him from the start and although it was all unspoken, you had to surmise there was a racist undertone to that apprehension. Equally tacitly, but just as plainly, Victor took it that way, which was no fillip to his plunging morale.

Then Victor started eating his glass. The sailor was agape, drawn hypnotically to the spectacle. Victor's face was a mask of concentration, his brow furrowed with an agony that I don't think had anything to do with whatever physical sensation he was experiencing, as if he was set on crunching up his pain and swallowing it once and for all. His eyes were focused on the squirming captain, his stare dull and steady.

Victor, chomping implacably, turning the diminishing middy as he went, blood dribbling Dracula-like from the corners of his mouth, the red flow speckled with scintillas of glass … He kept eating the thing till all that remained was a jagged-edged ashtray.

I'd seen other blokes demonstrate how to eat glass (though none of them ventured beyond a single bite) and understood that if you chewed it finely it'd go through unproblematically. Victor was chewing very thoroughly. He was mad with his ever-suppressed. inner rage but he wasn't mad. He was endowed with a fundamental and resilient sanity. The last time I saw him, in Melbourne some sixteen years after these events, he was thriving. Running a centre for disadvantaged indigenous kids (to risk speaking redundantly).

The room was dead quiet, yet filled, as it were, with the silent howl of Victor's black dog. The Canadian concierge summoned a cohort of some of his heavier residents and

then demanded that we leave. There were glares and shoulder-shuffles of resistance but Bates conciliated,

"OK man, we'll cut out."

Outside. Bates and the sailor, who had become completely mute, wandered off. Jock wanted to re-storm the castle.

"We'll punch on if we have to!" he vituperated. A preposterous proposition. We were facing the wall and a big gate which had been locked behind us. Jock, for all his customary pugnacity, couldn't punch his way out of a paper bag.

I walked along with Jock and Victor. They were both very drunk. Abruptly, they broke into another boarding-house sort of place by forcing the front door and then proceeded to flake out in the hallway. That kind of thing was something I preferred not to do and the pair of them were too far gone to respond to any sort of suasion. I left them there and made my way back to the Cross for another night of solitary street-trekking.

* * * * *

Charles was camp. That was the word back then, when you could still use gay to mean happy or frivolous.

Charles was wont to intercept me in the middle of the public bar at the George where he hung out. He would put his hand on my chest and pressing gently with the heel of his palm describe a circle, rubbing round and round several times while looking up into my face, well actually looking somewhere over my left shoulder since his gaze was always peculiarly askance in moments of intimacy or confidentiality, and murmuring in a voice husky with seduction,

"Why don't you let me take that dirty water off your chest?" Upon which I explained again that I wasn't that way inclined and he shrugged again saying what a pity and smiling sheepishly. Apart from the chest-rubbing ritual, he never pressed me at all on the issue, which polite restraint distinguished him from each and every one of the numberless others of his orientation by whom I was inevitably beleaguered, being a blond, teenage bombshell (inferring that term from the reactions of others) frequenting the George and the Vanity Fair and the Cross. I had innumerable conversations containing the words 'I'm not camp;' a phrase, as I came to learn, only uttered when it wasn't true. As an object of such voracious predation, I developed a sympathy for what girls have to undergo amid the jungle of male sexuality. Charles and I, however, got along famously (agreeing to disagree, so to say). On one occasion, when someone had lent him a VW, he invited me to sleep in the back seat and we both had a sound, if cramped, night's sleep, with no shenanigans.

Charles' usual drinking companion, apart from me, was Gary, who was sometimes Grace. Gary and Charles made a contrasting twosome: the one white, tall, lanky, awkward; the other short, black, generally managing to contrive a down-at-heel elegance. Gary, as Grace, with blotchy make-up, wig slightly awry, wobbling on modest heels, not so much towered as teetered over the diminutive Charles.

(I espied him later on that same year, when I was working for the Victorian Railways, pushing a hand-cart in A-shed, bonily thin in a white T-shirt, a look on his face of one utterly stricken. I'd never seen a person more tragically out of place.)

When a passer-through asked Charles what he did for a crust, I was surprised to hear him respond brightly,

"I'm a thief."

I had been similarly surprised to hear Annie and Mabel describe themselves as whores. I saw those girls most days of the week over a period of months without observing any evidence of their whoring. As to Charles' supposed thievery, all I knew of it was a funny incident he related to me. At least, the mental image I formed of it struck me as very funny. He said he'd come across a big, expensive car in George St. with visible valuables inside. He managed to get into it but was immediately startled by a loud, unfamiliar, siren-like noise, the vehicle having a car-alarm, a new-fangled device in 1967. Passing pedestrians congregated curiously, into which crowd suddenly hurtled a wide-eyed Charles, arms girlishly a-flutter, exiting the fancy jalopy at a rate of knots.

