a death in custody

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For Benny

Darkness

The bright light pierced the horizon dead in front of Lou. A motorbike, southbound on the flat straight highway? White lines zipped under the car but the light just hung there, in the darkness. A stranded car, one headlight dead? Lou suppressed a shiver and tightened her grip on the steering wheel. The world was empty but for that point of light and the thin blood-red line on the western horizon. Early mid-winter dark cloaked the plains. Heavy cloud obscured the fanfare of country starlight. No cheerfully lit houses broke the bleakness. Lou tried to think of something other than campfire stories of a crazed murderer who stalked the highways, swinging his victim's head, blood dripping from the neck and eyes dangling from the sockets. She shuddered with vicarious terror, feeling the fear of the next victim trapped in a stationary car while the maniac banged the disembodied head on the roof, *thud, thud, thud,* and pulled out his bloody knife.

Whirling blue lights in Lou's rear-view mirror grabbed her attention. She cowered in her seat as the car silently overtook, slipping through the darkness like a snake. Her heartbeat slowed as she watched the red and blue of the police car fade past the white light that grew on the horizon. That fright drove Lou's maniacal murderer back into horror-story land.

Lou fumbled through her bag in the passenger seat for cigarettes. When she looked up, the single light had exploded into a sinister carnival: orange parking lights, white headlights and party lights jiggling around the windscreen of a mighty prime mover. Lou yanked the little VW onto the edge of the road as the behemoth

charged towards her and felt it slide in the gravel. She clung to the steering wheel with one shaking hand and with the other rammed the gear stick through the H pattern to avoid spinning out, the way her ex had taught her. It was alongside her now, a maelstrom of churning wheels and roaring motor that made the Beetle shudder. With her foot on the brakes, Lou hugged the steering wheel and peered up through the windscreen. The truck's wheels were taller than the car. Above them Lou could see the scared yellow eyes of the sheep jammed in layers like proverbial sardines. Through the back window she watched the monster thunder away down the highway in a halo of dust and light.

The truck left the faint smell of sheep shit in its wake. The road was empty ahead and behind but for the diminishing red lights of the sheep carrier. Its enormous monstrosity had overwhelmed Lou; in its absence terror flooded back. Lou drove her little car further off the side of the road, switched off the engine and searched again for the cigarettes in her bag. She struggled to strike a match with her shaking hands, then sat back and blew smoke out a crack in the window.

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This trip unnerved Lou more than she cared to admit. She'd been so excited the night before, romanticising the long drive through the open countryside with Bern at the wheel. She cringed now, recalling Noelene's response when she told her about her date at the new Intercontinental Hotel opening with Bern and how he was going to help her become a journalist.

'Lou! You always do this. Bern? That jerk from the pub with the poncy North Shore voice and the square jaw?' Noel rolled her eyes. 'You're such suckerbait! The same Bern you were never ever going to talk to again? Jeez Lou. You're such a walkover!'

Noel had a way of taking the sheen off. They'd mostly talked, Lou protested. Bern was teaching her the tricks of the trade, all the things the apprentice journalists learnt, even though she was just a

copy-taker. ‘Journalism 101’ he called it.

‘You get the lecture before or after he gets into your pants?’ Noel quipped.

‘It wasn’t like that!’ Lou snapped, stomping off to the bathroom.

She turned on the radio and began singing along loudly to Madonna’s new single, ‘Who’s That Girl?’. Under the hot shower she mulled over the progress of the evening.

In the late afternoon Bern had come down to the copy-takers’ room and leaned over her as she typed, his scratchy cheek against hers, and murmured an invitation to join him on his spare ticket for a cocktail party. Lou nodded, enjoying the envy of the other copy-takers who pretended not to notice. After work they took a taxi down to the harbour on Bern's Cabcharge. At the new hotel uniformed doormen opened their car doors as if they were movie stars. The foyer was dominated by a central buffet crammed with oysters, crayfish, Moreton Bay bugs, potato salad and three-bean mix, breadsticks cut on an angle. If Lou had been less nervous she would have gorged herself. Champagne glasses sparkled in towers that encircled the peacock ice sculpture crowning the buffet. Above that chandeliers lit the atrium. It was the fanciest place Lou had ever been. She recognised public figures she had come to know from typing up reporters’ phone-ins. The women had sophisticated hairdos and skilfully applied makeup, huge shoulder pads on slinky dresses and strappy high heels. Lou felt conspicuously underdressed. Like many of the other women she was in black, but with heavy long boots, leather mini and polo-neck sweater. Bern seemed proud of her, though. He cupped his hand on her bum proprietorially, in between gladhanding people in that smarmy way he had – G’day, long time, what’s new? – holding his subject captive with a handshake. No one took any notice of Lou, and she was relieved that Bern didn’t introduce her to anyone – she wouldn't know what to say to any of these people. Bern made sure the waiters kept her glass full, and fed her hors d’oeuvres and

snippets of gossip. You can pick him from the back, he'd murmured into her ear, nodding towards the Treasurer. Always the best suits, always a perfect fit, must cost him a packet. Wow, lots of the government boys here, even Aboriginal Affairs, Bern said, scanning the room and pointing with his cigarette. Must be something going on. Bern seemed to know everyone, including the manager, who dangled a set of keys at him. Great etchings up there, he'd winked, your offsider might like to see them. Lou had been flattered that the manager thought she seemed cultured, but now, in the harsh light of the bathroom, she realised that the bastard was being lewd.

Bern had his hands inside her sweater before they were out of the lift and her skirt down before he closed the door. Afterwards, he opened a bottle of champagne from the bar fridge while Lou closed the curtains on the flickering lights of cars on the Harbour Bridge. They lay in the wide soft bed watching the tv news, sipping champagne, smoking. The top story was about Aboriginal riots in a little town called Collooney, out in the northwest of the state. In the gloomy darkness, the tv cameras focused on masked police wielding shields and batons outside a hotel with a broken window. The reporter's voice was urgent, shocked. More than a hundred Aborigines had attacked the hotel, he announced, hurling beer kegs and bottles through windows, narrowly missing innocent local customers who had to flee upstairs. On the hotel balcony one of the locals brandished a rifle, yelling that he would fire if the 'black bastards' didn't go home. When the riot police arrived, mercifully quickly, the announcer added, the Aborigines battled with them for forty minutes. Four police officers were injured, he gravely intoned, with two needing to go to hospital. A police vehicle was battered with iron fence posts, its windows broken. Five Aborigines had been charged, one with conspiracy to murder. Shaking his head, the reporter concluded that tensions may have been justifiably high among the local Aboriginal community after the funeral of Lawrence Jones, who'd hung himself in the police station lock-up, but the vicious and unprovoked attacks on the hotel, the white

community and the police could only show the Aboriginal community in a bad light.

'There's a story there,' Bern had said, in his wise old man voice. 'No one believes Lawrence Jones topped himself.' He refilled the champagne glasses. 'Behind every outback riot there's a story, that's what they say.'

'I'm not surprised there's a riot. Another Aboriginal bloke supposedly hung himself in a police lock-up somewhere up that way just a few weeks ago. I remember typing up the report,' Lou said. 'Suspicious, isn't it?'

'Could be suspicious,' Bern nodded. 'Could be copycat. One thing's sure: it's a job for a good investigative journalist.'

'That's what I want to do,' Lou replied eagerly. 'Get the stories behind the headlines, you know. Tell it how it really happened.'

'Want to go upcountry, then?' Bern asked, slurping his champagne. 'No wonder they seemed so worried downstairs, the Aboriginal Affairs lot. Always nervous the whole thing'll blow up. Behind every outback riot there's a story, until it gets buried, that's how that saying really goes. Still, the boss might go for it. First thing tomorrow while the story's hot. He keeps complaining that we don't do any real journalism any more. Opportunity for the paper to get a scoop and for me to teach you some tricks of the trade.'

Lou was electric with excitement. Bern grinned at her, his even teeth blue in the light from the tv. He emptied the bottle into Lou's glass and slid his hand between her thighs.

A haze of smoke hung over the cocktail party as they left the hotel; the men's ties were loose, the women's dresses dishevelled, voices were loud and laughter raucous. 'Bring a change of clothes to work in the morning,' Bern winked, 'there'll be an overnight stay involved.' As he got into the taxi to go home to the North Shore Bern offered her a lift, but Lou knew he didn't mean it. Surry Hills was out of his way. She walked through Hyde Park, fantasising all

the way about becoming a journalist. Bern might be a bit of a sleaze, but she was going to investigate the riots, Lou consoled herself as she turned off the shower. Noel was wrong. It wasn't all bad.

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At work the next morning it was as if Bern's plans for the day had been nothing but drunken ramblings. He told Lou coldly that there was no trip north or anywhere else, with no explanation, then turned his back and walked away, calling to one of the apprentice journalists. Lou was embarrassed and devastated, caught between tears and anger. She couldn't just go to her machine and start work with her hands shaking like that. The other women would ask what the matter was, or why she was wearing jeans and what the overnight bag was for, or worse, just whisper to each other about her. I'm going anyway, she thought, defiantly. Lou walked out of the building and went home to get her car.

Hours later, in the dark countryside, still shaking from the encounter with the enormous sheep carrier, Lou was angry with herself for having been so impetuous. She had no idea what she was doing and was frighteningly alone. She lit another cigarette and watched the flame burn down the match until it reached her fingers, wound down the window and flicked it out, shivering from the blast of night air. Her stomach rumbled. She'd found a can of Coke and a Mars bar on the car floor, but apart from that she hadn't eaten since breakfast. All day it had been a monotony of long empty roads and treeless paddocks. She'd looked forward to the towns, counting down the kilometres on the roadside signs. But she found them intimidating: wide streets with cars nosed in to the empty footpaths, old-fashioned shops, frightening looking pubs. She resolved to stop being such a chicken and to eat at the next town.

She turned the key in the ignition. The starter motor chugged and stopped. The rumbling pain in the pit of her stomach

sharpened and her heart thudded. She turned the key again, without success. On the third try the motor kicked in. Lou breathed a deep sigh of relief, pumped the accelerator, pulled out onto the road, and headed up the empty highway.

Dinner

Half an hour later Lou was leaning on the steering wheel, crawling down the wide main street of yet another desolate town. The weak streetlights shed a bleak cold light on the empty footpaths, but the shop windows were eerily jaunty; decorated as if a travelling signmaker had offered a cut-price deal to do the whole town. A leering great white shark swam out of the fish and chip shop window; inside it was dark as the deep blue sea. The hamburger joint had frilly electric green lettuce and dripping blood red sauce on the giant burger on the window. At least it's not a laughing cow, Lou said aloud, although she'd have forgiven anything if it'd been open. Artwork on the butcher's window advertised 'half lamb value packs' with a picture of a baby lamb frolicking on daisies, and the greengrocer had leafy topped carrots and crimson and lime-green apples. The haberdasher must have taken fright at the signwriter's limited style and turned him down. Headless, legless mannequins stood stiffly in its window: one in a brown tweed skirt and beige twin set with pearls lacing its pointy tits; the other in a men's blue checked dressing gown. Behind the dressing gown a poster for Yakka overalls showed two heavy shouldered square-jawed men comparing shovels. Apart from that there were a couple of pubs – The Empire and The Union – a couple of banks, a solicitor and a stock and station agent. The pubs were Lou's only option for a meal, but she couldn't stomach eating alone in an empty dining room. She drove out of town.

Lou cursed Bern for the hundredth time that day. If only he'd come. Or she hadn't. If only she'd been able to say something smart

and appropriate when he gave her the cold shoulder that morning, instead of feeling so embarrassed. She would have been home by now, cooking spagetti napoli with Noel, drinking flagon red, listening to music, cracking jokes. The thought of food made the growling pain in her stomach worse. She pulled into the BP service station at the end of town and stopped at the bowser. A thin man in overalls shuffled out of the roadhouse café wiping his hands on a greasy rag. Lou wound down her window and asked him to fill the tank. The man nodded and walked to the back of the car where he stood with his hands in his pockets and a grin on his face until Lou got out of the car, opened the bonnet and unscrewed the top off the petrol tank. She pulled her old duffle coat out from behind the tank, brushed the dirt from it and put it on, buttoning it up and pulling up the collar to keep out the cold wind. The man came and stood beside her, reeking of petrol and tobacco, and began to fill the tank. The smell vied with the stench of sheep shit from the empty semi-trailer in the car park. Lou huddled inside her coat with her hands in her pockets and peered through the plate-glass windows of the café. It was empty but for a burly man in a check shirt – presumably the truck driver – reading the paper while he ate a solitary dinner. The service station attendant slammed the bonnet shut, making her jump.

'Twenty dollars. Tank must have been nearly empty.'

'Ta,' Lou said, getting her purse from the car. The thought of eating under those fluorescent lights with only the truck driver for company made her feel nervous and achingly lonely. It felt worse than hunger. Lou yanked the driver's door open, wrestled with the starter motor, and when the Beetle finally chugged into life she turned back into town.

Lou pulled over outside the two pubs that faced one another in the middle of the main street. On her left the green tiled wall of The Empire stood hard against the footpath. Legend had it that was easy to hose vomit off tiled walls after the six o'clock swill, back in the

days of early closing. Through its frosted windows, Lou could make out men playing darts. The signwriter had painted a bright orange and yellow 'Counter Lunches Here' sign, with shadows on all sides, but there was nothing to suggest that there were counter teas or a dining room. On the other side of the street the two-storey Union with its small-paned windows and vine-clad balcony looked more approachable. Lou did u-turn and nosed into the footpath in front of The Union. Through its murky window she could make out the barman who appeared to be sporting a red cravat. Someone game enough to dress like that in a country pub would be likely to welcome strangers. Lou fished in her bag for lipstick and adjusted the rear-view mirror to apply it. She looked as worn out as she felt. Running her fingers through her hair, she took a deep breath and practised a smile.

Lou knew the safer option in a country pub was the Ladies Lounge, but the cravat gave her courage to try the bar. She squared her shoulders and pushed open the door. The barman gave her a welcoming smile, the old timer sitting at the bar raised his pot of beer by way of greeting, and the two men playing pool in the gloom at the back of the bar leaned on their cues and stared at her.

'G'day gorgeous,' the old timer said, cracking a smile and patting the stool beside him. 'What a sight to brighten me night. *Hallelujah*! There *is* a god.' he chuckled, raising his arms skyward. 'What'll ya have?'

'Same as yours thanks mate.' Lou smiled as she swung onto the stool and put her bag on the bar. The young barman, who complimented the red cravat with a slicked back Elvis hairdo, gave her a small bow. Lou dipped her head in response. What an unexpected relief these two clowns were. She wondered why she'd been so apprehensive.

The old timer introduced himself as Mark Trew and then introduced Lou to Dwayne, the barman. She nodded hello, suppressing a giggle. Elvis slickback, red cravat, name out of a

country and western song, white shirt taut across muscular chest, sleeves rolled up firmly around biceps, tight jeans, Cuban-heeled boots: Dwayne could have been in a Darlinghurst bar. Lou felt right at home.

After Dwayne had pulled Lou's pot of beer, she offered around cigarettes. Dwayne lit them, the flame from his petrol lighter flaring, lighting up Mark's gnarled and shaky hands.

'Running from the law or your old man?' Mark quipped. 'Don't get nice girls like you in this dump without good reason.'

Before Lou could answer, Dwayne leaned in close to the older man and jeered in a friendly tone:

'Lay off Trewie, leave er alone. She's too young for you mate! Ya dirty old bastard.'

Dwayne turned his big black eyes to Lou. In a poor rendition of a southern American drawl, he purred:

'What's a lovely lady like you doing alone in a god-forsaken town like this on such a sad and sorry Wednesday night?'

Lou giggled. Trewie put his head in his hands and shook it mournfully. He picked up Lou's hand and kissed it, then pronounced solemnly:

'Please, young lady, forgive the callow youth of today. They know not what they do.'

Lou raised her glass and gulped down the beer, enjoying the soft chill radiating through her body. She leaned against the bar and took a long drag on her cigarette, trying to find a way to explain why she was there.

'Actually,' Lou eventually said, in a posh North Shore accent, 'I drove all day to visit this renowned establishment. One hears that the food is sensational.'

Dwayne and Trewie burst out laughing. Lou joined them, the

relief of laughter chasing out the last of the day's anxiety.

'Cook's night orf,' Dwayne announced, his accent now as broad as the empty street out front. 'But I'm talented. I could do ya a toasted ham and cheese. Or two.'

'Perfect,' Lou grinned. 'Exactly what people say about this place. "A local specialty offered any time of night or day." Make it two, please, with cheese and ham in both.' Dwayne spun on his heels and headed out the back of the bar. When he walked back in he was juggling two hard white plastic-coated rectangles, tossing them high in the air. When he missed one it bounced off the floor. Lou's stomach lurched. Dwayne scooped it up and put the two frozen sandwiches, plastic bags and all, in a microwave oven and set it going. Lou had never used a microwave and was surprised to see one in the back of beyond – she couldn't wait to tell Noel that they cooked toasted sandwiches. It might finally encourage her to get one. While the sandwiches circled in the little oven Dwayne played air guitar, crooning a few bars of 'Folsom Prison'. When the microwave beeped, he whisked the two sandwiches onto a plate, shook them out of the plastic covering, raised the plate to shoulder height on his upturned hand, and delivered it to Lou with a flourish.

'Great singing,' Lou complimented Dwayne. 'You play professionally?'

'I'm working on getting a set together. I played "Pub with No Beer" for Slim when he called in here last year. He told me I had a pure and extraordinary talent.' Dwayne beamed with pride.

'Yeah, too right,' chimed in Trewie. 'A pure and extraordinary talent for being up yourself.' He crackled with laughter before being consumed by the coughing fit that overtook it.

Lou picked bits of burnt plastic off the first sandwich. Dwayne stared at her as she began to eat it, as if it was a test. She took a small bite. It was hot, which was good, and soggy, which was not. It neither looked nor smelt like food, but it didn't taste as though it

would kill her. She swallowed and took another bite.

Trewie stopped coughing and spat into the trough at the bottom of the bar, then joined Dwayne in observing Lou as she ate. She was slightly built and fragile looking. Perched on the edge of the stool with one foot on the floor and the other playing up and down on the brass footrest that ran around the bottom of the old wooden bar, she looked ready to take flight. She was wearing grubby sandshoes, faded jeans and a skinny black cardigan. Under the cardigan several layers of finely knit sweaters, each with a neckline lower than the one below it, failed to hide her boniness. Her fingers, wrapped around the sandwich, scooping dripping cheese into her mouth, were long and slender. Her nails were short, bitten down. Narrow silver rings with engravings adorned several fingers, cheap hippy rings, Trewie thought, no engagement or wedding ring. The light above the bar caught flashes of ruby in her dark, messy hair. She kept pushing it back from her sandwich with the back of her hand, half heartedly tucking it behind her ears. Opal and silver earrings dangled against her neck. Her eyes seemed to be different colours, one dawn blue, the other emerald green, echoing the colours of the opals, right down to their flecks of blue and red, a fluidity of colour that clearly had captured Dwayne's attention. Trewie could hear Dwayne softly crooning the wrong words to Donovan's 'Colours'. The girl was pale, as if she'd spent too much time inside during the long winter. Trewie wanted to touch her translucent skin, in the hope it would tell him if she was as frail as she looked or as tough as she sounded. Frail girls didn't usually travel alone, and they certainly didn't go into bars by themselves, especially not in country towns after dark.

No one spoke until Lou had finished both sandwiches. She suddenly became aware that both Dwayne and Trewie were staring at her. They seemed as pleased as an anxious mother that she had eaten both without complaint or mishap. Lou licked her fingers as she looked from one man to the other with a serious gaze.