I had to suppose that a self-description as thief or whore, however putative, was intended to suggest a person of more enterprise than one hanging around a pub awaiting the never really certain arrival of a cashed-up friend or captain.

* * * * *

One enchanted afternoon, across a crowded bar, I first saw Tracy. Our eyes met in a moment of mutual astonishment. I had, in my youth, several such experiences of sudden intimacy with chicks but never one so perfectly immediate and reciprocal. Nor one quite so deep. We seemed to be looking at each other across a vastness of space and time, from opposite ends of the human spectrum, across thousands of years – it was as if that expanse and those eons had contracted into an instant simplicity of boy meets girl.

Tracy was a full-blood aborigine. She had the physiognomic characteristics of her race: salient brow, wide nose, large, magnificent teeth. She was as black as it's possible to be, so black her skin was almost hard to look at, as if it swallowed all the light. (Up close, it had a delightful, purplish sheen.) I'd never seen anyone like her. The closest resemblance would have been an anthropological illustration in a book somewhere. Though it would have taken an anthropological Rembrandt or Da Vinci to capture her beauty.

Now, these are delicate matters, difficult to discuss. One must feel one's way through a haze of hypocrisy. Of the girls on the scene around the George, two white chicks, the sumptuously mammaried Karen and the pert, willowy Jane were the ones to whom I was most attracted. No black chick before Tracy had turned my head in that sense. I suggest that profound archetypes influence our sexual predilections. Further, the ramifications of those latent archetypes colour our racial attitudes multifariously. Yet, a beautiful woman is a transcendent universal. This fact, for all the strife it has generated, is an uplifting one, a pointer to a potential state beyond our internecine antagonisms, a state where we might enjoy and embrace our fascinating variegations. Seeing Tracy was empirical proof to me that, even on a primal level, humanity trumps race.

It was not only her supple, pristine physicality that made her so attractive. Rather the immanent soulfulness that informed it. Everything about her … the way she moved: loosely, but with just enough self-possession to be graceful; the way she spoke: in that quiet, unhurried, aboriginal way – though she giggled quite a bit and occasionally squealed in delight, but never too shrilly …

It was her – her startling flesh, her ineffable innocence, the soul in her smile – that brought home to me what a wicked pulchricide my mob had committed in this country.

We had long conversations with our eyes before we ever spoke. I saw her talking about me to the people around her, some of whom shot glances at me the opposite of amorous. I've forgotten which of us first spoke to the other. We came together as if by gravitation.

I learned that she came from Queensland where she'd grown up on a Mission, from which she'd been released on her sixteenth birthday, a matter of months earlier. I knew during that period of my life about half a dozen others who'd been brought up as waifs of the State, including the three girls I came to call the suicide sisters. All of them had been traumatized by their treatment. Tracy was not sullied in the same way. Perhaps it had been a better institution, perhaps her sheer specialness had somehow safeguarded her.

She'd traveled down to Brisbane. Someone, she said, in the push pub up there had said to her,

"The Royal George Hotel in Sydney is where it's at."

"And they were right," she added, intertwining her fingers with mine.

That moment occurred during our second or third conversation, at which point it was truncated by the intervention of Tracy's guardianship committee of three, who'd appointed themselves to watch over her. Annie and Mabel were two. The third was Vicky, who was older and had the dignified air of someone wiser. Certainly respected by the others. The first time I'd seen her, before I knew her at all, she'd been standing outside the George as Les and I were about to cross the street. Then, she'd struck me as a tragi-comic figure, the matronly amplitude of her upper body contradicted by her skinny, nomadic legs; the living embodiment of her history, one culture imposed on top of another.

The three ladies drew me aside. They gave me to understand that, in their eyes, Tracy was an especially precious girl. They weren't about to see her take up with just anybody. She was undoubtedly a rare and marvelous human being. It was never said but I felt it was left open for me to infer (and the thought, since Tracy, when talking of those she knew made no mention of any relatives, had spontaneously sprung into my mind) that she might be, like the Mohican, the very last of her people and thus unique.

A couple of days later, as I sat gazing into Tracy's liquid eyes, the pair of us were summoned to a corner of the bar. Vicky, Mabel and Annie stood against the wall. It was like fronting a tribunal. More accurately, an ad hoc council of elders.

Vicky was head interrogator. She asked Tracy,

"Are you interested in this fella?"

Tracy said she was. Then me,

"Are you interested in this girl?"

I said yes.

"We don't want this relationship to go any further until we're satisfied," pronounced Vicky. Satisfied that I was worthy, that is.

"We'll look into 'im," said Vicky.

"We'll check 'im out," said Mabel.

I thought, what are they talking about? Are they going to investigate my bank account, my criminal record? Not that there was anything to investigate. But how are they going to do that? Are they going to ask around among people who know me? Most of them would give me the thumbs up, but then most of them would give Mephisto the thumbs up were

he the candidate. In short, the whole thing seemed to me like a slightly absurd charade. Still, I was glad they cared so much about her and wanted to protect her. I was myself possessed of a mighty urge to protect her.

Internally, I gauged my own strength of feeling by the fact that I had barely a qualm or second thought about entering into such a spiritual betrothal. I hadn't been looking to take on any kind of responsibility. I t just seemed necessary. It felt like fate.

* * * * *

Coming into the saloon bar at the George I found it almost empty except for a group of six or seven blokes up the other end. I knew most of them. I strolled over.

"Sorry, man, you can't sit with us right now."

"Why not?"

"We're havin' a meetin'."

"What kind of a meetin'?"

"Black Power meetin'." And the fists went up, some with vigour, the others more desultorily.

What surprised me, more than the unexpected rebuff, was that, of the six or seven at least three I had always taken to be whitefellas. Another lesson for my eyes.

This was the year a referendum was held. A Yes vote in his referendum amounted to assenting to something like the proposition: that, now that the aboriginal peoples of the Commonwealth have been sufficiently destroyed, dispersed and miscegenated so as to no longer threaten or disturb the rest of the population, the State should deign to recognize that they are in fact human beings and henceforth should grant them the same status, more or less, as everybody else; and furthermore, in light of the foregoing, the shibboleth of White Australia may henceforth be safely construed as a quaint anachronism.

* * * * *

Around this time, someone said to me,

"You've got a high opinion of yourself, haven't you?"

Although the question, delivered by a disgruntled camp follower (so to speak), was intended as a rhetorical barb, I let myself consider it as if it had been raised conversationally as something that might be moot. After a momentary but deep introspection, I said,

"Yes." I was almost surprised myself. I had not a skerrick of an inkling how short a space of time separated me from the day after which I would never again be able to sincerely voice such a self-assessment, no premonition of how soon the shadows would begin to darken the sunlit prospect of my amour-propre.

* * * * *

About nine o'clock on a Saturday night, little Annie asked if I'd do her a favour. She wanted to go Montgomerys and would I walk her there? I didn't know where Montgomerys was.

"Just over the water. Just the other side of the bridge."

We set off down the hill, holding hands. Annie was prattling away about nothing in particular quite cheerfully but I could still sense the sadness that never seemed to altogether leave her.

We were a few steps onto the Pyrmont Bridge when I saw three figures start across from the other side. I had my eyes peeled for approaching danger as always on the streets at night. As we gradually converged I was studying the trio of shadowy silhouettes for any sign of malign intent – the hint of a vicious swagger or predatory focus. Getting closer, I could see they were white blokes, quite big, at least my size. But they appeared to be walking along casually, talking among themselves, paying us no particular heed.

They were almost upon us when Annie, exhibiting a strength you wouldn't have thought her puny physique was capable of, suddenly thrust us apart, gripping my hand tightly and raising both our arms, so that we spanned the whole footpath, me right on the gutter, her against the outside fence.

She said something like,

"Let the whites step down and make way for the blacks, for once!" in a growled whisper, a ferocity in her voice I'd never heard before. Her usually sweet, if haunted, face was blazing with a defiant resolution.

As far as I was concerned, no amount of protest on Annie's part would have been excessive, considering the enormity of what she protested against. But at that instant my mind was crying, 'Annie, Annie, what're you doing?'

The challenge was obvious and confrontational. Annie timed it so well I had no time to react. The three blokes were right on us, about to be mown down by our outstretched arms. They had no choice but to step onto the road to get around us. Or else …

The blokes looked astonished, rather than dismayed. I was making an effort to keep my own expression noncommittally composed.

They moved aside, filing off one by one, stepping down the gutter to go around us. We walked on, myself on jellied legs for quite a few strides. Annie swung back close to me, quite intimately, banging her head against my shoulder. She gave a little giggle.

"We showed 'em, eh?"