‘Don’t take this the wrong way,’ she said slowly, ‘but I’m not too sure that was actually real food. If it kills me, it’s been nice knowing ya.’ Dwayne looked offended, so Lou laughed. ‘While we wait to see it take effect, I’ll buy you both a beer.’

‘My shout,’ Dwayne announced. He flicked an empty glass upright with his left hand while he began pulling the beer tap with his right. The beer spilled down the inside of the glass. Dwayne obviously prided himself on getting perfect head every time. Lou watched in admiration; she’d been a barmaid herself. He was a performer alright.

‘But you don't get off scot-free,’ Dwayne added. ‘A round on the house in return for your story. What is a nice girl like you doing in a dump like this?’

Trewie

Trewie leaned back against the bar, getting comfortable. He was ready for a long story: lost love, he reckoned. He'd put money that she was running away from someone or something. So he was taken by surprise when Lou said she was headed to Collooney to investigate the riots.

'You wanna stay away from that,' he growled. 'There aren't any riots except those stirred up by the riot police and the press. Flown in, stirred up trouble, got a story about Ab'rig'n'l riots for the six o'clock news and flown out again. Why would you want to get mixed up with that?'

Lou took a long drag on her cigarette, sucking in her cheeks and squinting her eyes. That was a reaction she hadn't expected. She thought Collooney was still full of reporters, and said so.

'I'm from a newspaper not the tv,' she added, wishing she was confident enough to say 'I'm an investigative journalist' aloud. 'I want to find out the truth, what really happened, why Lawrence Jones hung himself.'

'Hung himself? Is that what you think happened?' Trewie barked. He repeated that the press had been and gone. 'And anyway,' he said, 'no one really wants to know what happened to Lawrence Jones. One more Ab'rig'n'l dies in the lock-up with a noose around his neck. Hung himself!' Trewie harrumphed. 'The bastards from the press just tell the cops' story and leave. There's no other story that counts. And you're a day late; it's already yesterday's story. Some more blackfellas got themselves arrested to help keep

the jails full, and Collooney's one young man short. End of story.'

He turned away from Lou, bringing his shoulder forward, closing himself off. Dwayne went to serve the pool players at the other end of the bar. The bonhomie had gone in an instant. Lou didn't know whether to defend the press or to agree with Trewie. He was right, of course, but now she was the press too, and she'd be different. She'd find out what really happened and tell the full story. But her confidence was ebbing. She'd decided Bern was just being a jerk, but perhaps he'd smelt that the story was over, as he'd put it in Journalism 101. But why was Trewie so upset?

'I'm pretty new at this,' Lou coaxed, 'tell me more.' She hadn't met a man yet who'd turn down an opportunity to tell her how the world worked. Trewie turned, leaned his elbow on the bar, and looked Lou up and down. She seemed pretty young; he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

'First, the story's not about a riot,' he pronounced in a schoolteacherly tone, poking the bar with his index finger. 'It's about a young black man losing his life in police custody in very suspicious circumstances. It's a great tragedy. Every single time it happens,' Trewie enunciated each word carefully, 'it's a great tragedy. Larry – he was only Lawrence to the state – was not the first and he won't be the last.'

'I know,' Lou jumped in proudly. 'Just a few weeks back there was another one…' and suddenly she felt embarrassed. All she could remember was that a young Aboriginal man had been found dead, hung, in the police lock-up in a town near Collooney. She knew his name was Bird because the journalist phoning in the story had made a nasty joke about it. Lou kicked herself for not having checked the facts before she left so she could ask leading questions. Trewie had edged his shoulder forward again, hunching in on himself, cutting Lou off. Dwayne had returned but kept his distance, playing air guitar and quietly singing. Lou could make out 'screaming and bull whips cracking' from 'Southern Man'.

Dwayne's face contorted as he bent the imaginary strings to get the high notes. Lou studied Trewie, wishing he would speak. His brown eyes were sunk deep into his craggy face and he was going bald. He wore a faded dark blue workman's shirt tucked into an old leather belt and khaki pants. He kept running his hand through his hair, clutching the top of his head, as if he had something to say and was trying to organise it so it would make sense in the telling. Finally he looked at Lou and began to talk.

'First, girlie,' he said ponderously, 'there wasn't another *one*. Larry was the *tenth* young Ab'rig'n'l man to die like that around here, and up in God's Own, in the last twelve month. Just around here and up north! The tenth! In a year!'

'The tenth?' Lou croaked. She didn't know what to say. 'I'm sorry. I didn't know.' She sipped at her beer while Trewie stared at her. Eventually she whispered 'Why?'

'Good question,' Trewie said slowly. 'Why? Why? How do you find that out?'

Lou had no idea what to say. She shrugged.

'I'd like to hear from the people who know why. But they're not talkin. Prob'ly never will,' Trewie said slowly, scratching the back of his neck. 'I can only tell you what I know. I didn't really know Larry, and I didn't know others at all, but I did know Birdie.'

'Tell me about Birdie,' Lou asked quietly, 'please.'

'Well, there's the man, and there's the world he lives in. Can't understand one without understandin the other,' Trewie sighed. His eyes misted over. He sniffled and looked away, embarrassed, then pulled out the scruffy handkerchief again to wipe his nose. Lou wordlessly offered him a cigarette, but he didn't see her. He'd got stuck in the recollection. She lit her own cigarette and waited in silence, not taking her eyes off Trewie in case she lost him. She didn't really know what he was talking about but it sounded important, seemed like a story worth waiting for. She shimmied her

stool backwards until her back, aching from long hours of driving, rested against the wall. Eventually Trewie pulled a pack of Champion Ruby and a crushed box of matches from his shirt pocket and embarked on rolling a cigarette. Lou guessed he was one of those smokers who soaked up time by spending as long rolling a cigarette as they did smoking it.

Lou called Dwayne with a barely perceptible nod of her head and motioned to both glasses. They'd both spent enough time in pubs to know how to give and take orders with little more than a gesture. Lou kept her eyes on Trewie, intent on being the perfect listener, awaiting keenly, remembering Bern's advice about interviewing. Her humiliating departure from the office forced its way back into her mind. She didn't want to go back empty-handed. She'd prove to Bern that she could get a good story and then the bastard would be sorry. She watched Trewie stick a cigarette paper to his bottom lip then carefully measure out shreds of tobacco, placing them in a long even line in the palm of his hand. He blended it between his palms in long slow sweeps, then pulled the paper from his lip to roll it around the tobacco.

Dwayne brought the two beers, put the empties in the sink, and wiped the bar with the red checked cloth. Lou slid her hand into her pocket, pulled out a two dollar note and passed it to Dwayne, her eyes not leaving Trewie as he lifted the rolled cigarette to his lips and poked out his tongue just enough to lick the gum on the paper and seal the cigarette. Then he picked up a match, poked the last strands of tobacco into the cigarette, put it in his mouth. Finally he picked up the matches and, cupping his hands to shelter the match and the box from an imaginary gale, lit his cigarette and dragged on it hungrily. The smoke made him cough, a low gravelly rumble deep in his chest, his shoulders hunched forwards as if to keep his lungs in place. Only then, as he picked up the full glass of beer to drink from it and drown the cough, did he focus on Lou and start to speak.

The problem was a lack of work and people need work for self-respect, he began. Trewie was going to be one of those storytellers who began at the very beginning and meandered along every side track on the way. Lou knew the type. The young men got stuck in the missions with nothing to do, Trewie continued, and the missions were crowded because a lot of families moved in off the stations after the equal pay decisions. On the positive side, Trewie's tone brightened, it meant the missions could have more than one football team. Lou did a double-take: what did equal pay and football have to do with it? Trewie kept on before she could frame a question to get him on track. Birdie had grown up in the Thunder Ridge mission, and Larry in the Collooney, he explained, so they played football together. Larry was better because he was so fast. Even the cops called him a runner, Trewie joked, because they couldn't catch him, not on the football field or on the street. They always caught Birdie. He'd get wheezy and have to stop running, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. Boy could kick goals though, Trewie beamed. Played in the front pocket for the mission team and if the ball went straight to him he'd get it through the goal posts every time. Never get a point when there were six to be had, Trewie grinned, replaying one of Birdie's great goals in his head, his face flushed with pride. 'Remember that game when he kicked ten goals in the first quarter?' he called to Dwayne, who shook his head slowly, without interrupting the tune he was playing on his air guitar. 'Too bloody young, that's your trouble,' Trewie growled.

'Maybe I'm too young too,' Lou jumped in, hoping for an opening to get Trewie back on track. Interviewing was more difficult than she had imagined. She felt such a fool for not doing some background reading before she left. Lou wasn't a sports fan, so she decided to ask about Trewie about equal pay, even though she couldn't see how it related to the hangings. 'What's the thing about equal pay? Could you explain how that relates to Birdie?' she asked, in what she hoped sounded like an investigative tone. 'Whitlam brought that in, didn't he? In the seventies? Equal pay for

women? Same work same pay, that stuff, no?' she added, hoping Trewie would get the impression she knew what she was talking about.

Trewie stared at Lou with his eyebrows knotted and wondered what to say. The girl called herself a journalist, yet she seemed pretty ignorant. He knew there was a lot of ignorance around, especially about Aborigines, but was it his responsibility to teach her how the world works? On the other hand, he told himself, it would be a way to get through the night, and she was a pretty girl, squinting at him with those strange eyes through clouds of smoke. Trewie took a last puff of his rollie, dropped it in the trough at his feet, and struck out on a history lesson.

'When I first started working on the stations, I was getting about $40 a week and the Ab'rig'nes would be getting about $6, the blokes, that is, the women got half that. Did fencing, dug dams, built those stations, Ab'rig'nes did. And such great horsemen! Even when the rain were barrelling down or you couldn't see for whirly whirlies, they'd be out riding for hours, rounding up the stock and bringing 'em in without losing any or getting them riled up.'

'Wish I could ride a horse,' Dwayne murmured, one hand up as if holding reins, his bum poked out, his torso rocking back and forth rhythmically. Lou worried that she had encountered a pair of weirdos. Trewie kept talking.

'But while the Ab'rig'nes barely got paid, they did have a place to live, on the stations – it was their place really, their bloody country. It was a rough way to live, lean-tos down by the river if there was one, or under some trees. The women and the kids would catch fish and rabbits and there'd be rice or potato rations, instead of wages of course.' Trewie spoke like an orator addressing a crowd, modulating his tone, gesticulating.

Lou was perturbed. The story about Birdie had disappeared in the mists of time. Feeling a failure as an interviewer, Lou racked her brains for some useful advice from Bern but there was nothing.

Trewie clearly wanted to talk about the world he lived in before he got to Birdie himself, but even her question about equal pay made Trewie stray further from the topic. Lean-tos and hunting! Trewie must be a lot older than he looked. She tried again. 'That was a long time ago, no? Back in the olden days?' Lou tried to nudge Trewie towards the present. 'Where's the equal pay come in?'

'Sixty-eight the equal pay came in, nearly twenty years ago. Probably around the time you were born. Not really what anybody would call the olden days,' Trewie said with an exaggeratedly patient tone. 'Should have been a century ago, more, and it was not for want of trying. I was in Darwin in 50 and 51, and Ab'rig'nes were having big strikes for seven quid a week and full citizenship rights. They didn't even have the right to go to the pictures when they wanted! A communist-inspired plot, the gov'ment called it. The unions organised a big march in support of the strike and the coppers laid into it like billy-o.' Trewie put his hands in front of his face and shrunk into himself, as though he was anticipating a punch.

'Full citizenship rights? The pictures?' Lou struggled. Trewie had already moved on.

'You know,' he was saying, 'Ab'rig'n'l men went off to fight in the war, fought alongside the white fellas, got the same pay. After the war, if they wanted to have a drink with those same white fellas they had to get a special pass. The dog licence everyone called it. Or if an Ab'rig'n'l woman wanted to go out with a white bloke, or vice versa, they had to get exemption.'

'Dog licence?' Lou was confused. 'Exemption?'

'It read something like: "For the purposes of the Act", the so-called Ab'rig'n'l Protection Act, "this person ceases to be an Aborigine".' Trewie said it long and slow, equal emphasis on each vowel. 'Or words to that effect.'

Lou began to think Trewie was making this stuff up. Exemption

from what? And how could someone cease to be an Aborigine? What's more, everyone thought it was outrageous that black people had to carry a special pass in South Africa. If it had happened in Australia she would have known about it. Trewie noticed the sceptical look in her eyes but didn't wait for the question.

'Conversely, a white person could be had up for consorting with Ab'rig'nes. You could get six months jail. Some did.'

'Consorting?' Lou thought that was something prostitutes were picked up for. She wished she could ask a proper interview question so that the conversation went where she wanted it to, instead of this maddening trying-to-keep-up.

'If the coppers thought you were causing too much trouble, or if one of the station bosses wanted a person to stop doing union work in their area, or even if you were going out with a girl a copper or his mate wanted, they'd pick you up off the street for consorting and put you behind bars.'

Dwayne chipped in. 'I've heard about that. From Aunty Helen. When she started going out with Uncle Phil she had to get exemption because he was white and she wasn't. And then they weren't allowed to hang around with the other Murris – that's what we call Aborigines around here – cos Uncle Phil would be picked up for consorting with them. She had to get special permission to go to her grandma's funeral.'

'Excuse me,' Lou cut in. She was determined to get Trewie back to where he began his story. 'I know that the cops will pick on anyone who isn't a Skip – we get plenty of that where I come from. But you were talking about ...'

Trewie looked at Lou with new interest, wondering where she came from, and what she meant by Skip. Dwayne cut in before he could ask, and before Lou could finish her question.

'They chucked you in for consorting, didn't they Trewie?' he asked. 'I remember Aunty Helen talking about that too. She reckons

all the Murris took off their shirts and walked off the job and marched into town and surrounded the jail til they let you out.'

Trewie laughed. 'Well, they had me in jail, but it wasn't for consorting. That time they had locked me up for agitatin' for equal pay and conditions. And it's true, a lot of Ab'rig'nes came and protested outside the jail. But that's another story,' he said proudly, smiling at Lou. 'So, young lady, you want me to tell you about equal pay.'

Lou's spirits sunk. She didn't want him to talk about equal pay. She should have kept her question short and focused. All she wanted was for him to tell her about Birdie and the others. Before Lou could answer Trewie was off again.

'In the early sixties, that bloody Kerr, the dog who sacked Whitlam, was a bigwig in arbitration commission hearings about equal pay. On the side of the bosses, of course. He peddled the idea that Ab'rig'nes had a lower work value, they were *slow workers*, he reckoned, so they should get paid less!'

Dwayne put three empty glasses in front of the beer tap and looked enquiringly at Lou. She nodded and raised her eyebrows in a signal of resignation. It was going to be a long night. Trewie sounded like he was just coming into his stride.

'It gets worse,' Trewie was poking the bar with his finger, making a point. 'The arbitration commission decided that Ab'rig'nes were *retarded*! Tribal and cultural reasons held them back from appreciating the concept of work, they said! To fix this problem, they decided Ab'rig'nes should be moved off the stations and into missions and settlements where they could learn the white man's way. And now, twenty years later, the young blokes who should be getting skills, making things work, earning their crust, are stuck in the missions with nothing to do. And that is the root of the problem. He'd of been a different man, Birdie, if he had a job, responsibilities. All of em would.'

Trewie took a long swig of beer, and sat back proudly, satisfied, having finally reached the end of his speech. But it was too late for Lou. She was exhausted and barely taking any of it in; she could see Trewie talking and pointing his finger but all she could hear was Bern droning on: 'You're learning from a master,' in the same wise-old-man tone, 'a lot of people would give anything to be in your position.' Bern hadn't taught her a single useful thing about interviewing! And why didn't he tell her about the other hangings? Noelene was right, Bern was a pompous jerk. And thanks to him here she was, stuck in the middle of Woop Woop being lectured to by another know-it-all old codger who wasn't actually going to tell her anything useful. Enough! Lou told herself to take control. She was going to investigate Lawrence Jones' death, find out about the other deaths and write an article about it. It was getting late. Time to head to Collooney.

Lou skulled her beer, picked up her bag and slid off the stool.

'Well, it's been great meeting you guys,' she said in the friendliest tone she could muster, 'and hearing your stories. I've gotta make tracks. Need to get to Collooney, find somewhere to sleep.'

Dwayne looked at her with surprise. Trewie looked mystified. Before they could say anything Lou walked out the door.

Rabbit

The chilly darkness took Lou's breath away. The strong southerly tumbled an empty chip packet across her feet. She couldn't feel her keys in her bag, and hoped she hadn't left them in the pub. Turning her bag so it would catch the weak streetlight, Lou peered deep inside as she shuffled through cigarettes, lighters, wallet, pens, notebooks, toothbrush, Disprin, comb, half a Cherry Ripe, coins, paperclips, back and forth, feeling for her keys. A messy bag is a messy life, Noel would say, making Lou laugh: as if her life would be transformed if only she could keep her bag in order. Thinking of Noel made Lou feel lonely and miserable. She wished she'd stayed home. She fumbled exasperatedly in her bag, shoving stuff from one side to another until finally she felt the cold jagged lines of a key. She exhaled with relief as she pulled the keys out of her bag.

When Lou looked up three big men were staring at her. They were straight ahead in the cab of a Nissan ute. She'd been oblivious to them in her hunt for keys. They must have been watching her all this time. The man in the middle began a slow hand clap. The one on the passenger side wound down his window and poked his head out:

'Hey love, on the hunt? Ya look like you could do with a bit of a good time. Must be desperate if ya gotta drink with that lot in The Union. Come over ere.'

His words were slurred. The driver broke into a sinister laugh, put his head out the window and added to the chorus:

'Come on love, we'll give ya one.'

In the gloom Lou could see the man in the middle moving his hand up and down in an exaggerated wanking motion. She wanted to disappear. Noelene, keys in hand, would have put them down with some wisecrack and kept walking. Lou could never think of something smart to say until it was too late. The man in the middle leaned over and stuck his head out the passenger window.

'Come on cutey. That's your little bug of a car there isn't it? No point trying to get away from us in that heap of shit, we'll catch ya in no time. Come for a ride in a real car instead. Ave a bit of fun with some real men.'

Lou shuddered. They knew it was her Volkswagen? How long had they been watching her? The chill of the street made her legs quiver and crawled up her spine.

The driver said slowly in his deep rough voice:

'We're going *rabbitin*. Outdoor sports. You'll love it, a bit of action with blokes like us.'

The man chortled. The one in the middle made a circle with his thumb and first finger, and slowly pushed the finger from his other hand back and forth through it, a nasty leer on his face. Lou glanced at the VW, wondering if the motor would start if she made a run for it.

Suddenly a bank of lights on top of the ute snapped on and pinned Lou in their glare. She froze. The blast of light was followed by a pulsating blast of heavy metal so loud it hurt her ears. She could hear the men jeering at her but couldn't make out the words. It was like being stabbed with sound.

After what seemed an eternity, Lou felt someone grab her arm and pull her back into the pub. Her heart thumped against her chest. Her legs were jelly, her walk was wobbly, her hands were shaking.

'Jesus, girl,' Trewie was saying, 'Take a deep breath, slow down

now. What's ya name? Lou? You alright Lou?'

He put his arm around her shoulder and led her back to her stool by the bar. All the lights had been switched off. The men playing pool had gone. Spotlights swung an arc of light through the dimness as the ute backed away from the street and drove off. In the ghostly light from the street lamps, Lou could see Dwayne pushing a shot glass full of golden liquid towards her. No one spoke. The three of them looked at her hands until they stopped shaking, then Lou picked up the glass and sipped the scotch.

Suddenly bright white light from the street bounced into the bar as the ute pulled up in front again. There was another burst of heavy metal music. Lou could make out the chorus of 'Highway to Hell'. Then the sound stopped and the spotlights snapped off. The driver revved the engine loudly as the ute reversed into the street and drove away.

'Don't ya hate AC/DC?' Dwayne said, looking at Lou. 'Music for morons. If ya can call it music.' He was wiping down the bar. In the silence Lou could hear water draining through the beer tap. Trewie picked up his half full glass, drank it off in one gulp and passed the empty to Dwayne. Neither Dwayne nor Trewie said anything more about the men with the spotlights. They were both exaggeratedly calm, as if it was normal to sit in the pub in the dark.

'Time to make tracks,' Trewie said, yawning.

Lou was too terrified by the creeps with the spotlights on their ute to try going to Collooney.

'You got a room I could have here?' she asked Dwayne.

'There's only five rooms and they're all full,' Dwayne replied. 'Not that you'd want to stay up there. It's all old blokes who shower once a week and get their clothes washed annually. What if you ran into one of them in the bathroom in the morning? Eew!' he said, pinching his nose between thumb and forefinger. 'I couldn't stand it. Hell, even Trewie couldn't take it, and I betcha he don't wash

much either.'

'I've got a spare room in me castle, which is yours,' Trewie nodded at Lou, 'as long as you promise not to take advantage of me.'

Lou tried to think of other options while she shuffled through her bag for her keys. Driving to Collooney was out. So was going back to Sydney. Light on alternatives, she looked at Trewie with gratitude. 'I don't want to put you to any trouble,' she said politely.

'No problem at all. I need a lift home anyway,' Trewie said gently. 'And you're too tall to sleep in that heap you call a car.'

Trostlos

Lou followed Trewie out of the pub, car keys in hand. The VW was the only car on the street. Lou yanked the driver's door open with both hands and got in, slamming the door shut behind her. She leaned over and pushed open the passenger door for Trewie. The starter motor groaned and failed several times before the car started. When Lou revved the engine, there was a plinking sound as loud as a grandfather clock in an empty room.

'Ya got a problem there,' Trewie whistled. 'Take it to the Shell servo in Collooney. Mechanic there's a genius with the internal combustion engine. Assuming this contraption qualifies, which he might dispute.'

'It's the timing,' Lou responded, hoping it would sound like she knew what she was talking about. Her ex used to say that about the plinking sound.

'Thank God for that,' Trewie said with mock relief. 'I was worried it was the other thing. I don't fancy breaking down with you in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.'

'Where to?' Lou asked. She wasn't going to ask him what the other thing might be. Nor say that she didn't fancy breaking down with him either.

'Sneak out the back way, so the coppers don't see us. Left up ahead, then first right.'

Lou reversed the car into the road then crunched the gears into first. She waited for Trewie to comment on her driving, but instead

he just muttered, 'You wouldn't credit it, but the bastards are even more likely to see us if we don't have the lights on.'

'Ta,' Lou said, switching the headlights on and turning to smile at Trewie. He wasn't so bad. She couldn't imagine what she would have done to get away from those hoons in the ute if he hadn't rescued her.

Lou drove slowly past a string of mean weatherboard cottages set back beyond nature strips on big blocks with empty gardens. The road narrowed as they moved into open country. The cloud had lifted. Pools of fog lay over the ground. In the cold moonlight Lou could see the road winding ahead around long slow bends, a snake line between glassy paddocks. She checked the rear vision mirror for lights. The road was empty.

'Who were they?' she ventured. 'What were the lights for?'

Trewie sighed and shuffled in the seat. 'Rabbitin, they call it, spotlighting. Mostly it's a sport with actual rabbits, or foxes. Shootin, you know, huntin, you could call it. But when they're drunk and bored they go down the missions and switch on their big lights and loud music, just to terrorise people.'

'What, like in Vietnam? Terrorise villages with loud music? That happens in Oz?' Lou was surprised. One of her cousins told stories about night raids on Vietnamese villages. The sound of heavy metal music still made him shake.

Trewie turned and looked at Lou. He found it odd what she knew about and what she didn't. 'Well, there's always been vigilante squads goin down the missions and the camps, but the music is new.'

'Well, they sure scared the bejesus out of …' Lou began, recalling the depth of fear with a shudder. 'But who…?'

'Just ahead, on the right,' Trewie interrupted. 'There's a letterbox, an old biscuit tin, on a post. Turn straight after that.'

Lou almost missed it. The big grey box bore no resemblance to any biscuit tin she'd ever seen. She changed down gears and turned sharply, skidding the car in the gravel. It shuddered over a cattle grid onto a bumpy dirt track that meandered down the side of a hill towards a line of trees ghostly in the shimmer of frosty fog.

'River down here or something?' she asked, holding on tight to the steering wheel and sitting forward so that she could see the edges of the track.

'Goes by the noble name of Sandy Creek, one of millions in the country. It'd be more accurate to call it Useless Creek. Runs in the winter when there's water all around and dries up in the summer just when ya need it. I got a spring though, in my bit, so I'm lucky, even if it is a bit briny.'

Lou drove slowly over the potholes. The car creaked and rattled.

'Just here, pull up on this bit of gravel, so you don't get bogged.'

A black dog ran up to the car as she parked. Trewie got out and the dog jumped up on him. Trewie stroked him, muttering sweet nothings. Lou left her overnight bag in the car, wishing it held flannelette pyjamas and a dressing gown instead of the skimpy lace nightie she'd brought to impress Bern. It seemed a world away when she had packed that bag. Trewie and the dog led the way down a narrow path under low hanging trees towards faintly flickering shades of green and brown.

'What's that? Those lights?' Lou asked, pointing.

'Home sweet home, that is. An architectural marvel.'

'It's a hobbit house!' exclaimed Lou, delighted. Up close the house was atwinkle with colour. The upper walls seemed made of circles of coloured glass. 'It's amazing! Are they glass tiles?'

'Stubbies, empty.'

'How'd you do it?' Lou asked, running her hands across the smooth glass. It *was* made of stubbies, mortared together as if they

were bricks.

'Wasn't me. It's the house that Wolf built.'

Around the side of the house they stepped onto a verandah, past a couple of camping chairs and a table, then into the house. In the middle of the small room there was a big round black heater with a metal chimney that rose through the ceiling. Lou dropped her bag and stood with her back to the heat, relaxing as it radiated into her body.

'Pot-belly stove,' Trewie said, pointing at the heater. 'Seen one before?' Lou shook her head. 'Very efficient wood burner. Safe too. Even makes ya a cup of tea.'

Trewie picked up a big kettle and put it on top of the pot-belly, then opened a little door in the side of the stove. The deep red coals threw a warm glow into the room. Taking care not to stand in front of the light from the stove, Trewie hunted around for something. Lou could hear him patting surfaces, the way she did when she was looking for her keys. Eventually he picked up a kerosene lamp and held out his other hand to Lou. She passed him her matches. Trewie lit the lamp and hung it from a hook in the ceiling. Then he went out the front door. Lou could hear him talking to the dog on the verandah. He came back with a couple of pieces of wood, poked them into the stove and closed the door with his foot.

In the soft light of the lamp the edges of the room blurred into darkness. Lou could make out a narrow bed against one wall. Beside it a door was ajar to another room. Every spare bit of wall was lined with rows of shelves balancing on bricks and packed high and higgledy-piggledy with books and stacks of magazines. There was a table stacked with newspapers. The only other furniture was an old wooden rocking chair and a wicker armchair. Lou pulled the rocking chair close to the stove, sat in it, and held her hands out towards the heat.

Trewie was rustling in the little kitchen, clinking china and

cutlery and quietly singing ‘Swing low, sweet chariot’ in an unexpectedly clear baritone. He returned with a tray laden with a teapot, cups, a bowl full of dog pellets and something that looked like the sort of cake Lou’s Aunt Hilda bought. Back in the pub Lou had decided Trewie was safe to go home with but she hadn’t suspected him as a tea and cakes man. He warmed the pot with water from the kettle, and emptied it out the front door in a practised throw, missing the verandah completely. When he’d made the tea he took the pellets out to the dog, then came back, sliced the cake, and poured the tea into two mugs and passed one to Lou. He sighed as though he’d just done a hard day’s work, sat at the table and nodded towards a sugar bowl with a couple of spoons in it.

‘Sugar ok? I’m out of milk.’

Lou smiled gratefully, took two teaspoonsful, and slowly stirred them in.

‘Thanks mate, for the tea and everything,’ Lou said gently, taking the end slice of the cake, her favourite piece. She couldn’t understand why she’d got so annoyed with Trewie in the pub, and wanted to make amends. ‘Tell me about the bloke who built this amazing house.’

‘Wolf? We were mates. Grew up in the same street in Newcastle. Played footy together, worked in the steel mill together, stood shoulder to shoulder in the front row on picket lines. Did we take some beatings! Ah, you wouldn’t know about that, and it’s not relevant anyway.’ He laughed. ‘I should stick to the topic.’

To Trewie's surprise, Lou was nodding. She knew all kinds of things he didn’t expect. Or perhaps she just thought he should stick to the topic.

‘My brother’s a builder’s labourer,’ she said. ‘He’s always in the front lines on the pickets when they’re on strike. Came home black and blue once when the cops attacked the picket line. Dad was so

proud of him! Not that that's relevant either.' Lou smiled, her nose wrinkling, eyes sparkling. Trewie imagined Wolf's gentle voice chiding him: 'The girl's on the same side of the class line, mate! Give her a break.' He passed Lou the plate of cake.

'Go on, you might as well eat it all. Might rot before I get another hungry visitor.'

'Wolf built this house? Out of stubbies?' Lou's plan was to get him to finish the story about the house.

'He was one for the bottle, our Wolf. The booze started wreaking havoc, as it does. Doc told him to lay off or he'd die. So he came up here to try and dry out. Bought this block of land and put a tent on it. Couldn't stay off the booze though. Soon had a heap of stubbies, so he started building a wall. A memorial, he reckoned, in case he dropped off.'

'Did he?' she asked.

'Of course he did, ya think I could make this up?'

'No, I mean, did he drop off? Sorry, I mean, um, pass away?'

'Yeah, it was horrible to watch. He got real sick. But before he died he'd built these walls and put the roof and verandah on. Planted the orchard. I built the little kitchen and bathroom, and a bedroom off the side, and moved in the summer before he died. You know, to look after him a bit.' Trewie was slowly shaking his head. 'Bloody lovely place, it is. Real good memorial.'

'Never seen anything like it,' Lou said. Her mother would like a stubbie glasshouse in the garden, she thought; her old man could supply the bottles. She could write about it for the Home section of the paper. Trewie's silence suggested he had finished the story of the house. Lou decided to ask him about Birdie.

'Trewie?'

'I know what you're thinking,' he cut in. 'You have the bedroom and I'll make up a bed here on the couch.'

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘But thanks. I’ll take the couch. I like being near this fire. And I don’t want to put a man out of his bed.’

‘Whatever you like. It is pretty cold out in the other room. And I’d rather you didn’t see the state it’s in. Wasn’t expecting company.’ Trewie pushed his chair back and went into the kitchen, where she could hear him banging cupboard doors. He walked back in with a pair of sheets so white they gleamed in the lamplight.

‘It ain’t the Taj Mahal,’ Trewie laughed, ‘but there’s no bedbugs.’

Lou watched Trewie elaborately making up a bed on the low couch. It balanced on spindly crossed legs, a piece of canvas stretched between two trestles. It didn’t look very stable.

‘What do you call that then?’ she asked, pointing at the couch and hoping the question wouldn’t prompt another long explanation.

‘It’s a camp stretcher,’ Trewie replied, standing up straight, hands massaging his lower back. ‘Don’t know much, do ya? How old are ya, anyway?’

‘Twenty, nearly.’

‘Well, that explains it. Ignorance is a condition of being young, yet it’s the only time in your life when you think you know everything. When d’ya leave school?’ Trewie was carefully folding back the top sheet over the blankets, then he tucked the blankets under to form another layer.

‘When I turned sixteen. Worked in me mum's factory for a year or so. Didn’t want to do that for the rest of my life. Mum and her friends always hatching plans to marry me off to someone or other’s cousin from Italy, and non-stop talking about bambinos. I wasn’t ready for any of that. My friend Noelene was in a share house in the city, and they had a spare room so I moved in there. Got a job with the paper and been there ever since.’

‘You got a journalist apprenticeship? Hard to get one of those

without connections.'

'Nah, I wish! Started in the canteen, serving on the counter. Got to know the journos and the typesetters and proofers, everyone. Got the idea I'd like to be a journalist. We had this old typewriter in the house, a portable Olivetti, with a "teach yourself to type in 8-hours" book. Took me more like 80!' Lou laughed. 'One of the typists used to let me practise on her IBM Selectric. Ever use one of them?'

Trewie was stuffing a pillow into a pillow case embroidered with flowers. He shook his head. 'Heard of IBM, but not the Selectric. Familiar with the Olivetti portable, though. Great invention. Lot easier to cart around than those big heavy metal things.'

'The Selectric's got all the letters on this little golf ball that spins like the bejesus when you hit the keys. Beautiful! Specially after the Olivetti. Ours jammed up every time I hit the "e". So I practised speed tests on the Selectric after work, and when a job came up in the typing pool I applied for it. Spent a few months typing boring letters and stuff, then they put me on copy-taking – you know, the journos phone in reports and I type em up. I got a reputation for being fast and accurate, and – this is weird – I can spell. Dunno why. Don't remember learning how to spell at school.'

'No surprise there,' Trewie muttered, laying the pillow on the bed and standing back to admire his work.

'I was dead set delighted about getting out of the typing pool. But what I really want is to be an investigative journalist,' Lou said, enunciating each syllable clearly. She loved the sound of 'investigative journalist'. Sometimes she'd say 'Lou Williams, Investigative Journalist, can we talk?' to herself in the mirror.

'Working your way up, eh? Good for you,' Trewie commented, admiration in his voice. Lou didn't explain that a copy-taker was a long way down the pecking order from journalist, and that the only

direct connection was that she got to know journalists and occasionally go places she'd otherwise never get to. She certainly didn't want to tell Trewie about Bern.

Trewie had disappeared into the next room. Lou could hear him opening and closing cupboard doors again. He came back with two glasses and a full bottle of Teacher's scotch. He sat at the table, cracked open the top, and poured two half glasses.

'This is to balance the tea. And cos I don't think I can tell you about Birdie without it.' He raised his glass. 'To his memory, and to the memory of all those who die too young.'

Lou raised her glass and took a swig – the scotch burned her mouth. She added her own silent toast – to getting her first story – and turned sideways in the chair, resting her chin on her knees, giving Trewie her full attention.

'I knew Birdie since the day he was born. I got to know Stella, his mum, when they lived on the river on Buckley's place and I was shearing there. Used to see them every year for a long time. That was before they moved to the mission at Thunder. Bloody concentration camp, Thunder Ridge mission is, worse even than at Collooney. Whole town of Thunder's got no more than a thousand people, and about three-quarters of em Ab'rig'nes. When it's quiet there's one copper for every hundred blacks. And that's by the official report. When it's not quiet, there's more.'

'One cop for every hundred people? Is that normal?' Lou asked. She needed to take notes, but it seemed obtrusive.

'Normal depends. Those nice leafy suburbs on the North Shore, you get one per thousand.'

'That's …' Lou struggled with the maths. It wasn't her strong suit. 'Ten times as many. Why?'

'Well,' Trewie rubbed the back of his neck. 'All the missions, places like Thunder, places like the boys' homes, they're all a bit like prison. White blokes in charge. Force of the state behind em.

Isolated from the rest of Australia. Separate. The coppers keep the line.'

Trewie sighed, got up and opened the door of the pot-belly stove. A rush of warm air cheered the room. He went out onto the verandah, talked to the dog, and came back in with a couple of elaborately twisted pieces of wood. They could have been fashioned by a sculptor. Too pretty to burn, Lou thought, in our house Noel would put them on display and call them art.

'Mallee roots,' Trewie explained to Lou, seeing her admiring the wood. 'Can't get anything like em for slow hot burning. Ever seen them?'

Trewie poked the wood into the fire. Sparks flew out onto the floor. Lou shook her head. Mallee roots sounded like something out of a country and western song.

'The mallee gum sends up a myriad of branches, each no thicker than your arm. The trunk itself hides from the harsh desert climate, below the surface, conserving moisture and nutrients. This is the trunk we're burning, long and slow and hot, dying with the same intensity of its struggle to live. We'll leave the door open a bit. It's pretty when it burns, concentrated desert colours. Cheers ya up.'

Trewie sat in the wicker chair and bent down to loosen his boots. His bones creaked as he straightened up. He raised his glass to Lou, emptied it and picked up the bottle to pour another. Lou held out her glass. They sipped at the scotch and stared at the flames. Eventually he began to speak again.

'Where am I? Thunder Ridge is a hard town. Real sharp divide: colour divide, social divide. And the Gubbas.'

'The who?' Lou cut in. 'Gubbas?'

'That's our lot, love, the whities.'

'Oh! We call them Skips where I come from,' Lou explained. Trewie nodded slowly, one mystery explained.

'Anyway, a lot of Gubbas are scared shitless of their dark-skinned brethren. So to make em happy, the cops are patrollin all the time and pickin up the Ab'rig'nes for breathin wrong if they can't get em for anything else.'

A dog howled in the distance. Another responded, or perhaps it was an echo.

'Birdie – William he was, but no one called him that – Birdie was trying to give up the grog. Any idea what that's like? When everyone around ya is drinkin all the time, and there's nothing else to do?'

Lou shook her head, but Trewie wasn't looking for an answer.

'So there he was, poor Birdie, tryin to give it up, against all odds. And this night he had the horrors real bad. He was havin hallucinations and scarin the shit out of everyone. Stella, his mum, knew he'd be better once he got through it. But he's wakin up everyone in the house – Stell's got little kids and old folks sleepin all over, probably a dozen people crammed in three rooms. So she walks Birdie up to the hospital so they could take care of him. The night nurse complains when Stella brings him in and tries to send them away, but Stell sticks to her guns and eventually the nurse puts him in a bed and then goes back to readin her *Woman's Day* or doing her knittin or whatever she thought was more important than nursin a blackfella with the horrors. Didn't even give him a glass of water. So, of course, Birdie is straight out of the bed, wanderin around and makin a racket. The man was sick. It was a hospital. What do you think they do?'

'Um, call in the doctor?' Lou had seen old blokes with the horrors round the alleys near Central Station. She'd keep her distance – it was frightening to watch someone's body taken over like that. Sometimes ambulances would come and pick them up.

'Doctor makes sense. But no. Nurse calls the cops. Said he might hurt the other patients. Said she couldn't do anythin for him

and that he needed to be locked up. Far as she was concerned, Birdie might as well have been an animal.'

Trewie stopped talking. Lou thought he might be crying, she couldn't see in the dark. She pulled her cigarettes out of her bag, lit two and passed one to Trewie. They sat companionably in the light of the lantern, watching colours flaring in the burning mallee roots.

'Cops pick him up in the bloody divvy wagon. Handcuff him. Chuck him in the back. There's been no crime, remember. No misdemeanour, nothing. And then they throw him in a cell with a skinny blanket despite it's bloody freezin in the middle of winter and they turn the light off. Jesus, poor kid. That was it. That did it. Birdie always slept with the light on. Scared shitless by the dark, from the time he was a baby.'

'My cousin was like that,' Lou said quietly. 'Still does it, even though he's grown up, still sleeps with the light on. He can cope now with just a little light in the corner, a night lamp, looks like a magic mushroom. Bit weird though, being scared of the dark when you're grown up, don't you reckon?'

'We're all a bit weird, love,' Trewie was sniffing. 'Sleeping with the light on is pretty mild compared with some of the weird stuff I've come across. Like, say, throwin a man in jail cos he's sick.' He snuffled and wiped his hand across his eyes.