I was breathing inward sighs of relief all the rest of the way across the bridge. On the other side it was only a little farther to our destination. By then I was positively bathing in my own relaxation. Annie was as happy as I'd ever seen her, swinging our arms as we went.

Then we walked into Montgomerys.

It was packed to the rafters and the joint was jumping. Really the jumpingest joint I'd ever seen and I'd seen a few. The noise was a cacophonous din. What took me aback more than anything was that, to my now-more-educated eyes it was plain that apart from two or three frantically busy bar staff, there were no white people at all. As we stood there, just inside the door, heads everywhere started to turn; the noise, all of a sudden, dwindled from a roar to a general murmur. (The jukebox may have been playing but this once I wasn't listening.) Everyone was staring at us. The hostility was palpable.

Annie dragged me toward the bar. I was well and truly surrounded and being grilled.

"What d'ya think you're doin', comin' in 'ere like that?"

"Who the hell are you, comin' in 'ere with 'er?"

"Draggin' our sister in like that."

Draggin'? Who's draggin' whom?

And I'm explaining,

"We were in the George and Annie asked me if I'd walk her over here."

Annie says,

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. I asked 'im to."

"Ah well, that's all right, then."

"No worries, then," and immediately the hostility has melted and mellowed and someone buys me a beer and I'm standing in the circle and the pub around us has returned to rip-roaring normality.

Someone else buys me another beer and I'm being treated like an old friend. Then Annie squeezes my arm and says,

"I'll be all right now," and I set off to get back to the George before closing.

Walking back over the bridge I was wondering if, in the history of the world, a black man had ever walked into a den full of drunken white revellers with a white girl on his arm and been treated as graciously as I had just been.

* * * * *

Interlude. A kiss …

Bates and I were sitting in the back part of the Bunch counting our change.

"Down and out in Sydney and Melbourne," he said, a flicker of drollery crossing his leathery features.

Having assembled sufficient pennies for a beer apiece, we went into the bar. There was a girl sitting side-on to the bar with a couple of others. When she saw me she rose and sashayed towards us. She was quite nice-looking, a warm chocolate-brown, though she paled in comparison to Tracy. Ahem.

"Would you like to buy me a bottle of beer?" she asked.

"Well, I would, but I'm afraid we're broke."

"Maybe you could give me a kiss then." She flowed like honey into my arms and we were kissing, at length, deliciously. I could feel her exquisite flesh through the ultra-thin material of her dress, her buttocks writhing gently under my hand. My mind went walkabout, I was lost in a libidinous dream. When it ended and I returned with a soft jolt from my transcendental reverie, suddenly aware again of my surroundings, she detached herself with a sweet smile. Bates was looking up at me, grinning like a pixie.

"Did she light your fire?"

Indeed, I was basking in the glow …

* * * * *

Another interesting walk. Or pulse-raising perambulation …

I got to be friendly with a bloke called Joe, an ex-fighter who was thirty-two and had spent a decade or so travelling around Queensland with Jimmy Sharman's boxing troupe. After all those years thumping on for a living, he'd ended up with bugger-all, come to Sydney, got into a bit of trouble and was now concentrated on keeping out of it. He'd down time for assault with a lethal weapon, his fists being classified as such because he'd been a professional fighter. Joe thought his conviction unfair (he'd only been defending

himself or somebody else) and no doubt it was – he was even-tempered and mild-mannered.

We were sitting together at the bar one day when a fight broke out behind us. There were racial epithets as well as fists flying. Some of Joe's friends or kin (a distinction sometimes hard to draw in that company) were involved. According to his lights he should've been lending them his support. Instead, as the mayhem raged behind us, very proximate, battlers bumping into us as they surged back and forth, an elbow grazing my ear, he sat immobile, staring down at his flat, knuckleless hands inert on the bar in front of him, shaking his head, murmuring with wistful ruefulness,

"Lethal weapons, lethal weapons," until the affray was quashed by the intervention of Harry, the bouncer.

Joe's favourite topic of conversation was his younger brother, whom he extolled enthusiastically. His brother, he reckoned, was a serious talent as a boxer, much better than himself, with a big future in the ring. This brother showed up one night, out of the blue, with three of his mates.

Joe's brother was my age, nineteen. In appearance and demeanour he made quite a contrast to Joe. He was several hues darker and, where Joe was soft-spoken and unfailingly polite, he was surly and aggressive. Positively toey. A brawl waiting to happen. Also, it seemed to me, he paid scant respect to his elder sibling. But Joe, who had instantly shouted us all to a round when his brother's crew lobbed, must have seen it differently. He was happily telling us how brilliant his brother was. His brother took it as his due. His mates were grinning agreement.