Trewie *was* crying. Lou didn't know what to do. Men never cried until Bob Hawke started doing it on tv. Girlfriends cried all the time, and you just hugged them, but Lou didn't want to hug Trewie. She got up and poured more scotch into each glass, then stood in front of the stove holding out Trewie's glass, waiting while he dragged out his grubby hanky and blew his nose and wiped his eyes against his sleeve. Taking the glass, he nodded his head in thanks and took a big swig.

'He was dead when they went in to check on him next mornin. Sposed to have torn up the blanket and hung himself but they

reckon he was sittin on the floor when they found him. How he was sposed to tear up a blanket when he couldn't even stop his hands from shakin is beyond me. You ever tried tearin a blanket? I can't do it sober. Story don't add up. Stinks from start to end.'

'Jesus,' Lou gasped, rerunning Trewie's words in her mind. 'That's unbelievable.' She'd never seen anyone with the horrors with enough self control to walk straight, let alone hang themselves. She had a hundred questions, not least of which was how did Birdie end up sitting on the floor? Trewie was watching the flames leap in the fire, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. Lou couldn't bring herself to ask him anything. The silence was broken by a loud scratching sound in the ceiling above their heads. Lou jumped. The dog barked. Trewie called out, 'Siddown Toby.'

'What's that?' Lou whispered.

'Big old possum, keeping warm,' Trewie said quietly. 'I should fix the roof so she can't get in, but I'm getting a bit soft in me old age.'

Now that Trewie was speaking again, Lou asked him what happened next.

'What happened next,' he said, quietly, 'was Birdie's brother, only fourteen year old, goes round to the cop shop the next day and stands out the front,' Trewie cupped his hands around his mouth, an impromptu loud speaker. '"You bastards!" he yells at em. "Why'd ya lock him up? He was sposed to be in the hospital. He's sposed to get better. He's not sposed to die! What happened? You fuckin bastards" he cries out.' Trewie dropped his hands, shrugged his shoulders. 'All reasonable questions. Anyone would have asked.'

Lou, still shocked, asked Trewie how the cops responded, not that he needed prompting.

'Cops march out and arrest him for disturbin the peace. Put him in the same cell where his brother died the night before. And then

they taunt him: "Don't you go doin what your brother did", they say, and they slam the door and lock it. Left him there for hours, the dirty bastards. There's no basic human decency in any of it, from the moment Stella left the hospital.'

Trewie sighed slowly and loudly, like the pull and crash of a wave. He pushed himself up from his chair and put a hand on his lower back as he straightened. He put the glasses and cups and plastic wrapper from the cake on the tray, and headed out to the kitchen.

'You can wash up out here,' he called in a cracked voice. 'Dunny and shower through the curtain. Clean towel on yer bed. Put the lamp out before ya go to sleep, unless you need it on.' He smiled as he passed through the room towards the bedroom. 'See ya in the morning girlie.'

And Trewie was gone. Lou heard him rustling around in the next room and then it was quiet. She rifled around in her bag for her toothbrush and then reached for the handle on the top of the kerosene lamp. It burnt her fingers. She pulled her sleeve down over her hand and tried again. The flame rocked then settled. Picking up the towel, she ventured into the tiny kitchen. It was like the set-up in her parents' garage, where her mother and aunts made passata from her father's tomato crop: two-ring cooker on a bench and a laundry trough for a sink, and an old kitchen cupboard with stained glass windows like the one Noel's grandmother used for storing empty jars. Through the window above the sink Lou could see the moon shining on a corrugated iron water tank on a rickety-looking wooden stand. Lou pushed aside the plastic curtain that let on to the shower and looked in dismay at the rough concrete floor, the shower head attached to a gas water heater, the hook for towels. Through another tiny door she found the toilet. The hole that served as a window let the moonlight in. The walls were unlined, there was no light, and, worse, no flush – just a wooden bench with a hole for the seat over a smelly can. Dog-eared copies

of *The Bulletin* were tucked behind a board at the end of the bench. Lou prayed that the scratching sound on the roof was branches, held her breath and had a quick piss. It wasn't a place to linger. In the kitchen she found a cracked block of yellow Sunlight soap, washed her face and hands under the single cold tap, and cleaned her teeth.

Back in the lounge, Lou blew out the lamp, pulled off her jumpers and jeans and got into bed. She snuggled into the blankets, head swirling with scotch and exhaustion, feeling like she'd stumbled into a different world. Light from the pot-belly stove flickered on the stubby glass. The camp bed hugged around her like a hammock; she was soon asleep.

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The sweet song of magpies and the smell of bacon woke Lou. For a moment she couldn't place the strange walls with their freckled light. Then she heard Trewie singing 'Molly Malone'.

In Dublin, fair city,

Where the girls are so pretty ...

Lou smiled. Her mother used to sing that to tease her father, who claimed it should be his song alone, given his Irish ancestry and the fact that she was Italian. It sounded much better in Trewie's baritone than it did when her mother sang it. Lou reached for her jeans and pulled them on under the bedclothes, then got up and pulled on a couple of skimpy sweaters. They ate on the verandah, looking over the little creek. The dog sat with his head on Lou's knee as if she was an old friend. She fed him bacon rinds. When they finished Lou began to clean up the dishes.

'Leave that,' Trewie ordered. 'I've got all day. You'd better go and get ready.'

Lou looked down at her jeans and sandshoes, and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, 'won't this do?'

'If you're gunna talk the talk, you'd better walk the walk. You got

anything that might make you look like a journo?'

The black leather mini and the polo-necked sweater Lou had brought now seemed all wrong. She'd packed for Bern, she realised, not for the job.

'And you need a shower,' Trewie added, leaning back in his chair and rolling a cigarette.

Lou walked over to the car, opened the bonnet and took out her boots and overnight bag. The little shower room was so cold she skipped the shower and changed quickly into the skirt and sweater, relieved that she'd brought black ribbed tights as well as the suspender and fishnets.

Trewie gave a long slow whistle when she reappeared on the verandah, and Lou did a model's twirl. He was right: she felt more like a journalist now. Trewie handed her a small black leather-bound notebook.

'All the best journos have one,' he said, smiling at her warmly. 'You find out the truth about what happened to my boy Birdie, let me know.'

'Thanks for everything, mate,' Lou said as they walked to the car. Trewie extended his hand and they shook. Lou had thought it was something only men did, and it made her feel proud and grown up. She resolved to shake hands at every opportunity henceforth. It would be her journalist thing. She tore a flap off the top of her cigarette pack and wrote her address and phone number on it. 'If you ever need a feed or a bed in Surry Hills …'

Trewie scratched the dog behind the ears while she struggled to get the car to start.

'And get that thing looked at. Bloke in the Shell servo, remember. On your left when you get into town, north side of the square.'

Lou nodded and revved the engine to keep it running while

Trewie told her how to get back to the highway. She noticed a hand-painted sign hanging from the roof.

'Trostlos,' she read out. 'Was that his name, the bloke who built this house?'

'Nah, that's what he called this joint.'

'What's it mean?'

'Dunno. I used to ask him. Gave me a different answer every time.'

'What answers?'

'Desolation city,' he'd say. 'It means desolation city. That was when he was cheerful. Sometimes when he was being philosophical he'd say it meant "devoid of consolation" and then he'd swing his big arms around and exclaim that not a single one of the bloody thousands of stubbies stacked up to make this house had consoled him in any way. And when I'd ask him what he needed consolation for, he'd stare at me as though I was an idiot and say "for this fucking miserable dismal cheerless bleak excuse for life" or words to that effect. I'd usually change the subject then, or go to the pub. When he got desolate it was contagious.'

Cars

Lou had no trouble finding the Shell service station in Collooney. It was opposite the memorial square in the centre of town. In the square several Aborigines congregated around a fire in a 44-gallon drum. Others lounged on the steps of the war memorial. An elderly couple and a young woman sat upright, blankets on their knees, on camping chairs near the fire. On the west side of the square Lou recognised the pub from the tv news. The police station, court house and post office were on the far side of the square and a line of coolibahs on the river formed the eastern boundary. Welcome to Collooney, Lou said to herself as she shoved the car door open with her shoulder.

The mechanic was filling the tank of an old beige Holden Kingswood. Lou waited at the workshop door, watching the woman in the driver's seat. Her elbow was resting on the open window frame of the car door, her hand holding a cigarette high. Every now and then she took a drag of the cigarette and blew a funnel of smoke skyward. Her left arm snaked along the top of the bench seat, and occasionally swung at the kids in the back, who would squeal and duck when they saw it coming. Johnny Farnham's 'You're the Voice' with its strident bagpipes and marching drums, 'We look at each other, down the barrel of a gun' was blaring out of the workshop radio. Lou smiled at the recollection of Noel's proclamations that she would look at Johnny Farnham down the barrel of a gun if she had to listen to that song one more time.

When petrol spurted from the car tank, the mechanic removed the pump handle and hung it on the bowser. After he put the cap

back on the petrol tank, he picked up a watering can and rinsed the fuel off the car, a touch that seemed excessive given that the car was pock-marked with rust-tinged dings. Then he picked up another bucket and began gracefully washing the windscreen with long smooth strokes, wiping down the squeegee between each stroke against the back of his overalls. When he was finished he leaned against the car and chatted with the woman, tossing his head from time to time. Lou couldn't decide whether he was trying to keep the long fringe of his lustrous blond hair out of his eyes or if he was showing it off to the woman. Eventually she handed over a couple of notes and the mechanic sauntered over to the small office to get change. He nodded to Lou as he passed by.

'With ya in a minute, sweetheart.'

The woman started her car with a roar, took the change from the mechanic, wound up her window. Lou watched her drive off into the grey murk of the day.

'What can I do for ya, gorgeous?'

The mechanic had taken Lou by surprise. He was so close she could smell the grease on his overalls. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and shook one out, and tapped the end against his hand before he lit it.

'I've got a VW that's making a bad noise,' she said.

'That'd be right,' replied the mechanic.

Lou squinted at him. She had no idea what he meant or how to reply, so she just smiled and waited. He smiled lopsidedly back at her, as if he had one eye on her face and the other on her chest. His teeth were nicotine yellow except for one front tooth that was white as porcelain.

'That's how they make em,' he continued, his smile broadening into a grin. 'With a signature bad noise. So ya know when one's comin. Anatomy of a Beetle: air-cooled engine in the back, boot in the front, uncomfortable to sit in, gutless to drive, ugly to look at,

bad noise,' he said, counting the features on his fingers as though he'd learned them off by heart at trade school. 'Or did we already get the bad noise? That's the offender there with the nice two-tone feature, ain't it?' he asked, nodding his head towards her car.

Lou shook her head. It took originality to like a VW Beetle her ex always said, and most mechanics were too thick to appreciate them.

'No, actually. I don't think Volkswagen do two-tone,' she said. 'Two-tone's more of a Holden thing, isn't it?'

'That dark blue one with the light blue door?' He pointed at her car.

'Well, yeah, that's it,' Lou laughed. 'Had to get a new door. Couldn't get the same colour at the wrecker, but it's perfect in every other way… Except the engine's got a …' She didn't want to go through the bad noise routine again. 'Starter motor's stuffed and I think the timing's out. Could you have a look at it for me?'

'And what would a cute city slicker like yourself know about timing?' the mechanic asked.

'What makes you think I'm from the city?' Lou challenged.

The mechanic examined Lou, looking at her slowly and deliberately, starting with her dark messy hair, the dangly earrings, the tight black sweater and leather mini, the knee-length boots. He looked back up, pausing at her chest before locking onto her strange eyes, shades of blues and greens, each different from the other.

'Pretty bird can't drive into a borin town, not even in a poor excuse for a vehicle like that, and not expect people to jump to conclusions. Anything for a bit of spice in a place like this. Alleviates the boredom.'

The mechanic pulled the greasy cloth from his back pocket and wiped his hands on it. He flicked his fringe out of his eyes, clearly

enjoying the opportunity to flirt with someone new. Lou wondered if the purpose of wiping his hands was to make them cleaner or dirtier and whether or not she should be offended by being treated as a sex object. The mechanic was her first contact in Collooney. From this vantage point he would have seen everything. If he was prepared to chat she might get a lot of information from him. She decided flirting back was the best way to proceed. Investigative journalists had to be able to draw on a variety of techniques to gain information, she told herself.

'I heard there was a riot here just the other day. That must have alleviated the boredom!' Lou said cheerfully.

The mechanic stopped smiling and he took a step back. 'Oh, no,' he replied quickly, coldly. 'No way. You're not gunna con me into talking about that. Dreadful business. Bloody awful.' Shaking his head, a sorry look on his face. 'No comment. Specially not to outsiders coming in to stir up trouble.'

'Hey, wait a minute,' Lou was taken aback by his quick negative response, then charged on. 'Do I look like a troublemaker?' she flung her arms out wide as if giving herself up for inspection again.

It didn't work. The mechanic had clammed up.

'Get whatever you need out of the car and leave the keys here,' he said, the bantering tone gone with the smile. 'I'll take a look at it when I'm done with this one.' He walked over to the Falcon panel van in the workshop and put his head under the open bonnet.

Lou walked out to the car, yanked open the driver's door, grabbed her bags and duffle coat and slammed the car door.

When she got back to the workshop the mechanic was busy talking to another man. They were leaning against the front of the Falcon, deep in conversation. They were about the same age and height, and identically dressed in overalls with checked flannelette shirts rolled up to the elbows despite the cold. Lou leaned against the door, waiting for them to finish. The mechanic was laughing as

he spoke, shaking his head.

'Can you believe it? Jesus, Coil, what a balls-up! First Herb goes down Buckley's track to go fishing, you know that good spot down there? Gets a puncture. Amazingly he's got a spare with air in it, but no jack.'

'Bloody idiot,' the man called Coil replied, shaking his head. 'Bloody typical Herb. He's got a one-track mind hasn't he? Thinks of nothin but fish. So what's he do?'

'He's got his sister's youngest with him, so he sends the kid back to the mission to get some help. Lucky for him the kid can run. Have you seen him? Jeez, he's fast. Gunna make a great rover in their team when he gets a bit older. We're going have trouble catching them then.'

'Yeah, Annie's kid,' Coil nodded. 'Saw him in the school sports before Easter. Something to see, ain't he, Monk? Streaked out ahead of everyone like it was no effort at all. Not even wearin shoes! And lookin over his shoulder all the time,' the man turned his head repeatedly, 'to see what was taking everyone else so long. Slowed down before he even got to the finish line.'

'Yeah, little bugger, and raising his arms in the air like, hey, will ya look at me!' The men laughed, both waving their hands in the air victoriously.

Monk's head and shoulders disappeared into the engine cavity. Coil tucked the tight curls of his shoulder length hair behind his ears and he leaned in beside Monk, his body bent at right angles, with a folding wooden ruler sticking up like a tail from the back pocket of his overalls. Lou looked around the workshop. The walls were decorated with calendars and poster advertisements for mag wheels and engine oil, featuring women in bikinis with enormous breasts, tiny waists, buoyant bums and what Noel called 'fuck-me shoes'. Lou wondered if the choice of artwork explained the dearth of women mechanics. Back before she broke up with her ex, Lou

used to help him fix up VWs to sell. He introduced her to the magical *How to Keep your Volkswagen Alive* book for *Compleat Idiots* from which she'd learnt enough to know that it wasn't the difficulty of fixing cars that kept women out of the mechanics trade.

Monk emerged from under the bonnet with a cable in his hand, waving it as if it was a treasure, and resumed his story.

'Anyway, the kid takes off up the road and runs into the Legal Service bloke on the road. He stops to ask the kid what he's doin out of school, and the kid tells him he's looking after his Uncle Herb and they're broken down. So he takes the kid to the school and leaves him there.'

'Poor kid! Bet he was sorry he didn't run the other way. Tough on em, that Legal Service bloke. Robbo, aint it? Drives that orange Monaro with the V8?'

'Yeah, yeah, that's him, Robbo. Tough. In a good way but. Anyway, then Robbo goes off down Buckley's track to help Herb. And he runs out of petrol! Robbo's got a jack, so they change the tyre, you know, one thing at a time, yakkin away, takin it easy. Then Robbo and Herb try driving around the Monaro to get into town to get some fuel, but they're on a real narrow bit of the track and they can't get past the bloody Monaro.'

Coil was laughing, holding his sides.

'Jeez, they might of thought of that first, silly buggers! So then what do they do? Bet they're sorry Robbo took the runner in to school! Don't see either of those blokes joggin up Buckley's track.'

Monk dived back under the hood. Lou could hear a low rumble. He was still talking but she couldn't make out a word. Neither could Coil, who demanded that Monk leave the bloody car alone and finish the story. Monk surfaced, wiping his forehead, wrench in hand.

'Herb and Robbo don't want to rush into anything. They're giving the matter their long and thorough consideration. Then a

solution appears. Old Phil loomin up the track from the river. And guess what?'

'On no! Don't tell me he gets a puncture!'

'Course! Something sharp all over the track there. Bit weird if you ask me. Hardly anyone uses that track except for Herb and Phil for fishin.'

'Go on, tell me,' Coil was laughing, tossing his curls out of his eyes. 'Phil's got no spare?'

'Spare with no air. None of em with a pump. Three of em stuck on the track, the only car that'll actually go stuck right in the middle. And three of them to have a proper discussion about the problem so they're sitting there a long long time. Don't want to tear down Buckley's fence, understandably. It's a wonder they didn't decide to leave their cars there and walk back to the river. Do a spot of fishin, clear the mind.'

'Oh jeez, Monk! What a beauty. So are they still there?'

'Still there?' Monk laughed. 'Next thing that happens is they see the boys in blue coming down the track. Picture it, will ya. There's the three of em sittin havin a yak on the bonnet of Herb's car, track completely blocked. Phil looks guilty cos he's got a boot full of yellow belly and no licence. Herb looks guilty cos he's got a boot full of fishing gear and no licence.'

'What's coppers doin on Buckley's track? It don't go nowhere but the river. Coppers are goin fishin now?'

'Who knows?' replied Monk. 'It's that new copper, trying to make his presence felt.'

'Over the top ain't he? Bastard picked up Sheryl for point-oh-five the other night on her way home from work. I mean, she works in the bloody bar at the Bowling Club. Of course she's gunna be over point-oh-five on the way home! Occupational bloody hazard. Bastard! She did the night's pay *and* lost points off her licence. He's

gunna have to watch out if he doesn't lay off.'

'Yeah, he ain't making imself popular, that's for sure,' Monk agreed. 'Anyway, he gets out of his car, gun in holster, hand on gun, so the story goes, and accuses them of suspicious behaviour. Says he's got other evidence and he's gunna charge the three of them with conspiracy.'

'Oh, Jesus. Conspiracy to what, catch fish? Robbo must have given him a run for his money. He's pretty smart, that bloke.' Coil tapped his forehead with his forefinger. 'What'd he do?'

'Copper come out of it looking like a bit of an idiot, as usual. Herb said Robbo give im chapter and verse on conspiracy, and then started on him about police harassment. After a while the copper's radio comes on and he jumps in the car and says he has an important call. Gives him an excuse to get away. Tells them to stay there until further notice.'

'Hah! Idiot tells them not to go anywhere when they can't move?' Coil laughed.

'Yeah! Anyway, the copper called in here and told me I could pick up a bit of business if I went down the track with a jerry can of petrol and a pump, so I did. Ya should have heard em tellin me the story. Much funnier than I can tell it. Herb goin after Robbo for takin his runner to school. Robbo blamin Herb for makin em a captive audience for Old Phil and his stories about the big ones that got away. Phil describin Robbo telling that new copper what do with his bloody conspiracy charges. Bunch of clowns. Made my week, I tell ya.'

Suddenly Monk became aware of Lou leaning against the workshop door. 'Just chuck your keys on the bench there,' he pointed, wiping his hands on his greasy cloth. 'Shouldn't take too long, and you can be on your way.' Monk turned his back and went on talking with Coil.

Roxy

Lou stood at the edge of the service station looking at the small group of Aborigines huddled near the war memorial. Her job was to walk up to those people and ask them for their side of the story about the riot, but she had no idea how to do it. On the far side of the square Lou could see a young woman sitting on the footpath, her back against the stone wall of the austere court house. She looked relaxed and approachable. Lou took a deep breath, hitched her bags over her shoulder and set off along the edge of the park towards the young woman, doing her best to look as though she knew what she was doing. The woman sat with one long leg stretched out in front of her and the other bent at the knee, which she used for a drum, to tap out a rhythm. She seemed to be singing. Wearing a black parka over a green check shirt with pearl studs, blue jeans and Cuban-heeled riding boots, she was a red-haired, freckled, female version of Dwayne. She smiled as Lou approached.

'Hi,' Lou said awkwardly. 'Mind if I sit with you for a bit?'

'Go for it,' replied the young woman, patting the footpath beside her. 'Be my guest.'

Lou turned her back against the stone wall and slunk down to the footpath, her posture echoing that of the young woman beside her.

'I'm Lou,' she said, smiling and holding out her hand, 'from the city.'

Lou hoped the grownupness of shaking hands would make up

for her witless 'from the city' introduction.

'Really?' said the other woman, sitting up, taking Lou's hand and responding with a good firm handshake. 'I'd have thought with a look like that you were from the local CWA,' she cracked, with laughter in her eyes. 'I'm Roxy. Also from the Big Smoke. Well, Roxy's me stage name anyway.'

'Stage name, huh? What do you do?'

'Country and western. Ha! Both types!' Roxy laughed and her deep red hair swung around her face. 'Done some gigs at little late night bars in the Cross, even did a couple of numbers at Tamworth last year. Looking for the big break.'

'Wow, King's Cross,' Lou said. She'd been there with Bern, seen singers in little late night bars. It was a tough gig. Bern would deride them as prostitutes with infectious diseases, trying to pick up some income by singing half-naked on the stage. Leering drunks would yell 'get ya gear off' or, worse, talk loudly while they sang. You had to be pretty tough to sing in a place like that, Lou thought. She took her cigarettes out of her bag and shook them towards Roxy, who smiled and nodded her thanks. Roxy pulled a lighter from her shirt pocket, lit her own cigarette, then lit Lou's.

'A good botter always brings the lighter,' Roxy grinned. 'I'm broke. Desperate for a smoke.' She took a long drag and tipped her head back then blew smoke rings into the cold grey sky. 'You're a life-saver.'

Roxy waved to a very dark-skinned middle-aged woman passing by. The woman, walking as though her dress shoes pinched her feet, said 'Good morning Raelene' and went up the stairs of the court house.

'So, what are you doing out here in the bush then?' Lou asked.

'Court day,' Roxy replied. 'Everyone comes to town on court day. It's better than Christmas. Not so many fights.'

Lou was surprised. She'd assumed the people in the park were there because of Lawrence Jones. She looked around and realised that people were coming and going from the court house, most looking like they were dressed in their best.

'I thought everyone'd be here because of, you know, what happened with…' Lou said. She sat forward and looked Roxy in the eye, hoping that she wouldn't have to find the words that were eluding her.

'Larry?' Roxy shrugged. 'Yeah, but people were already in town for court. And then things got out a hand cos they flew in the riot squad. Sparks on tinder. Then the tv's here and it's on the radio and more blackfellas head to town to see what's going on. Never been so much excitement in borin' old Collooney.'

'People upset about Lawrence?' Lou asked, thrown by Roxy's nonchalance.

'Lawrence! Poor bastard only got called that when he was in trouble,' Roxy replied, but her attention was on a car that had pulled up nearby. A couple of women got out and the car drove away. The older woman's thin, lined face gave a sorry forecast of how the pretty younger woman would look in twenty years. The daughter's long hippy skirt and sloppy mohair sweater suggested that she didn't want to follow her mother into the land of the tweed skirt and twin set too quickly. Roxy was smiling at the daughter, and gave her a cool little wave – two fingers raised in a break from tapping out a tune. The young woman pretended not to see Roxy and walked on by. Roxy's face darkened.

'Bitch,' she said. 'We went to school together. Same grade. She was all over me last month at a gig in the Cross, hanging round the stage, proud to be me mate. Up here she's just another Gubba. Looks right through me, like I'm a ghost.'

Lou wondered if she was just another Gubba too. She didn't know what to say.

'Still,' Roxy brightened, 'you get your good Gubbas and your bad, as me old man used to say. You must be one of the good ones.' She looked intently at Lou. 'You really want to know what happened to Larry?'

Lou explained that she had come to Collooney to find out why he'd died, and why there'd been a riot. She said she was from the newspaper, but was honest about her lowly status, saying only that there'd been a bit of a mix-up and the main journalist hadn't been able to make it. It sounded too stupid to be made up.

'Alright. We're sitting here, we're from the Smoke, we're looking for a break, and we want to know what happened to Larry in that lock-up. I guess that's enough of something in common,' Roxy said, staring into the sky.

Lou waited.

'Long story,' Roxy said, stubbing her cigarette out on the footpath and flicking the butt into the drain.

'I'm not going anywhere,' Lou said, wiggling her bum, which was developing pins and needles from sitting on the hard footpath. Surely no one could take as long to tell a story as Trewie. She smiled encouragingly at Roxy and put the cigarette pack on the ground between them. 'Just help yourself, anytime.'

'I knew Larry since we was little,' Roxy began. 'And it's bloody horrible to say this, but it was like he had it coming. Specially since he had that fight with that copper over Connie. It was gunna end up bad for him one way or another. The cop was always going to get the last word. That's what cops do. Make sure everyone remembers who's boss.'

'What do you mean?' Lou asked. 'What fight?' There'd been nothing on tv to suggest that Larry and the cops actually knew each other, let alone had a fight.

'It was all because the dago cop had the hots for Larry's missus.'

Lou winced. She hated that word. Roxy didn't seem to notice.

'He's only been in town a couple of months. Transferred in from down south to be the new boss. When he arrived, he went round introducin himself to everyone. Community Relations, they call it. He was supposed to bring a human touch to policin in Collooney.' Roxy laughed and leant forward. She raised her arm and shielded her eyes with one hand, searching around the street and across to the park. 'Can't see him around to show ya. Anyway, he introduces himself to the Murris as well as the Gubbas, and to the young chicks and the old ladies as well as the blokes. He's Mister Multiculturalism. Funny thing happens though. For the first time in me life, the Collooney Gubbas and Murris agree on somethin. They all hate the copper cos he's a new Australian.'

Lou realised that Roxy must have noticed. 'New Australian' was supposed to be the polite way to describe postwar immigrants. Lou hated that nearly as much as dago, especially when the people who used it had only been Australians for a couple of generations themselves. Roxy was flying on with her monologue. She told stories without the little prompts most people needed to be sure the audience was still listening. Must be all that practice in those late night bars. If you paid attention to the audience you'd lose all nerve.

'No one wants to give the new cop the time of day except Larry's missus. Connie's so sick of putting up with Larry, she'd fall for an orang-utan if one walked into town and smiled at her. That's Con over there, next to the fire, red sweater.'

In a canvas chair near the fire a young woman sat curled tight, knees hugged to her chin, arms wrapped around them, head resting on her knees. An old lady sat upright next to her and beside her sat an old man. They reminded Lou of the formal row of immediate family at an Italian funeral, waiting for people to pay their respects. Lou had been watching Aborigines making their way across the square to shake hands with the older couple and the young woman

on their way to the court house.

'We don't get on, me and Con,' Roxy kept on. 'I used to hang around with Larry when I was a kid and she was a bit jealous of that, a bit insecure. Larry was a hunk, you know, a real charmer, when he was sober. Everyone liked him, even the schoolteachers and the old dears. Con couldn't go anywhere without someone flirting with Larry.'

A thin middle-aged woman with a line of bright grey roots in her brown hair clicked along the street in silver kitten-heeled slingbacks. She gave Roxy and Lou a wide berth, muttering loudly that dirt always finds its place. Roxy behaved as though she didn't see or hear her, and continued with her story.

'Anyway, Larry and Connie had a kid. He doted on that kid. It was a bit of a love-hate thing with him and Con. They were never gunna settle down. And Connie reckoned Larry used to hit her – that's why they had him in the lock-up. I never knew if he did or not. They were like,' she paused and hummed a tune. 'You know that new Springsteen song, "Tunnel of Love"?' Lou nodded. Roxy was singing, tapping the beat against her knee.

Man meets woman and they fall in love

But the house is haunted and the ride gets rough ...

'I reckon Con'd just dob Larry in when he got to be too much of a pig.' Roxy waved to a couple of young Aboriginal men going up the steps of the court. 'Too much booze under his belt, y'know. And with that new cop, all she had to do was smile and he'd do what she wanted. Not that Con would have wanted this; don't get me wrong. I'm not saying for a minute that Connie would have wanted Larry dead.'

Lou pulled her legs up tight to try to ease the tingling in her bum. She didn't want to stand up in case it interrupted Roxy's flow. She pulled a smoke from the pack and gave one to Roxy, who lit both. They sat a while, Roxy's smoke rings dissolving into the grey

sky, watching the group in the middle of the square.

A couple of young men were returning from the riverbank with arms full of branches hung with dried leaves. They dropped them near the fire in the 44-gallon drum, and turned back towards the river, hands in pockets, heads bent against the cold breeze. A young woman held a thin leafy branch in the fire until it lit, then gave it to a child who waved the flaming branch around as if it was a sparkler. Two older men picked up a long branch from the stack, one holding it at each end, and balanced it over the fire. Once they had it settled they moved into more comfortable positions, half leaning on each end of the branch, talking to whoever was nearest, waiting for the wood to burn through.

Roxy began singing quietly, in a deep rich voice.

Someone's crying, Lord, Kumbaya,

Someone's crying Lord…

On the next verse, 'someone's dying', Lou joined in.

'You know it too?' Roxy asked. 'They made us sing it in the Home. Used to get the cuts if we were out of tune.' She held her hand out, palm upwards, as if ready for the strap.

Lou had to sing it at primary school. She told Roxy about Mr O'Brien's classroom, where he made the whole class sing after lunch on days so hot the air sizzled off the blackboard. She described the teacher with his belly testing his shirt buttons and dark rings of sweat under his arms, hitting his tuning fork on the desk to get a note, then using it to conduct.

Roxy wasn't listening. Her eyes were following the white divvy van that went past them on the street and pulled up at the police station. Roxy was elbowing Lou in the arm. A cop got out of each side of the car, doors slamming behind them.

'That's him, driver's side,' Roxy said, motioning her head towards the car, and holding her hand over her eyes as if to shade the sun. The driver of the car was walking into the station beside

the other cop, whose shoulder he barely reached. Being short was always a problem for a bloke, Lou thought, but he was a hunk – good looking with black hair and full red lips, well-proportioned and muscular. He walked like he was in command of himself. Lou could understand the attraction.

'They didn't like im coming in as boss, the other coppers, you could tell. They'd hang back and let im do the dirty work. It was like they were setting im up all the time. Not that I've got any sympathy for any of the bastards.'

'What do you mean, they set him up?' Lou asked, pulling her legs up underneath her and turning sideways to look at Roxy. She couldn't understand how the other woman could just sit there looking comfortable for so long without moving. Roxy pulled her parka tight around her chest. Her eyes glazed as if she was concentrating on something in the distance, and then she began to speak.

'Well, there was stuff like this,' she turned sideways to look directly at Lou. 'A few weeks ago I was visiting my aunty, over in the new mission. Larry was there at Con's sister's place, looking for Con. A bit drunk, making a bit of racket, yellin that he was gunna find her no matter what and he needed to see the little bloke, you know, his kid. Someone must have called the cops because the new cop and Jackson, who's been here for yonks, showed up. And they knock on the front door and ask for Larry and he stands at the window and turns his arse to the coppers and does a brown eye at em.' Roxy laughed and shook her head. 'Then he takes off out a side window and over the neighbour's fence. Always pretty quick.' Roxy paused, serious again. 'Larry was a genius playing football. Pity he never got into the big time; it mighta saved him.'

A middle-aged couple approached, walking slowly, the man with a limp and the woman with swollen ankles and lace-up shoes with no stockings. They stopped in front of Lou and Roxy. They looked like they wanted to speak with her, but said nothing. Roxy

scrambled to her feet and gave each of them a long hug, and then slid back down the wall and resumed her one-knee-up position on the footpath. The couple crossed the street to the square.

'Larry's aunty and uncle. Come in from Buckley's. To pay respects to the old folks. They're all taking it pretty hard.'

Roxy shook a cigarette from the pack on the ground and lit it, exhaling the smoke in a series of perfect rings. Lou took a smoke for herself, and Roxy passed her the lighter. Roxy seemed far away. Lou was worried that she wouldn't pick up the thread of the story. She searched for a way to lighten the atmosphere and get Roxy back into her story.

'Larry mooned them? Really? Bit cheeky, isn't it?'

'He always was cheeky,' Roxy laughed. 'And always was quick. They used to try to pick him up for juvenile, you know, for pinching lollies and shit like that. He'd always run away when they'd try to catch im. He'd hide out at someone's place or down the river camp for few hours and they'd forget about it. They were the days, eh?'

Roxy was really pretty when she smiled, Lou thought. If she used that smile on stage, it would have made her very appealing. Lou made a mental note to ask Roxy about her next gig when she finished her story.

'Anyway, Larry moons them and then he jumps over the side fence and disappears into their back yard. The coppers are giving chase and they're gettin humiliated again. People were yellin out "Go Larry, see if they can catch ya this time", stuff like that. Everyone's comin out of their houses. Larry's jumpin over back fences and swingin on washing lines and doublin back, tauntin the cops all the time. And the cops are splittin up, runnin after him, never seen coppers move so fast. They must have been in training. The kids were laughin at them and calling em names and even the oldies were trying not to giggle.'

Roxy was up on her haunches, playing out the story in an

animated way, swinging her body around, making out she was looking here, there, following a chase. She was laughing at the memory, sparking mirth in Lou. And then Roxy's face went dark and she stopped laughing and slid back down the wall and sat with her legs pulled up tight, a protective posture.

'Cops got him in the end,' she said quietly. 'Dragged him back along the street real bad, everyone saw it. He was stumblin along at first – they had him with handcuffs behind his back and they were pullin him along each holdin onto one arm and he had blood comin from a cut under his eye and a dribble of blood comin out his mouth. But it wasn't all one way. He'd had a go at the coppers too. Mister Multiculturalism had a torn shirt and a cut on his face and he was livid and yelling out "what are you looking at?" and tellin people to get back in their houses or he'd take them in for aidin and abettin. But everyone's yellin out to stop treatin Larry like a dog and to leave him alone and to let him walk like a man. Jesus, I've seen a lot of rough stuff, but this was pretty bad. The new copper was making it clear that there was no more mister nice guy. They chucked im in the back of the divvy van like he was a bag of briquettes.'

The roar of a prime mover hauling a semi-trailer of live sheep drowned out Roxy's voice. Lou stared at the sheep, recalling the bright eerie sheeps' eyes on the truck that had terrified her the night before on the highway. The depth of fear she'd felt still made her shudder, yet it was a non-event compared to what Roxy was describing. The smell of sheep shit hung in the air after the truck had rumbled across the bridge.

'Then, funny thing,' Roxy went on, 'Bob the bastard clerk let Larry out on bail again the next day, on the condition he stay sober and out of town, and the cops drive him to the bus stop and buy him a ticket to Googoonah. Or so I heard. It was weird, cos the clerk had it in for Larry too – everyone was surprised he didn't just send him to the jail – he'd had a go at the cops after all, which is

really crossing the line. The clerk's a real pig, the biggest arsehole in town, and not even got a uniform. Yet he let Larry go. It was like he wanted to have a shot at the new copper as well.'

Roxy paused, and scanned the park and street again, hand above her eyebrows, hunting for someone.

'Dunno where the bloody Legal Service bloke is,' Roxy turned and looked at Lou, her eyebrows raised and shoulders shrugging. 'I'm sposed to be on in a few minutes.'

'Larry had to stay out of town?' Lou asked. 'They can send you away from your own town?'

'They do it all the time,' Roxy said, looking at Lou as though she didn't know anything. 'Anyway, he was only in Googoonah for a day before the cops there picked him up and chucked him in jail for breach of bail – not reporting twice daily or something like that. They kept im in the lock-up there for a month, six weeks. When they let him go, Larry just came straight back here. Where he was in breach of bail again – red rag to a bull, or a new copper with something to prove. Once he was back in town, somethin bad was gunna happen.'

Roxy looked away from Lou to the court house, waved and called out.

'Hey, Robbo, where ya been?'

A young dark-haired man looking uncomfortable in jacket and tie was standing on the steps smiling at Roxy.

'Hey, Raelene. Get that lazy butt over here. You're on next,' he called out, and turned back into the shadowy interior of the building.

'See ya,' Roxy said, pulling herself up from the footpath and wiping dirt and pebbles from her bum. She walked towards the court house, pulling her hair back into a ponytail and wrapping an elastic band around it. Lou smiled at this concession to getting

dressed up to face the court, and began to drag herself up, feeling much less graceful than Roxy had looked. She was suddenly conscious of being alone on the street and didn't know what to do next. Despite it having been so easy to talk with Roxy, she still didn't feel confident enough to approach anyone in that crowd in the square. Roxy had made it clear that was there was a lot more to Larry's story than Lou had heard on tv. And she had nothing yet on Birdie. Or Trewie's story about there being even more Aboriginal deaths in custody. So much to find out. Lou picked up her bags headed to the pub. She'd need some accommodation if she was going to stay here and investigate.

Grand

The Grand Hotel looked anything but. In place of several panes in the bar windows grimy plywood broke up the iridescent orange signage that splashed across the windows so that Counter Lunch now read unt unch. Boards buckled on the wooden balcony that perched precariously over the street on rusty cast iron poles. On the tv news, hotel patrons had crowded onto the balcony during the riot, squashed against the balustrade. Lou remembered seeing someone with a gun, leaning his shoulder into the pole as he aimed. Did he aim at someone in the crowd, she wondered, did he even shoot? Things to find out. The investigation needed organisation. Lou imagined herself on the balcony, writing sharp observations and lofty thoughts in the notebook Trewie had given her. As Lou got closer she saw, to her delight, that the bar had saloon doors. She thought that only happened in Westerns. It saved her the agonising bar or Ladies Lounge choice: she wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to walk through saloon doors. In any case, Lou told herself, she was an investigative journalist on an important story. She had to be brave enough to go into a bar. Lou pulled her shoulders back and held her head high, then patted her hips, wishing for guns in holsters. She took a deep breath, then pushed each door aside with a flourish and marched in. Behind her the doors creaked back and forth on ever shorter trajectories. She resisted, with difficulty, turning around and walking through them again just for fun.

Bars were just like pirate ships, according to Noel: any females foolhardy enough to venture in among the crazies that inhabited

them had to be prepared to battle long slow looks and low wolf whistles. It was only half past ten but a few men were already drinking. Lou looked around the bar sharply and caught the wolf-whistlers in action. They were barely her age; she glared at them and they turned away in embarrassment. An older man stirred them: 'Eh, boys! Watch out for the lady. Where's yer manners?' Lou smiled at the old man in gratitude, and in the hope of securing an ally with authority. She might be in this pub, in this town, for a while.

The barman looked like he'd been working in the pub since it was built. His face was deeply wrinkled and his neck scraggy as an old bull's. His watery eyes smiled in greeting as he spoke. 'Mornin, love. Ladies Lounge is through that way.' Lou knew. She had walked past the main entrance and seen the Lounge with its frosted glass door etched with a slim-waisted lady wearing a chic little hat, clutch bag in one hand and a cigarette in a long holder in the other. She refrained from telling him that she'd chosen the bar on purpose, for the double advantage of challenging the status quo on behalf of womankind and having a shot at the saloon doors.