They wanted to check out the Vanity Fair but didn't know how to get there. Joe looked momentarily disappointed. He said he'd stay where he was. He volunteered my services as a guide.

"M'mate 'ere knows the way. He'll take yers up there, won't ya?"

I assented, as a courtesy to Joe.

Joe's bro impatiently quaffed the rest of his beer and slammed the glass down on the bar. His mates followed suit. We were off.

It was a fair slog on foot. Mostly uphill. The quickest way involved cutting through two or three alleyways.

All the way, they trailed me at a distance of several yards. The intention was minatory. No-one spoke to me at all. They nattered and chiacked between themselves. I heard, as I was meant to, a comment here and there.

"Do y'reckon 'e knows where 'e's goin'?"

"I think our whitefella's lost."

It was a nice inversion of historical stereotypes: a whitefella leading a party of blacks through the unfamiliar city. I couldn't begrudge them their relish of it. Still, I had no way of knowing whether or not the real plan was to jump me somewhere along the way. Joe, I thought, wouldn't do it to me. Then again, he was seemingly blinded by love where his brother was concerned. My inner suspense grew as we climbed.

The last part of our journey was up a long, dark alley, which led to the rear of the Vanity Fair. I glanced back at them a few times. I wanted to at least see them coming if an ambush was on. I couldn't make out their faces. I was hoping to see a flash of white that would indicate a smile. No such luck.

We arrived. No reconciliatory drink at the end. I left them to their own devices and retraced my steps.

* * * * *

I met Tracy, accompanied by a couple of her friends, on the street in Paddington near the employment office where I was headed. She had just left the same place. Her dancing eyes and dazzling smile told me what I wanted to know but she told me anyway, standing close, holding both of my hands. Her three guardians had apparently decided that I was all right and given us the all clear. Tracy gave me a brief, promissory embrace and we parted. I would've turned around and gone with her right then but I had an appointment and getting a job seemed suddenly even more urgent. She and her friends were off somewhere. She said she'd see me later at the George.

I felt a bit like a knight-errant who had fulfilled his quest and been granted the hand of the maiden. Yet I was baffled as to what the quest had been or how I had fulfilled it. It was years later, with a degree of belated embarrassment, that I realized the essence of my being checked out and looked into had been the jaunt across the Pyrmont Bridge with Annie. Lots of people must have known about it, including most of the mob in Montgomerys. Though surely the encounter with the three white blokes had been fortuitous.

She didn't show up that night. Nothing to get hung up about.

The next day she wasn't there again. I asked around, looked in the Bunch. No-one had seen her.

The day after that, as I entered the back bar at the George, a blackfella I hardly knew motioned me over. I wasn't sure why, perhaps it was the look on his face, but I had an intimation of impending calamity. He had a newspaper open on the bar in front of him. All he said was,

"Tracy's gone." He tapped the paper. It was a very short item. "Aboriginal girl raped and murdered … naked body found in park …' It was the windswept park on the other side of the Cross. There was a nook up there where I had quite liked to sit and contemplate because it overlooked the water and was usually deserted …

Down Memory Lane: A Trip

Our landlord at Jolimont was the gruff, one-armed Mr. Wallace. The missus and I had the flat at the rear. An older couple occupied the front one. Because of my disgraceful record with real estate agents I'd thought a bodgie name might be wise, so I'd rented it under the name of Shelley, my favourite poet then. When visitors came knocking they'd ask for Mr. and Mrs. Shelley. Shelley soon became my nickname. (How long ago this is you can tell from the fact that Shelley was not at all a common name for girls back then. There was Shelley Winters, of course, but equally there was Shelley Berman, who was a guy.)

The Jolimont flat was where I first dropped acid. Over the previous couple of months we'd spent many nights listening to Sergeant Pepper's, mostly with Lemons, who was very keen on it, as was I. Then Alfie came around with four tickets. The missus being pregnant, she thought, we thought, she shouldn't have any – scare-stories of chromosomal malformations due to acid were already rife – so Alfie and I had two apiece. I saw the girl with kaleidoscope eyes. One of those shibboleths, as Jack London suggests in 'John Barleycorn', by which fellow-travellers in altered states recognize one another.

Carl Gallagher and Steven Seal came around one day to invite us to come and live at their house in Fitzroy. The offer was made with an earnestness and sense of formality that I found quite touching.