'Got any rooms?' Lou said instead.

'Why?' the barman asked, suddenly suspicious, the smile chased from his eyes by distrust.

'Seems like a nice town,' Lou replied, smiling, hoping it was the right answer in what seemed to be a pass/fail test. She had the distinct impression that introducing herself as a journalist wasn't going to bring out the friendly side of this barman.

'I'm on a slow trip north,' Lou went on, trying to sound breezy. 'Need a breather from the driving. And your balcony looks like the perfect place.' Going north was a national trope for a trip taken to escape, from work, or trouble, or lost love, or just plain boredom. Lou took a gamble that the barman would assume she was running away from a personal tragedy and not press her for details. She was

right.

'The town's not showin its best face lately, but you're right, it is a nice town, or can be,' he conceded. 'I've only got a little single room off the balcony upstairs. Might get noisy in the night.'

'Sounds perfect. I'm from the Big Smoke. Used to noise. You know what it's like down there.' Lou hoped to elicit sympathy from the barman with this disclosure. Lots of country people couldn't imagine how city life could be endured. Lou was relieved to see the barman's watery eyes crinkle back into a smile.

'Well then, it'll be nice to have ya. We've had some real smug bastards up here lately. Could do with a lady looking for some peace and quiet. I'll get ya a key before the counter lunch rush.'

'Thanks mate,' Lou grinned at the barman, and resisted shaking his hand.

Lou followed the barman's directions to the stairs. The banisters were grimy and worn, the carpet runner threadbare and the sides of the steps needed a coat of paint. At the top there was a dark narrow hallway with doors either side to the rooms. The bathroom was the first door on the right. Lou found her room at the end on the left.

The room had a single bed with a lumpy mattress and a thin lemon candlewick bedspread. The pillow smelt of tobacco and Brylcreem. Under the window there was a small table with a rickety wicker chair that would do for writing. Lou threw her bag on the bed, sending up a puff of dust, then tried to open the balcony door. She turned the handle, but it wouldn't budge until she leaned her shoulder into it and shoved. She grabbed her notebook and pen from her handbag and pulled the wicker chair out onto the balcony. Peering through the railing, she began to sketch the layout of the town.

At the centre of the town lay the square, and at its centre stood the war memorial, a simple obelisk surrounded by four layers of steps. Lou drew stick figures for the Aborigines sitting on the steps

and standing near the fire, and small boxes for the elderly couple on camping chairs. Beyond them, the east side of the square was marked by the fringe of coolibahs that lined the river. The river was also the edge of the town. Lou added a tentative north arrow to her diagram, and then drew the river's course as a curve out of town to the north-west and straight line due south, and added swirls to indicate the trees.

North of the square, along from the Shell service station, the Collooney Bowling Club backed onto the river. Its vibrant carpet-smooth green was a stark contrast to the dusty khaki of the trees and the unkempt grass in the square. The club house was at the back, its windows covered with lacy curtains. Beside it there was a substantial car park, with a large sign indicating that it was For Members Only. Lou drew that sign on her plan. The few houses between the car park and the service station had tall well-trimmed hedges instead of fences, providing privacy from the street, and from the settlement beyond the river. On Lou's plan it appeared as an abstract collection of broken lines.

A two-lane steel bridge crossed the river and led into the street that bounded the south side of the square. It was the only connection between the town and the settlement on the other side of the river. The cement-board shacks with unpainted corrugated iron roofs surrounded by doorless derelict vehicles fitted Trewie's description of the mission.

On the town side, next to the bridge, a once-grand colonial house with deep verandahs had substantial gardens that ran down to the river. On the front verandah Lou could make out an old woman sitting in a wicker chair, seemingly staring into the square. She drew her carefully, wondering who she was. Next the dingy police station grounds began, with cracked bitumen, thistles and a couple of straggling wattles. The station itself was a low 70s redbrick building connected to an outbuilding by gravel pathways. Lou wondered if that was where Larry Jones had died. She drew a

thick question mark over the spot.

Next to the police station stood the stone court house where Lou had sat with Roxy, and next to that a solicitors' office. All the justice business was in one area, Lou noted, a one-stop shop. Interested parties could sit and watch the Aborigines in the square without even having to leave their desks. The last building, on the corner, was the post office, a well-kept cream weatherboard building with a red corrugated iron roof and green painted trim. The little garden out the front was jagged with pruned roses. Lou was delighted that the weathervane on its roof confirmed her guess at north, and not surprised that the cold wind was south-westerly. Lou drew the red phone box in front of the post office and made a mental note to make sure she had enough coins so she could phone Bern. Lou admired her sketch, snapped the notebook shut, stood up and flicked her cigarette butt over the balcony railing. Work done. Time for the wash Trewie said she needed.

Lou picked up the threadbare towel and her toilet bag, and her notebook and pen in case she had any bright ideas, and wandered down the hall to the bathroom. It was big and airy with a huge cast-iron bath complete with lion's feet, a basin, a painted wooden chair, cracked pink and aqua lino on the floor. A shaft of wintery sun came in through the opaque windows. When she turned the hot tap red-brown water mixed with creepy green slime dribbled out. The pipes gurgled and rattled, and spurts of clear water shot into the bath. The same slimy concoction came out the cold water tap too. Eventually the water ran clear. Lou pushed the slime and grits down the plughole with her hands, turned the cold tap low and put in the plug. It would be a long wait for the bath.

Lou wandered around the bathroom, which was bigger than her entire room in the share house. Avoiding contact with the black mould that lined the window frames she pushed open the tall windows. At the back of the hotel she could see a beer garden of sorts, lacking the desirable salubrity of the beer gardens in the inner

city, with their potted palms and umbrellas and director's chairs. This one had wooden picnic tables with backless benches bolted to them and unmistakable white splodges of bird shit – guano decorative effect, Noel called it. The concrete was badly cracked and uneven. Weeds grew in the cracks and against the fence. A hunched old woman sat alone at one table with a half full glass of beer. She was rolling a cigarette, carefully poking the skerricks of tobacco into the paper so as not to lose any. Two young men, one in a striped football beanie and the other with dark curly hair down to his shoulders, sat at another table, talking demonstratively to one another. One patted a blue heeler that stood beside him. Lou wondered if they sat outside in the cold because of the dog. But as she gazed at them it dawned on her that all three were Aboriginal and that there hadn't been any Aborigines in the bar. Colour divide, like Trewie said. Surely that can't be legal, Lou thought, picking up her notebook and adding it to the page of Things to Find Out.

The near-full bath had clouds of steam rising from it, just how Lou liked it. Her skin would go bright red and there was a danger of fainting, but she loved immersing herself in that heat. She pulled her clothes off and dipped in one foot, toe first, slowly slowly, then her ankle. 'First one foot then the other' she recited to herself, as her father had done when he gave her a bath as a kid. She pulled her foot out to see how red it was. Not too bad. It would be bearable in a minute or two. Bern would be laughing at her by now if he was there, saying she was mad not to know it was too hot, and even crazier to willingly suffer the heat. She put the chair with her notebook and pen on it beside the bath so she could write up notes from her interviews with Trewie and Roxy. It would keep her from thinking of Bern, the bastard. Lou now suspected he had a lot less clout with the boss than he made out. Perhaps she really should go north, get over him.

Lou began the re-entry. One leg in, then the other. She stood a while, getting accustomed to the heat, then she began lowering herself into the bath, one hand on each side. Her stomach was

turning pink from the rising heat of the bath but it didn't feel too hot anymore. It was like going in the ocean in reverse. She slid down into the water until she was fully submerged, and slowly let out her breath, bubble by bubble. Then she rose in a whoosh, creating a wave that splashed over the end of the bath and across the floor. Lou giggled. Noel always complained that the floor would rot when she did that at home. Here there was no one to complain. Lou did it again.

From the bath Lou could see the sky through the window, still grimly grey with a blanket of cloud. She began to discern variations in the quietness of the town. She could hear the warble of magpies and the occasional faark of crows, the only birdsong she recognised. Every now and then a car moved in the distance. Lou was surprised by how much more intrusive individual cars were than the constant hum of city traffic. She heard a dog bark and a child cry, and the soft sound of a woman soothing the child. And then she heard a man's voice startlingly close by.

If Lou kept very still, she could make out most of what the man was saying. He must have been in the next room with the window open. His tone was deferential.

'Yes Sir, clearly plotting something Sir. Well, Sir, you know the report about the purchase of crates of firearms from the terrorist from Tassie? ... No Sir, we haven't found them, Sir. But the same intel is all around up here. One of the barmen here in the pub heard that there was talk out in the beer garden about the crates of guns. His sister heard the same thing at the hairdressers. Same story everywhere ... Yes, Sir, just hearsay. But now we've got some evidence as well, Sir. The sergeant tells me he came across a secret meeting between the Legal Service stirrer and one of the local ringleaders out on a back road. They were checking out the boots in each other's cars, like they were hiding something there, or planning to ... No, the sarge was watching from the main road, Sir ... With binoculars Sir, they carry binoculars. It's all big distances

up here. He reckons they must have been plotting something, to go so far away from town where there's no one around …'

There was silence while the man listened. Lou hoped he hadn't realised she was there.

'No Sir, yes, yes, there is more Sir. I can provide facts, Sir. What transpired next is that the Legal Service stirrer got in his car and goes into town and then out to the back road again. The sarge reckoned he definitely must have picked something up in the town. Pardon Sir? ... No, Sir, I didn't ask what he was doing just sitting out there watching, but it was lucky he was because meanwhile another one of the local ringleaders had come up the track from the other direction ... Yes, a rendezvous, Sir. Three of them, three cars, boots open, conspiring about something, Sir ... Definitely suspicious, Sir, especially when you put it together with the crates of guns. The sarge thinks it was all about that armed uprising we've been hearing about.'

Lou sat bolt upright, swishing more water out of the bath onto the floor. She hoped the man in the next room didn't hear her. Armed uprising! She had stumbled right into the middle of the story. The other journalists had left and here she was with a big story all to herself. It might get her promoted to apprentice! She gripped the sides of the bath and sat still, craning to make sure she didn't miss a word.

'I know it sounds a bit far fetched, Sir, but the sergeant knows these people ... Yes Sir, in the end he did approach them. He said they acted very suspiciously and they were very cocky. All leads to the same thing Sir ...

The man went quiet for a few minutes, then Lou could hear him wrapping up the conversation.

'Right Sir, but most of them have gone back,' he paused. 'What are they doing? Waiting for orders, Sir, just sitting about at the station as far as I know ... Right, Sir, I'll report again at five, if

nothing happens between now and then.'

Lou had heard talk about armed militant Aboriginal groups in the newspaper office. The boy cub reporters were always going on about it. Bern had scoffed at them, saying he'd been in journalism long enough to know a police beat-up when he heard one. 'They're just after funding!' He'd laugh, and add 'Boys must be running low on collecting bribes.' But Lou had noticed that he always ran the stories. One afternoon in the stationery room, she challenged him about it.

'Why run those stories if you think they're beat-ups? Doesn't that just give them credibility?'

'Oh, my lovely little Lulu!' he'd replied. She hated that. It was such a put-down: either it was so obvious that no explanation was necessary, or she was so stupid she could just never understand. She didn't ask a second time. It was much more comfortable sharing Bern's assumptions than challenging them. If Noel knew she'd call Lou a doormat.

Lou heard the door bang as the man left the telephone room, then heard another door open on the other side of the corridor, near the top of the stairs. She turned on the hot tap, lay back in the bath, and wondered where she'd heard his story before.

Before she left the bathroom Lou put her head out the window and checked the beer garden. The woman was still there, alone, nursing her drink. When she got back to the balcony the scene in the square had changed. There were more people now, milling closely about the fire in a tight group. Lou could also see two, no three pairs of cops, on the edges of the square, black-gloved hands on holsters. She'd seen cops dressed like that at demonstrations Bern let her cover after work or on the weekends. She'd write up reports and sometimes he'd use whole paragraphs in his articles. Once he'd even put her whole report in the paper, under his own name, of course. But mostly the notes went in the filing cabinet and the demonstrations wouldn't be reported at all, even when they

were big or about something that was front page news. But that won't happen this time, Lou thought, this time I've got a story. An armed uprising might even get me a byline.

Suddenly the door from the room at the other end of the balcony flew open, and a young man flew through it. He was going at such speed he nearly somersaulted over the railing. He looked up in embarrassment when he saw Lou staring at him, and pointed to the door.

'Sticky doors, aren't they?' he said nervously, and then, patting himself down, he added, 'Bloody dump, isn't it?'

Before Lou could reply, he had disappeared into his room. She recognised his voice: he was the man on the phone. When he returned to the balcony his arms were full. He laid out binoculars, a transistor radio, a notebook and a couple of pens on the table, then sat on his chair, picked up the binoculars and trained them on the crowd in the square. Lou leaned on the balustrade and followed the line of his binoculars as he did slow sweeps around the square and surrounding streets. There were about twenty people around the memorial now. The elderly couple still sat ramrod straight in their camp chairs, blankets tucked around their legs. The younger woman was curled up in her chair with her blanket up to her neck, as if struggling to keep warm. Roxy and the lawyer Robbo were sitting off to the side, on the steps of the war memorial, looking at documents.

Too late Lou began to realise that the people in the square were watching her and the man with binoculars, pointing, turning their backs. The last thing she needed was to be associated with the cops. It wouldn't do her investigation any good at all. She abruptly turned and left the balcony.

Sports

Lou sat on the lumpy narrow bed in her room and tried to figure out where to take her investigation. Approaching the group in the square seemed a worse idea than ever. The old lady in the beer garden might talk to her, especially if she bought her a drink. Lou grabbed her bag and set off to find her. She didn't want to ask the barman for directions. He probably wouldn't approve. There were no signs in the entrance hall. Apart from the dining room, there only seemed to be the Ladies Lounge. Lou ventured in. A middle-aged woman with a blue rinse and a perm, obviously thin despite being swathed in a thick navy coat, sat alone clutching a glass of something brown – probably a brandy and ginger ale, Lou thought. Ladies didn't drink beer, unless it was diluted with lemonade. A thin spiral of smoke wound up through the bleak light. The ashtray was already full. Lou pulled the door closed quietly and tried an unmarked door down the hall. It opened into a dark corridor lined with brooms, buckets and mops. Someone was banging dishes and singing along to 'Candle in the Wind' on the radio. In one direction Lou could see the swinging service doors to the dining room and the bar. She turned the other way, walking quickly past the half-open kitchen door.

At the end of the corridor Lou pulled open the door. She'd found the beer garden, if not the proper entrance. The woman was still at one of the picnic tables that balanced unevenly on cracked concrete. Weeds straggling up between the cracks were the only evidence of a garden. There was no fence to differentiate the beer garden from the lane behind it. A 44-gallon drum overflowing with

rubbish sat in one corner. Lou had never seen a more unappealing place to have a drink.

The woman held a half glass of flat beer tightly between her hands and hummed tunelessly. She looked like the poor twin sister of the woman in the Ladies Lounge but her features were older and more haggard. Lou took a deep breath and asked the woman if she'd mind sharing the table.

'Go on, love, it don't bother me,' the woman grinned at Lou toothlessly. 'Specially if ya buy me one.'

Lou sat gingerly on the uncomfortable bench, hoping not to get any splinters. The table was sticky and splodgy but on the plus side, Lou told herself, none of the bird shit was fresh.

'But you can't buy me one until Jimmy comes back, and that'll be a while yet. He's gone to put on a bet.'

Lou knew people liked to talk about what they were interested in, but her knowledge of betting didn't go beyond the office sweeps for the Melbourne Cup. She wondered if she could get by with bluff.

'Is he putting something on for you as well?'

'Dollar on the longest odds,' the woman replied with another gummy grin. 'If I win I'll be rich. "Just A Pilgrim" came in at fifty-to-one at Rosehill. Wish I'd had some money on that. Got to go the long odds. If I win on the favourite, it just gets me another dollar. I'd just drink it.' She cackled at what she obviously thought was a great joke. Lou smiled her friendliest smile, and leaned back. The woman didn't smell good with her mouth closed; it was worse when it was open and laughing.

'You like a bit of sport, then?' Lou continued, wondering how she was going to get a conversation going, and feeling very uncertain as to what she hoped to gain from it.

'Oh, yes, love me sports. This is the Sports Bar,' the woman said,

cackling again. 'Get all the entertainment I need sittin right ere.'

Lou looked around. There was nowhere a tv could go; a closed hatch from the kitchen with a little verandah over it to keep the rain off the serving shelf was the only connection to the hotel apart from the door. It wasn't a Sports Bar in any sense that Lou was familiar with. The woman took the tiniest of sips from her drink, and sucked at the skinny rollie between her yellowed fingers. Lou waited for the woman to say something else, worried that her best I'm-interested-tell-me-more look would be taken as staring. She wanted to ask 'Why aren't you sitting in the Ladies Lounge with the other woman, where it's a bit warmer and a lot more comfortable?' or 'Is this pub segregated?' but the questions seemed absurd and the answers self-evident. She thought the old woman would just laugh at her, releasing some more of that nasty smell from her mouth. So instead she waited for the woman to continue, and when she didn't, Lou tried:

'What kind of sport d'ya get around here?'

'Coppers chasing the boys, mostly.'

'Who wins?'

'Coppers mostly,' the woman grinned, looking around at the sky.

'What happens when they lose?'

At that the woman turned and looked into Lou's eyes with an intensity Lou found unnerving. The woman's irises were black and deep, solid and strong in a pool of yellowing whites striped with veins. Lou noticed that the woman's hands shook, and wondered if it had just begun or if she had been shaking all along.

'Where are you from?' the woman said, a tinge of distrust creeping into her voice. 'What do you want?'

'Big Smoke,' Lou replied, tossing up whether or not to tell this woman the truth, and deciding finally that it was the only respectful thing to do. 'I'm Lou Williams,' she said, holding out her hand so

the woman could shake it. ‘I’m a journalist and I’m trying to find out the truth about the death of Lawrence Jones and ...’ Lou couldn't say Birdie. She wished she knew his real name. The woman made no move to shake Lou’s hand so she lowered it slowly to the table, embarrassed.

‘Since when?’ the woman asked, looking directly at Lou.

Lou had lost track. Since when what?

‘I came up from Sydney yesterday,’ she said, hoping it was an answer to the question.

The woman shook her head, and slowly leaned forward and picked up her glass, took another tiny sip, then another little puff from the cigarette, as though she had to make both last until sundown. She looked at the sky and followed the progress of a flock of pink Major Mitchell cockatoos overhead. Then she gave Lou a piercing look and spoke again.

‘Since when do journalists tell the truth?’

‘I’m different, I’m an investigative journalist,’ Lou blurted, emphasising the word investigative as if the distinction would clarify all. ‘I tell the truth.’ She stopped herself from adding ‘fair dinkum’ just in time. She already sounded like a con artist. She decided to appeal to the long-shot gambler in the woman.

‘Try me,’ she said, ‘what have you got to lose?’

The woman turned and stared at Lou for a long time, a wordless inquisition. Lou held her gaze until a scrawny yellow dog with raw red patches of skin and dried scabs trotted into the beer garden. Both women watched it nose around under the tables. When the dog put its feet up on the bin and began to pull rubbish from it, the woman called ‘out’ in a surprisingly sharp voice. The dog looked at her, dropped down and loped off down the lane. Then the woman began to speak again, very quietly and slowly. Lou had to lean forward and endure the rotten smell on which each word floated.