It was when we moved to George St. that I first got to know Gae, who was Gallagher's girlfriend at the time. He always introduced her as Gae Johnston, as if there was some significance in the surname. Which it turned out there was, she being the daughter of George, the novelist, though I was unaware of that for ages. She never mentioned it. I did read 'My Brother Jack' years afterward – I still recall his description of growing up amongst the amputees maimed in the Great War. (And frankly, I would've misspelt her name were it not for that book. I don't think I've ever seen it written down anywhere else.)

I was very taken with her: the hint of green in her eyes, hint of auburn in her hair, the perfect pallor of her skin, her soft, white throat, the pleasant huskiness of her voice, her lissom movements. Just how mutual that feeling was it took me years to really realize; although I sensed it, felt it at the time … I wasn't quite sure that I wasn't flattering myself.

We often met up in the kitchen.

The walls of that kitchen were vivid with slabs and patches of colour and illustrations, so that it resembled (or prefigured) a hippy household. These were pre-hippy murals. This is just about the time when the hippies were embarking on the Australasian leg of their tour of the Western world, but, as you may gather, tickets were already available in esoteric quarters.

Gae and I had some long conversations, quite intimate … she even told me about her sex with Gallagher … "He's like an animal," she said, slightly disdainfully. And when she referred to our respective commitments, her to Gallagher, me to my ever-more-spherical missus, there was a distinct ruefulness in her tone. We used to keep a physical

distance between us, as if we might, in a moment of inadvertence, fall into each other's arms.

Gae was a painter, and not bad at it. Other artists I knew seemed to produce mostly monstrosities. (There was a contemporaneous resident of George St., one Mike Brown, whose pictures (going on the few I saw) were at least interesting, if a bit cartoonish.)

She was a few years older than me, as was Gallagher.

Steven was my age. Outwardly, he was all finger-snap, rapid repartee, sudden enthusiasms … that's too much, man, too much … all being cool … or his own facsimile of cool, which after all is all cool is (or should I say, harking back to when the word had a meaning, was). His being cool, however, always had an edge, owing to his almost visible inner disturbance – an edge which some found menacing … extraordinarily so. When I introduced him to my friend Fredrick from Copenhagen … we'd been standing together for what can't have been much more than a minute or two when Fredrick sprang back from the bar, crouching and pointing like some person in a horror film pointing at the approaching horror, pointing thus at Steven, yelling,

"Murderer! He's a murderer! Murderer!" Whilst Steven stands perplexed, but not as surprised as you might expect, because he somehow evoked that kind of sentiment in many people, though few responded as openly and spontaneously as the always open and spontaneous Fredrick.

But despite the fact that Steven generally affected the sort of savvy cynicism that a committed iconoclast should, deeper down he was rather more naïve and artless (and, as Dostoievski says, aren't we all?) Concomitantly, despite the mean streak he was reputed to have, he was, beneath the brash and savage-seeming exterior, a tender-hearted soul.

While we were living there he had a job at the mental home in Kew. He was training to be a psychiatric nurse. He was very keen on the idea. He spoke with genuine sympathy about the patients and related snippets of his interactions with them. The only detail I remember was his description of an old bloke whose brain had been "burned out by the booze, man." I'd known a few such blokes, and not only blokes, when I was living on the streets around the Cross in Sydney. Came the time of Steven's exam, after which he'd have a qualification. I saw him afterwards, very downcast. Must've failed, I assumed, but had to ask him.

"So, how'd it go, man?"

He looked at me blankly and replied,

"They said I should consider signing myself in as a patient."

I'm very confident that Steven never murdered anybody.

Unlike Gallagher, apparently … He was talking to someone else about being locked up. Gallagher said he had been. The interlocutor asked,

"What were you in for?" and Gallagher, with a wide, mirthless grin, more a baring of his too good to be true false teeth, and pausing momentarily before he spoke to give the word weight, replied,

"Murder."

I learned later that he'd incurred the charge when he was sixteen, because during one of those swarming gang brawls (outside Flinders St. Station, I believe) Carl and some of his mates had kicked to death a hapless teenage member of the opposition.

When I no longer lived at George St., I'd still visit the place occasionally. One night, on one of our hijinxing jaunts, Jock – this is Melbourne Jock: shoulder-length, curly dark

hair, big sable beard, prominent Celtic proboscis – and I dropped in. Carl and Steven and Gae were in the lounge-room. Someone had acid. We all took some.

"Let's do a communal painting," Gae suggested.

From a big roll of white paper, she rolled out a large rectangle on the wooden floor, holding down the edges with glass jars, some of them with water in them, some with brushes. She handed around tubes of paint. The paper glistened slightly, appearing more and more glisteny as you looked at it.

This was not the sort of thing Jock or I would normally participate in, but it seemed a nice distraction with the acid coming on.

And some communal chord was struck. We flecked and squirted and smudged and, in Gae's case, flowingly applied the paint, in concert, each of us feeling in mouth and stomach that anticipatory, tinged-with-suspense early phase of the trip. And as the multi-coloured flecks and daubs and whirls and whorls and rivulets began to dance, replicating and spiraling and imaginatively transmogrifying, we were collectively aware of being on the same plane, in one sense, and leaving on the same plane in another … Or were we?

Having filled the whole sheet, we abandoned the magnificent mess we'd created. Really tripping now. Only Steven and I left in the room. I was sprawling comfortably in an armchair contemplating Gae's painting that hung on the wall over the mantle-piece. During that period she only painted one subject. Meher Baba.

The three of them were, for the time being, Baba-ites. I read some of his tome, modestly entitled 'Listen Humanity.' A lot of it was very appealing, being drawn from the wisdom-wells of the ages. But then he said, in a transcript of one of his guru sessions in the ashram,

"You see that sparrow. It thinks it's a sparrow …" and I thought: a guru should know that a sparrow is cosmic. It's us who aren't. That's why we need gurus. So, I'd drawn the conclusion that Baba was another benign yet mendacious mystic for Western muddleheads.

Steven was walking up and down, snapping his fingers, pronouncing,

"Man, I'm zapped. Good acid, man. Far out! Too fucking much!" Whirling around at the end of each lap, doing little shimmies, shaking his arms, radiating multiple images with each movement, casting showers of iridescent sprinkles across the room.

I wondered where Jock was. I discovered him in the kitchen.

He was sitting at the table. He'd found a thermos of cold tea and was sipping from a cup of it.

"Jesus this is strong booze, Shelley," he said, with a little shake of his locks and a wry, almost pained, smile. "A helluva brew."

"No, Jock, it's acid, man. Let it happen, man."

Around us the walls were scrolling and palpitating.

"Strong grog."

"No really, man, it's acid."

Back and forth. There was no swaying him.

Steven popped in.

"Wanna see my Zen pictures, man?"

Jock was sitting immobile, saying nothing, wrapped around his cup of cold tea.

I went upstairs with Steven.

Pausing, so to speak, on the staircase, with one foot two steps higher than the other as was my youthful custom, for a short peroration on acid – and when I say a peroration on acid I mean that the subject is acid rather than that the author is on acid at the moment of writing, although he wouldn't mind at all if he was. Perhaps, a paean *to* acid. I had thought quite a lot about what it might be like before I took any and to my pleasant surprise and to some extent relief – I had heard plenty that was negative, especially from Alan with whom Alfie and I used to shoot up, who described the world dissolving and himself hiding from horrors behind a garbage bin in an alleyway – it was much as I expected. It reminded me of my infancy – the world as a blooming, buzzing delight and the sense of stepping into a whole new adventure when you went from one room to another. Acid also reminds you that you see with your mind rather than with your eyes. Your eyes are the lenses, your mind the viewer. What you see – what you notice, what you ignore – is a process, albeit largely subconscious, of selection. Tripping, your eyes are opened. You see the world as it *is*: a roaring, profane panorama, swept by vibrations, pulsing with energy. Yet, this visual wonder-scape need not be overwhelming. Concentrating, you can see everything as you normally would, if with especial clarity. And as with the eyes, so the emotions – the deep throb of love that thrums at the core of our being comes more readily to the surface, in surging sprays of feeling that mirror the glorious, surging sprays of colours that you're seeing.

But, the fear also rises, becoming for some the dominant emotion of the experience. Hence the description: a bad trip. And hallucinations … normally, you experience your visual field and mental imagery as two discrete sets of data. But with the doors of perception flung open, the customary sequestration breaks down, the boundaries blur, become more fluid. What you imagine, you may see, as if it was visibly present; visualization become visual. But this again may be quite voluntary – you may allow your imagination to gallop freely or rein it in, as needs be.

Yet, enthusiast though I was, and despite the detectable thrill that briefly went through the Western world when people all over were dropping acid, I never thought that any widespread Leary-esque enlightenment would result from it. Precisely because, for so many people, the experience was just too discombobulating.

In Steven's room. His Zen pictures were arrayed around the walls. They were on paper, not the proper canvasses that Gae used. There was a blank one awaiting his inspiration.

"I'll show you how I do 'em."