‘They came to get him ... Frid’y arvo ... Late ... It was busy ... People already in town for the footy on Sat’d’y ... And he was here ... But he’s banned, isn’t he? Not sposed to be here, Larry ain’t ... weren’t ... But always was cheeky. He was ere having a drink,’ she patted the bench next to her. ‘Banned from drinkin too. Suddenly, coppers come in down the lane, too fast, nearly drive right into the pub.’ She upped the tempo of the tale. ‘They jump out of the car, like on *Homicide*. Grab im. Drag im off the bench and over to the car. Push im into the back seat. “You’re banned” they kept sayin. Always statin the bleedin obvious. They go to get in the front and take im away. Then they see Deek …’ Lou waited while the woman took another interminable sip of the flat beer. She jiggled her legs and pulled her sleeves down over her hands to try and keep warm. She wished she hadn't left her duffle coat in her room.

‘They see Deek and decide to grab him too, two for the price of one ... they’re yellin that he’s banned too ... I never understood it,’ the woman turned towards Lou. ‘You’re not from here. You might know. I understand how Earl can ban ya from the pub, cos he owns it. But how can Bob ban ya from the town? He don’t own the town. I’ve wanted to know this for a long time, and you bein an investigator, you might know. Ever heard of anyone gettin banned from the Smoke?’

‘Never, no, never heard of it,’ Lou shook her head.

The woman was staring sadly at her shrivelled rollie. Lou quickly pulled her smokes from her pocket and offered one to the woman.

‘Ooh, tailor made. Very nice,’ she said, taking a cigarette and leaning forward for a light. Lou lit one for herself while the woman took several long drags from the cigarette, examining it closely between puffs as though she’d rarely seen one before. The woman’s fingers were as gnarled as the mallee roots Trewie burned in his pot-belly stove.

'It's the Sports Bar, like I told ya, so Deek starts dodgin round the tables,' the woman had started up again. 'He's playin footie the Sat'd'y, he don't want to get caught. Coppers dodge around after him. That new young copper, the looker, he trips on the cracks, bumps into a table, spills some beer. Everyone's cheerin and jeerin and old Fergie's yellin "I've been robbed, buy me another beer or I'm makin a complaint".' The woman was warmed up now, acting out the parts, doing the voices. 'Meanwhile, Larry's wound down the car window and he's climbin out of it head first. Everyone cept the coppers knows what's goin on. Some of the young blokes standin around creep back towards the car, so the coppers don't see Larry wigglin his way out the window. Deek's still dodgin around the tables, teasin the cops, givin Larry time. Ya could see his feet slitherin out the window.'

The woman was laughing, enjoying her story. She paused for a sip of the beer, for a pull on the smoke, for dramatic effect.

'Soon as Larry's out the car, he calls to the coppers to get their attention, callin them stupid, dumb, you know, not talkin nice. He takes off down the lane, dancin about like a monkey, "catch me if ya can". They stop chasin Deek and start off up the lane after Larry, but they could never catch him. He was off faster than a speedin bullet just like always, ever since he was a little tyke.' She was dancing in her seat, cackling with pride.

A man with unkempt curly grey hair wearing a brown leather biker's jacket appeared from the lane, diverting the woman's attention. He walked up to their table.

'Ere's ya ticket, Mol. "My Kind of Girl", fifty-to-one. The old nag'll prob'ly die before the finish, but if there's a miracle and she gets a place, remember who did the buying.'

'Thanks Wardie,' she smiled. 'The girlie's buyin me a drink,' she said, gesturing towards Lou with her head. 'I'll stick with the shandy. Make it a pot.'

Wardie gave Lou a cold look: 'Anything for you?'

'Any chance of a cup of tea?' Lou asked.

'This look like a dining room to you?' Wardie replied derisively as he walked in the door to the hotel.

Wardie soon lifted the hatch in the wall and put Molly's pot of beer on the serving shelf. Lou went to collect it and gave Wardie a dollar. He didn't say a word to her, just got some change and put it on the shelf. Lou didn't take the coins. A tip might make him less hostile.

Lou got another one of Molly's toothless smiles when she gave her the beer. She offered another smoke, which Molly took and put behind her ear.

'For Ron,' she cackled, winking.

Lou waited for Molly to resume her story, but she was quiet, sipping at her drink like a small bird. Eventually Lou asked:

'And then what happened? What happened next with Larry?'

Molly looked at Lou long and hard.

'I thought you already knew what happened. I thought that was why you was ere.'

Molly made it clear the conversation was over. In the hatch Wardie had turned on the radio. Molly strained to listen. Lou could make out the revved-up voice of a reporter calling a horse race. Molly was trackside; her attention total; her body jigging slightly as if she was a jockey. Lou reached out and squeezed Molly's hand as she got up to leave. She left the half-empty pack of cigarettes on the table, picked her way over the broken concrete and weeds to the lane, and headed back out towards the main road.

Some of the backyards had fences that were too high for Lou to see over. Where she could see in, there were wheel-less cars on blocks of bricks, clothes on lines, rusty swings, gnarled skeletons of fruit trees. She imagined Larry running down the lane, the police in

chase, the air ringing with calls of encouragement and taunts, comedy capers.

The empty road at the end of the lane was straight, stretching in each direction like a lesson in drawing perspective. To Lou's left there were a few weatherboard houses, then open country. Beyond that the horizon was a blur, the dark grey of the bitumen merging with colourless late winter paddocks and school-uniform-grey clouds. Lou shivered in the cold and cursed herself for forgetting her coat. She wondered what she was doing in such a cold bleak place. She despaired of getting any proper interviews. Everyone she talked to had a story to tell but their stories only embroidered the edges.

Lou turned towards the Shell service station. Her car was still where she had left it. The workshop doors were closed and the mechanic was nowhere to be seen. There were fewer people in the square. Roxy and Robbo weren't among them. Lou wished she had the courage to walk up to someone in that group and begin asking questions, but it felt like doing interviews at a funeral. She couldn’t understand how journalists did it.

Lou sighed and walked towards the pub. A sign in the butcher’s shop said it would be closed for lunch from 12.30 to 2. The greengrocer and the haberdashery had similar signs. The footpaths were empty. Lou had thought a lunchtime shutdown was something only foreigners did. Her mum was always going on about it. In Italy, she’d say, everything shut down so that everyone could have a proper lunch with pasta and meat and salad and wine and a bit of hanky-panky afterwards. Lou decided she could manage the awkwardness of eating alone in the hotel dining room by imagining upright country folk with their pearls and twin sets, ties and sports jackets enjoying a Mediterranean siesta.

On the far side of the square, at the house between the police station and the river, the old woman was still in her chair on the verandah. There was a kerfuffle on the steps of the court house.

Several Aborigines who had been sitting there stood up and made way for a portly balding man. Wisps of hair lined his shiny pate. His suit was taut over his big round belly and rugby-player's shoulders. He walked down the steps like he owned the town. Lou watched him head towards the pub. Lunch might turn out to be more interesting than she'd hoped.

Lunch

The fat man from the court house steps was holding court at a big table in the dining room when Lou got there. She sat at a small table nearby and studied the sticky plastic-coated menu. The four middle-aged men sharing the table with the fat man – the other men called him Bob – already had big plates of steak and chips in front of them. They were eating and talking loudly, confidently filling the near-empty room with the sounds of their own voices. Three wore sombre ties in plain colours: brown with a beige shirt, dark blue with a light blue shirt, pale green with a white shirt. The fourth wore a wide tie patterned with flamboyant cerise and teal flowers. Lou guessed the sombre three were local businessmen – solicitor or accountant, bank manager or council officer. All but the one with the flamboyant tie spoke in the same tones, vowels as wide as the plains they lived in, talk as slow as the life. Flamboyant tie sounded like Bern: private school, city, North Shore. Either a Pitt Street farmer or here for the riot, Lou figured.

Bob was denouncing the ABC for using taxpayers' money to incite a riot and the media generally for having stage-managed racial disharmony. Then he broadened his attack, pontificating about the 'lawless boongs' and their role in the decline and ruination of Collooney. Lou looked around, shocked by his language. The twin-setted women at the nearby table leaned over their ham steak and pineapple to whisper to each other, as circumspect as the men were open. She wondered if they thought the likes of Bob should have better manners than to speak like that in public, or if they were talking about her. Bob was explaining to

Flamboyant Tie that it all began when they let them into the pool.

'Before, in the old days, they knew their place and kept it, and the town was thriving. They stayed in the mission or they worked on the stations or as domestics. Sometimes the little ones would go to school for a while, and if they didn't cause any trouble they could stay on. They had an eq-ual opp-or-tun-ity.' Bob gave each syllable a sarcastic edge. 'But everyone agreed that if they weren't too bright, and most of them weren't, it was the best thing for them to stop going to school. They'd get a good life by going into service.'

The three sombre-tied men nodded in agreement, murmured about the social bedrock that came from knowing one's place, and kept on at their steaks.

'Back in those days, when I first started working in the court, and right through the 50s and the early 60s, we only saw white people in the courts. Hardly ever got a "boong" in court. Ab-or-ig-in-al, I should say!' Bob used the same tone he'd used to say equal opportunity.

The men guffawed and shared a smirk of brotherhood. The fat man took a mouthful of steak and peas and chewed at it like an old cow, then continued.

'We just didn't get them in the courts. They couldn't drink, unless they got an exemption from the Act. That meant only the good ones could go to the pub and they only got an exemption because we knew they wouldn't go to the pub.' Bob was sawing at the steak as he spoke. 'If they were troublemakers they didn't get exemptions! Straightforward as that!' He piled peas and limp carrots on top of the steak on his fork, dipped it all in tomato sauce, and shoved it in his mouth.

Lou said a silent thankyou to Trewie for telling her about exemption from the Aboriginal Protection Act and wondered where the waitress was.

Brown Tie wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and joined in: 'City folk say it's because their conditions are bad, but the missions had the same houses then as now. They looked after them properly in those days. Everyone knew their place.' Green Tie was nodding energetically, waiting for Brown Tie to finish so he could add something. Brown Tie looked at him questioningly.

'Until the pool,' Green Tie said, pointing his knife at the man in the blue tie.

Flamboyant Tie asked Bob to tell him more about the pool. Bob nodded to the man in the blue tie: 'You were president of the Pool Committee, George, it's your story.' George put down his knife and fork and wiped his face with his serviette. He ran his fingers around the neck of his pale blue shirt, loosening the tie just a little, clearing his throat.

'In the beginning, everyone swam in the river. They swam in their bit, and we swam in our bit. We had swimming lessons and everything. But some of the mothers thought we should have a proper pool, so the kids could do the certificates and that.'

Green Tie broke in, peas falling on the table from his fork: 'And we thought it would be a benefit to the town, and help us attract a better kind of people.'

'So the Council allocated the land and eventually we got some funds from the State,' George continued, 'and we built the Municipal Pool.' He pronounced 'Municipal Pool' as though it was the title of an opera. 'Fifty metres, diving board, little kiddies pool, nice lawns, changing rooms and a shop for icecream and soft drink. Everything anyone could want. Beautiful.'

A waitress in a black skirt with a frilly white apron and a white shirt came in the swing door at the end of the dining room. She was skinny, short and middle-aged, with thin bright red lips, smudges of rouge on her cheeks, and greying roots in her thin hair. Lou recognised her as the woman who had stepped widely around her

and Roxy when they were sitting on the footpath. She remembered the nasty muttering as she passed. Disdain was etched in fine lines on her face, giving a clown's cast to the too-cheery smile she offered the men in suits. The waitress ignored Lou and approached the men's table.

Flamboyant Tie insisted on buying another round of beers for the businessmen. The waitress picked up the empty glasses, balanced them on her tray, and wiped at the wet circles left by the glasses with a cloth she kept hooked in her apron. Lou leaned towards the waitress as she walked by her table. The waitress stopped and sneered at Lou, as if to suggest she shouldn't even be in the room.

'Could I have a steak, please? Medium-rare?'

The waitress gave Lou slightest of nods, a loud harrumphing sigh, and kept walking. Lou didn't know if she'd taken her order or not. George from the Pool Committee was still telling his story.

'We gave them our bit of the river, of course, as soon as we opened the pool. They were much better off. They had the whole river for themselves instead of just the bit in front of the mission. They didn't have to spend a cent or do anything and they got the whole river, including the bit with the sandy beach which they'd never had before. Everyone was better off.'

Green Tie cut in, mopping up the the last of his gravy with the remaining mashed potato: 'We'd done everything, all the work. They'd got the whole river without having to lift a finger. Handed to them on a plate, like everything else.'

'But no, they had to be allowed in the pool too,' George resumed. 'Although, to be fair, you've got to recognise that it wasn't really ours that complained at first. Some outsiders came up from the Big Smoke stirring up trouble about civil rights and then our lot, the troublemakers amongst them, joined in. Suddenly the place began to look like America – you know, that civil rights stuff you'd see on telly?'

‘Most of them didn’t want it,’ said Green Tie broke in. ‘The good ones tried to stop the fuss. Old Queenie was still helping Mum in the kitchen back then and she thought it was awful. Queenie would cry about it. She was that sorry the young ones were making all that trouble. She’d say straight out that they all liked the river better. Gosh, I liked the river better myself. If you had a choice between swinging out from a branch to do a bomb and diving off a board? You’d take the river every time.’

‘So what happened?’ asked Flamboyant Tie.

‘Oh, you must know the rest,’ George said, pushing his empty plate to the centre of the table. ‘There were demonstrations and the tv cameras came and there was a lot of carry on and, oh, in the end we just let them in the pool. They thought it was a big victory and there was a lot of crowing, but it just made things worse.’ George was shaking his head mournfully.

‘We didn’t have any separate changing rooms for them,’ Green Tie picked up the story, ‘so our kids had to share. It doesn't sound so bad now, but back then it just didn't happen.’ He leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped over his belly.

‘What should have been a clearcut benefit to the town just became a problem,’ George added. It was a duet, the lines oft rehearsed. ‘And their kids still swim in the bloody river, after all that. They’ve got the river and the pool now.’

The waitress arrived with five beers. The men leaned back to let her distribute them around the table. She spilled a few drops from each one as she put them down. When she left Bob took up the story, as if by right.

‘It’s been downhill since then. Look out there now,’ Bob waved vaguely in the direction of the street, even though there were no windows. ‘Sitting in the square with nothing to do. Drinking even though it’s only lunchtime. By the end of the day they’ll be all stirred up and ready for another riot. And it’s court day too, so every

blow-in is here to get their bail varied or have their case adjourned or whatever. And the bloody Legal Service poking their noses in every case, so they all take a lot longer than they should.' Brown Tie held his forehead in his hands, mimicking a headache. Bob kept on speaking slowly and deliberately as if he was delivering a judgment. 'The facts are always clear. Who are you going to believe? The local constabulary or the bloody "boongs"? They should just take their punishment and be done with it, instead of thinking they might be able to get off. What do they think the court is for? To hear their bloody whining side of the story?'

Flamboyant Tie looked around to see who was listening. Lou thought he seemed uncomfortable. He turned back to Bob, cleared his throat, and suggested a change of topic. 'We'd better get on with the interview, Bob. Let's start with your campaign. What have you got for law and order?' The other men looked at their watches, drained their beers and wiped their mouths with the backs of their hands. Then simultaneously they pushed back their chairs, stood up and buttoned their jackets and excused themselves, mumbling about getting back to work. Bob began to talk about his campaign to be the local MP. He turned his back to Lou, to talk directly to the journalist, and lowered his voice.

Lou's steak finally arrived, burnt outside and in. A few crinkle-cut carrots and bruised peas lay comatose beside a heap of flaccid, cold chips. Lou wondered what she'd done to offend the waitress. She'd ordered steak because everyone else was eating it but what she got looked like it had been retrieved from the rubbish bin. She picked up the knife and fork resignedly, and alternately sawed and chewed the steak, every now and then picking up drifts of Bob's speech to Flamboyant Tie.

By the time they left, she'd learnt that Bob was clerk of courts, justice of the peace, crime reporter for the local paper, the National Party candidate in the upcoming elections, and the holder of the line between barbarism and civilisation in Collooney, a role he

thought he was destined to carry out on the national turf.

The room was eerily quiet without them. The waitress was wiping down tables, dipping a cloth into a bucket and wringing it out before slopping it over tabletops. Lou couldn't catch her eye, so she touched the waitress on the shoulder as she passed by. The waitress spun around wearing a look that would slay tigers. Lou tried for a winning smile and asked if she could have a cup of tea. The waitress rolled her eyes and shook her head: 'Dining room's shut. Lunch is over.'

Phone

Lou wandered upstairs, unsure of what to do next. She didn't want to go out on the balcony. There was no point sitting in the bleak little room. She picked up her duffle coat and bag, and fruitlessly searched her overnight bag for a scarf or gloves. All she found was the fishnets and suspenders, which reminded her that she had to phone Bern. He'd want a report on her progress. She resolved to approach the people in the square and interview someone before she called him. Then, at least, she'd have something to say for herself.

When she stepped out the main entrance of the hotel she dawdled before she crossed the street, observing the square. Sparks and flames shot out of the 44-gallon drum. Lou counted about thirty people altogether, mostly adults. Some stood with their backs to the fire. Some held their hands out towards it. All trying to get warm. Three young men sat on the steps of the war memorial. The young wife still sat hunched on her seat, a striped football beanie low over her eyes. Someone leaned over the proud elderly couple, tucking blankets around their legs. Lou shivered and did up her duffle coat. She wished she'd put on her jeans instead of the bloody leather mini.

Lou forced herself to cross the street. She had to talk with some of those people. The trip would be a waste if she didn't find out what they were saying and thinking about Larry Jones' death and about Birdie, and about the riot. She encouraged herself: be upfront this time, introduce yourself properly, shake hands, say you need some good quotes, you're going to tell both sides of the story. Lou

tried to remember something useful from Bern's Journalism 101 tirades but drew a blank. A low gurgle of discomfort wrenched through her guts. If Roxy was there it would be ok, but she was nowhere to be seen. Lou felt inside her bag for another packet of cigarettes. Walk up to the first friendly looking person and offer a cigarette, ask for a light, it always works, she told herself. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

A couple of men on the edge of the crowd turned to watch her coming, making it obvious they were speaking about her. As she neared, people seemed to turn away. Why would they do that? The closer she got, the more backs turned. Lou was nervous, adrift in the wide expanse of the square.

She noticed a young white couple about her own age in the middle of a group near the fire. They were talking to people and showing them newspapers. Lou slowed down and concentrated on the newspapers to see what they were. She recognised the unusual name of the paper, *Spartacist*. Every other Friday someone would sell it outside the staff entrance to the office. One morning Lou stopped and the young man explained that the name came from Rosa Luxemburg and the German revolution, and then he talked for ages about workers revolutions in the twentieth century. Lou learnt more about history that day than she'd learnt at school. The fact that these lefties were so far out of the city made Lou feel more certain that there was a good story waiting to be unearthed. And, she told herself, if the Aborigines in the square were prepared to talk to the lefties, then surely they'd talk to her. She just needed to be brave. Once she got talking it would be fine, she told herself.

The closer Lou got to the group, however, the more her nerve crumbled. If only Roxy was there! Lou's heart thumped and her stomach wrenched. She thought she'd throw up. Her eyes lit upon the public telephone on the far side of the square and she remembered she had to call Bern. She swerved away and made for the phone box, quickening her pace as though she'd been

wandering aimlessly, daydreaming, but had now become aware of something urgent.

Inside the phone box she opened her purse and found three 20-cent coins. Her hands scrambled through the bottom of her bag and found another 10-cent coin and several useless one-cent coins. Seventy cents wouldn't get her many minutes from way out here. Lou lifted the sticky handset from the top of the phone. She looked at her watch. It was after two. Bern should be back from lunch. She dialed his number, resolving to tell him it was going well and that she'd need another couple of days. Suddenly the prospect of going back empty-handed was worse than the thought of staying in Collooney and trying to get a story.