He dipped his brush in his paint-pot and addressed the empty rectangle of his prospective masterpiece. He stood motionless for a few seconds in a contemplative enguard and then lunged, and slashed and flicked – was he a Zen master channelling cosmic creativity or Zorro snickersneeing? – producing just a few lines and squiggles, with extended sprays of tiny dots – black, or was it a very dark purple? – on white.

A minimalist flourish and he was done. A new Zen picture to go with all the others; each one different, but somehow seeming all the same.

Gallagher hovered in the doorway.

"Come'n dig my pictures, man," he said. He was effusing friendliness, his huge smile totally lacking the subtle snarl that usually accompanied it.

Though I'd lived in the joint, I'd never actually been in Carl's room before. The bed, of course, made me think of Gae being unappreciatively fucked.

One picture, one of Gae's, struck me.

It was Baba, needless to say, but painted as a straightforward portrait, sans the psychedelic embellishments of the one I'd been studying downstairs. Just his head, against a bluish-greenish-greyish background. He looked profound.

I said, spontaneously,

"Ah, I dig that one, man."

Gallagher,

"Oh yeah? Far out."

Gae,

"Do you really?"

"I'm almost a Baba-ite looking at it."

"It's yours, man," said Gallagher. A moment of serene solemnity, shared by the three of us, as he detached the painting from the wall and handed it to me. It was raining benevolence. I was rapt. Gae was rapt. Bliss all round.

That was the only painting I've ever owned. I cherished it for several years and would still be doing so except that it was stolen during one of our moves, the thief breaking into the new place while we were collecting our second load, perhaps thinking it was valuable. Which it was, if only to me.

Downstairs, I found Jock where I'd left him, still in the same chair, in the same position, a seemingly forgotten roll-your-own dangling from the side of his mouth – a hanging badge of bad habits, as Dylan Thomas says somewhere. He was staring fixedly ahead as if to limit the range of the leaping phantasmagoria he was seeing.

He'd worked his way through most of the thermos.

"Strong booze, Shelley, strong booze," he intoned again, flashing a desperate glance at me.

"Here, man, have some." I grabbed a cup and poured some to humour him.

"Careful, Shell, powerful stuff."

It was cold tea, a bit brackish, but excellent cold tea and very refreshing.

Steven appeared.

"Let's go out and dig the dawn, baby!" It was getting light outside.

I ruffled Jock's hair and squeezed his shoulder to reassure him everything was cool and followed Steven out through the front door. In the little yard near the gate a couple of medium-sized garden stakes were leaning against the fence. Steven picked them up as we passed. We went into the little lane or alley next to the house, marveling at the hues of early morning.

Steven began shadow-fencing with one of the stakes.

I picked up the other one. We started crossing swords, playfully at first, one of us advancing, the other retreating, then vice versa.

I had done a fair bit of sword fighting with sticks in my boyhood, playing pirates or Robin Hood. Steven, who grew up in England, had obviously done something similar in his personal yore. He wielded his weapon quite skillfully.

The vigour and tempo escalated, till it became quite exciting.

The wood was jarring in my hand. Each time our sticks met there was a dull but loud crack. The reverberations bounced ringingly off the bare walls on either side of us.

The vigour increased still more. Quickly, and totally unexpectedly from my point of view, our playful battle was getting hostile.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Steven looked very serious. There was a strained intensity across his pale face. What was in his mind I don't know. Some old bitterness seemed to be driving him.

He was raining blows at me. I was just parrying, trying to defend myself.

He was coming at me like Sir Steven of the Cross laying into the Saracen. Primal fierceness on acid, literally.

Garden stakes at dawn.

Suddenly, I was fighting, if not for my life, at least for my physical well-being. Those were hefty pieces of wood. A whack across the noggin wouldn't be nice.

On the receiving end of that scything sword-stick, seeing Steven's eyes, pulsing with intent, streaming colours – that was the first time I personally experienced a menacing vibe from him.

I was full of cosmic thankyous when his stick broke first.

Steven grinned. We relaxed again. We were getting near the end but still tripping.

Soon after, we started to come down. In glimpses of quotidian normalityat first. Incrementally, the alleyway was losing its vibrancy, becoming once more the nondescript, cobbled alley we were used to. The spangly grey of early morning was becoming merely grey. Our trip was fading into the light of common day.

We share-shouldered our way indoors – two jolly musketeers après-affray. Jock and I said our collective so longs and later mans and we cut out. I had Gae's painting. Jock was in a cheerier state of mind than he had been not long before, like a bloke who'd just unsteadily disembarked from a harrowing ride on the big dipper, so glad to be off he was already starting to think more favourably of the experience.