The head secretary, Eileen, answered the phone. She'd worked for the paper for more than thirty years and treated everyone under twenty-five as if they were children. Tipsy at an after-work party once, Lou had confided in Eileen that she wanted to be an investigative journalist. Eileen had scoffed, saying that women did women's pages and men did men's pages and that was why god had made them different. Lou bit back a retort that there were no newspapers around when god created the world, and a tirade that man, by which she meant mankind, had created newspapers and paper and the machines to print them. The only times she had quick comebacks they were better not said. Instead she'd just stood there smiling at Eileen, making speeches in her head. The first piece of advice anyone new got in the office was that there was no move worse than making an enemy out of Eileen. Lou had not drunk enough to forget that.

'It's me, Eileen,' Lou shouted into the phone. 'I need to speak to Bern. I'm calling from Collooney and I've only got 60 cents in change.'

'I've been wishing you were here all day, young lady,' replied Eileen. Lou was taken aback. Did Eileen miss her?

'There's a problem here with the copy-taking department, Miss

Williams. Mrs Norris is unwell again today. You should be here doing your job.'

Olive Norris had been the stalwart of the copy-taking department for as long as Eileen had been ruling the roost, but she had a deep and growing attachment to the pub over the road. Apparently she was the only typist in the entire office, apart from Lou, who had the talent of being able to type and spell correctly at the same time.

'What's the problem? No one else who knows what order the letters are supposed to go in?' Lou quipped.

'That's enough of that, young lady. We're short-handed because *you* have developed airs about being a reporter. I'll put Mr Adams on.'

Lou smiled with relief. Back-chatting Eileen was easy after the challenge of walking across the square.

'Hey, gorgeous, great to hear your voice,' Bern boomed down the line. Lou was pleased he was friendlier than he had been the last time she saw him.

'Bern, it's going well. I need a couple more days. I've only got 50 cents left for the call,' Lou said breathlessly.

'Listen, darl, we need to talk,' Bern murmured in that honeyed tone he used when he wanted something. 'We need you here, Lou. Didn't Eileen tell you? Old Olive's too bloody pissed again to take copy, let alone spell. You've got to come back. And look, the boss is making it clear, there's no story up there. It's dead.'

'Why don't you get one of your cub reporters to do the copy-taking?' Lou snapped. 'Don't they teach spelling as well as rugby union at those fancy schools?'

'Can't do it darl. And don't be so hard on the apprentices. Public schools don't teach typing because there's no call for it. And typing isn't in their contracts anyway, so I just can't do it.'

Yeah, right, thought Lou. You'd ask me to get you some coffee, but you won't ask them to take copy. The red light on the phone was flashing. Lou had 40 cents left. It was not the time to have this fight. She steeled her resolve.

'There is a story, Bern. Something's been going on here. There's been ongoing trouble between the police and elements in the Aboriginal community.'

Lou did another double-take, shocked by what she'd said. Her thoughts had translated themselves into the kind of language they used in the paper.

'Lulu, my excitable little minx. Listen. All we've got is another suicide. Yes, it's tragic, it's tragic, but that's how it is. You have to understand, it's because they can't take being locked up. They need the great outdoors. Walkabout and all that. The Minister has issued a statement. It was straightforward. They sent in the tactical response boys when the blacks drank too much at the wake and started causing trouble.'

'The trouble, as you call it, started *after* the riot cops …' Lou broke in, but Bern kept going in a grandfatherly tone.

'Something had to be done darl. A couple of police were *injured*. Broken bones as well as cuts and bruises. And so a couple of troublemakers were arrested for riot or conspiracy or something. The score's even now, so it'll go quiet for a while. When you've been in this game as long as I have, darl, you get a nose for this stuff. Look, we put a couple of paragraphs on page twelve in today's. But it's yesterday's news already Lulu. The evening papers have buried it.'

'Bern, I'm not so sure,' Lou began, but her resolve was crumbling. She pulled in her stomach muscles and straightened her back. 'I've been interviewing people here and there are stories about police harassment. There's been something bad going on between the cops and Lawrence Jones for a while, Bern. And it's

not only him. Not only was there the other hanging a few weeks back, but there's been more …' Lou's heart was racing. Her knees were jelly. She was talking too quickly. 'And the police are talking about crates of guns and an armed uprising.' Lou knew straight away that she shouldn't have mentioned the guns. That would kill it with Bern.

'Ah, good for you.' To Lou's surprise, Bern sounded positive and interested. 'Interviewed the local police, why didn't you say? That's great. You'll make it as a reporter yet Lulu. So, what's their story?'

'Bern, the light's flashing, I'm out of coins,' Lou lied with an anxious tone. She didn't want to say that she'd overheard this important information while she was in the bath.

'Listen, Lulu. You've got to come home. Write up your notes from the interview. We might be able to use them when the riot trials come up. But you've got to leave the rest alone and get back to your desk. And listen, you mustn't get involved. You've got to be objective. Larry Jones had a record as long as yer arm, Lou, *ipso facto* there was something going on between him and the police. But the fact is, he couldn't take being locked up and he topped himself,' Bern said wearily, as though remonstrating with a child. 'And the crates of guns are a figment of the Force's imagination. We've talked about that.' And then he softened his tone, cajoling her: 'And we need you here. You're the best copy-taker we've got, after Olive.'

Lou felt deflated. She hated the way Bern made her feel so ignorant and the *ipso* bloody *facto* put-downs. She should never have slept with him. How could she make him take her seriously? There was definitely a story to be investigated. She had to try a new line.

'My car's in the garage, Bern, I can't come until it's fixed.'

'*Your* car? Did you go all the way up there in that little kraut piece of junk?' Bern sounded angry now. How did he think she had

got there? ‘Leave it there and come back in a hire car. We can pick it up some other time. Or, better still, pay someone to take the car off your hands. I can reimburse you out of my expense account. But, seriously, be at your machine first thing in the morning or the boss mightn't have you back at all. I'm doing my best to cover for you Lou, but he's pretty angry about you running around up there.’

Now the light really was flashing rapidly on the phone. Lou gave in.

‘Yeah, ok,’ she muttered with resignation. Losing her job was the last thing she needed.

‘You’ve done really well, Lulu,’ Bern’s voice was warm now, gooey with familiar dulcet tones. It was one of his tenets of superior journalism: always end on a positive note. ‘Think of it this way: you’ve learnt two of the important lessons in Journalism 201,’ Bern chortled his haughty laugh down the phone line. ‘Number one, always get the story from the authorities first. Number two, carry a lot of coins for the phone. See you in the morning. I miss having your cute little arse around here.’

The phone cut off. Lou was relieved. From this distance Bern was a lecherous creep. Take away his warm laughing eyes and the way he had with his hands and he seemed a lot less attractive. Lou wondered if that was the third important lesson in Journalism 201.

Police

Lou stared at the police station through the dirty windowpanes of the phone booth. She had to talk to them or Bern would know she had been bluffing. She was relieved to be the only person on the street as she walked past the solicitors' offices and the court house towards the police station. As she turned into the gravel driveway she noticed the old woman still sitting on the verandah in the house next door and idly wondered if she had anything to say about the night Larry Jones died. The wire door that seemed to be the main entrance to the station squeaked when Lou opened it and banged behind her, rendering a doorbell unnecessary. A long tall bench with forms and papers arrayed along it barricaded the office proper from the entrance. A hatch at the end of the bench that allowed passage from the front to the back of the office was open against the wall.

Two uniformed officers sat at their desks and ignored Lou. The dark-haired new cop that Roxy had pointed out wasn't there. The younger cop, writing in a large leather-bound ledger, kept his head down, although he seemed to be making an effort to avoid looking at Lou. The older cop, who was balding with red veins on his nose and cheeks and a beer belly bulging over his belt, sat with his black-booted feet atop the desk and his chair tipped back, reading the horse-racing section of a tabloid. Talk rumbled on a radio in the background.

Lou coughed, and held her journalist's union card up, hoping it would give her some authority. Both cops turned to look at her. She smiled. Neither smiled back. She leaned forward on the bench,

expecting that one of the men would come and speak with her but neither moved. A garish wall poster warning against speeding and the consequences of having a blood alcohol limit greater than .05 flanked a voluptuous blonde Miss August in a bikini and high-heeled sandals playing with a big multi-coloured plastic ball on the beach. Lou wondered why there were no warnings about the dangers of playing ball games in stilettos, and if there was a rule against displaying sexist calendars in government offices. She wondered if the cops were going to address her as gorgeous, just like Bern and the mechanic, or if they were going to keep ignoring her.

'There's a copy of the statement for the press on your right,' barked the cop who was reading the paper, without looking up. 'No suspicious circumstances, it says, signed by the Minister. It's been sent to all the main papers and tv, along with a suggestion that you all stay out of town.'

Lou realised that the cops had probably been watching her since the morning when she sat on the street with Roxy. At least they thought she was a reporter, on the plus side. She decided to push for some information.

'I thought you might like to do an interview about what happened with Lawrence Jones. You know, tell your side of the story, human interest sort of thing, the people behind the news flash,' Lou said, trying to smile seductively at the balding cop.

'There aren't any two sides of the story, young lady,' he replied, throwing his newspaper on the desk and laboriously pushing himself up from his chair. He unbuckled his belt and began to stuff his shirt into his pants. 'Unless it's the old "Police do police work" and "Press stirs up trouble" story,' he said, mimicking Maxwell Smart from *Get Smart*, the old tv series.

A chill shot down Lou's spine. The cop seemed crazed. The sudden combination of comedy accents with a deathly stare was

unnerving.

'Anyway, you're a day late,' he continued in the broad local accent. 'The show ended yesterday. Apparently there's some dispute about whether or not it would have been possible for the young man to hang himself, so the sarge here will show you how he did it. Then you can convey that information to your journalist union and whoever else you're friends with.' He turned to a filing cabinet, opened the top drawer, pulled out a striped football sock, and threw it onto the younger cop's ledger. The young cop grimaced and pushed the sock away, without stopping writing, without looking up, without speaking. Lou wondered if they'd been in the middle of an argument when she walked in, or if they weren't speaking to each other at all. There was clearly bad blood between them.

The big cop kept talking, doing up his belt buckle, and fixing Lou with a cold hard stare. 'Apart from that, take the statement and get your cute little arse back to the Big Smoke and get on with your fashion pages or cookery column or whatever it is a girl journalist is supposed to do.'

He pulled his jacket off the back of his chair and thrust his left arm in it, turning his back on Lou as he struggled to squish the rest of his bloated torso into the jacket. Then he walked to the back door of the office, held it open and looked back at Lou.

'You'll be safe in the pub while your car's getting fixed, but my advice to you is that you get straight out of town. And stay out. Meanwhile, stay out of the square, the Beer Garden and the bar. If you need a drink, have a gin and tonic in the Ladies Lounge. And don't forget about point-oh-five,' he pointed at the drink driving poster and looked at Miss August. 'You don't want to be over the limit if you get pulled over on your way home.' He slammed the door on his way out.

When he was gone, the younger cop closed his ledger, stood up, put on his jacket and buttoned it, and picked up the football

sock. He looked at Lou for the first time and nodded curtly, then walked through the hatch opening in the bench, and past Lou to the front door which he held open for her. The clipped staccato of a horse-race caller filled the room as they walked out.

The cop pointed to the gravel walkway along the side of the station and the rundown outbuilding that housed the cells in the yard behind the station, and motioned to Lou that she should walk in front of him. The gravel crunched beneath their feet. Crows called from the trees. Lou was nervous about the cop behind her, uncertain about what was happening. At the building, the cop unclipped a set of keys from his belt and opened the heavy door. He held a finger over his lips to indicate that they should be quiet as he pointed to someone sleeping on a bench in a cell with the door open. The cop opened the wooden door to another cell, and then unlocked the metal mesh door behind it. He motioned to Lou to join him in the cell.

The cop removed his shoes and placed them neatly beside the open wooden door. With the speed of a magician he tied knots in the football sock until it formed a noose that he held out for Lou to inspect. She stepped back, alarmed. He looped the noose over his head and let the sock dangle down his chest like a scarf. Then he hauled himself up the metal door, using the mesh, the handle and the bolt as steps, and swung his leg over the top of the door. The cop sat there panting, catching his breath, then coughed quietly to make sure he had Lou's attention. She watched, transfixed, as he balanced on the top of the door and leaned forward to tie the other end of the sock to the grille above the doorway. He motioned to Lou to stay out of the way, put both his hands on the grille and swung slowly down, as if lowering himself from a chin up. On tiptoes under the door with the sock tied to the mesh above, and looking Lou in the eye, he flailed his arms and poked out his tongue to mimic hanging. She backed away, into the cold wall of the cell. Pulling a pocket-knife out of a sheath on his belt, the cop reached up and cut the sock. Then he loosened the noose, pulled it

off over his head, and rolled up the sock and tossed it in the corner with a flourish. Finally he bowed slightly as if to indicate that the show was over. Lou was terrified by the mock-hanging and even more disturbed by the impression that the cop had practised it until it seemed as simple as the gymnastics in the Olympics. She wanted to run. The doorway was blocked by the cop who was trying to untie the rest of the sock from the mesh.

The man who had been sleeping called out, 'Sarge, are ya there? Where's me afternoon tea?'

'Hang on will ya, I'm just getting it,' the cop called to the man, his voice surprisingly gentle. The cop ignored Lou and went over to a bench and began filling an electric kettle from a large urn. She backed towards the door and out of the building, crunching along the gravel path to the street, chilled to the bone.

Robbo

Lou walked out of the police station feeling small, scared and alone. The mock hanging in the jail was so unexpected and horrifying it already seemed like a nightmare. Her hands shook as she tried to light a cigarette. She'd been seriously kidding herself about being a reporter. It was lucky Bern had told her to get back to work. Staying in Collooney now would be terrifying. Lou jumped when she heard someone call her name. To her great relief, it was Roxy, who was coming down the court house stairs with the lawyer. Roxy was flashing her a bright smile and waving. Lou broke into a grin, and only barely stopped herself from running to hug her.

Roxy introduced the lawyer to Lou simply as Robbo. Lou had learnt no surnames here, only first names and nicknames, none of which would be any good in a report. As they shook hands, Lou took in Robbo's dark eyes, thick near-black hair and full red lips, and the way the tie and jacket looked like they belonged to someone else. Lou thought he was holding her hand longer and more firmly than was customary, but she didn't pull it back. She needed all the comforting she could get.

'Good news!' Roxy was saying to Lou. 'The judge set me free, so long as I leave town. Which is what I want to do anyway. Need to get out of this hole as quick as I can.' She was waving towards the middle of the square as she spoke. A man waved back and began to walk towards them, saying farewells to the people around him as he left.

‘Come and see me play sometime,’ Roxy said, as she moved off to join the man. ‘Texas Bar in the Cross, or, I dunno, Tamworth in January? Dunno where the road’s gunna take us, ya know how it is.’

On the far side of the street she and the man kissed and walked hand in hand to a dusty Ford panel van. The starter motor turned over a few times before a dirty puff of smoke pulsed out of the exhaust. Roxy’s hand appeared above the car in a wave as they drove away.

Robbo turned and focused at Lou, looking her up and down as if inspecting her. She felt naked under his gaze, and ventured a smile. Eventually he smiled back, his dark eyes smiling first, wrinkling up at the edges, then slowly his mouth curled and his lips parted. Lou felt like he was wrapping himself around her. She didn’t want him to take his eyes off hers. He put his arm out to her shoulder and turned her around, slowly, and she turned with him, not knowing why she allowed him to be so intimate. They were on the street, in front of the police station, in front of the people in the square, in front of the whole town. When he’d turned her full circle he let her go and took a step back.

‘Well, you don’t look like a cop to me,’ he said, still smiling, his whole face warm and tender. ‘Seems like Roxy’s right, as usual.’

‘A cop?’ Lou’s voice croaked. Embarrassed, cleared her throat, tried again. ‘What do you mean, a cop? I’m an investigative journalist.’ It sounded so phoney. But she definitely wasn’t a cop. ‘Where’d you get that idea?’

‘Everyone thinks you must be a cop,’ he said, waving his arm towards the square to indicate what he meant by everyone.

‘I’m here to find out why Lawrence Jones died,’ she said, disturbed by how prim she sounded. ‘Didn’t Roxy tell you?’

‘Yeah, well, you don’t look like a journalist either.’

‘No?’

‘First, you drive a vehicle that barely deserves to be called a car. You tell old Eddie that you’re going north, not that you’d get that far in that thing. You dress like you should be on a corner in the Cross or in a rock band. You sit on the footpath with Collooney's answer to Linda Ronstadt. Journalists generally interview figures of authority, and, let's face it, that's going to be white middle-aged blokes, not drunken old dears in beer gardens – haven't you ever seen the news?'

Lou laughed. Robbo was not treating her like a cop.

‘Those things make me a cop?’

‘You just came out of there,’ he said, gesturing at the police station.

‘Interview,’ Lou stumbled, wondering what words she could use to explain what had really happened. ‘Have to get both sides of the story…’

'Both sides?' Robbo raised his eyebrows.

‘You know,’ Lou replied quickly, ‘responsible journalism and all that.’ It was Bern's phrase. It did nothing to help her understand the frightening weirdness of what had happened in the lock-up.

‘Ah. *All that*!’ Robbo sounded sceptical. ‘And what about sitting up there on the balcony,’ he said, turning and pointing to the pub, ‘with the surveillance unit? Must say, that made everyone think you were a *real dumb* cop. All that trouble with the disguise, and then you blow it by sitting out in the open with them.’

Lou winced.

‘I just like balconies,’ she stumbled, ‘in old pubs. And, um, I’m new at this. It’s my first time, just about.’

‘First time in a leather mini?’

Lou gave Robbo a brotherly slug on the arm, and was straight away sorry. It was too familiar. She didn’t even know him.

‘Give me a break,’ she said quickly, unexpectedly biting back tears. She was doing her best to be cool and professional and here she was, all over the place. Her cheeks were heating up in a blush.

‘Alright, Miss Investigative Journalist, just teasing,’ said Robbo, wrapping her in his warm soft smile, ‘but what’s with all the skulking around the edge of the wake?’

‘Skulking? Wake?’

‘Why do you think all those people are sitting out there in the square? Enjoying the weather?’

‘I just couldn’t make myself walk into that group,' she replied feebly, ‘I just didn't know how to start.’

Robbo stared into her strange shimmery eyes, one gunmetal blue, the other silver grey-green like saltbush. He looked at her fragile pale skin, and at the pinkness of her lips as she nervously bit at them with her teeth, and he wondered how anyone could simultaneously be so brave and so timid.

‘Trewie said you were just a kid.’

‘Trewie? You know Trewie? Is he here?’ It was only hours since she’d left Trewie’s place. He hadn’t said anything about going to Collooney.

‘Nah, bush telegraph,’ Robbo replied. ‘Best surveillance system around.’

Lou stared at her feet, kicked a stone. Hardly anyone had spoken to her since she’d been in Collooney, but everyone seemed to have spoken about her.

‘Not that I’d trust the bastard as far as I could kick him. Not where there’s pretty girls concerned,’ laughed Robbo.

‘Oh, give me a break,’ Lou bounced back, blushing again, and wishing she could think of something different to say.

‘Alright. A break for a reporter starting out. I’ll take you out to

the mission, show you around. You owe me one though, when you're rich and famous.'

'I've got to get back to Sydney. Boss's orders. Don't want to lose my job.'

'Your car's not fixed yet,' Robbo gestured towards the service station. 'Anyway, quick trip to the mission won't take long, and you might learn something new.' Robbo raised his eyebrows and smiled at Lou.

'Seem to have been doing nothing but learning something new since I left Sydney yesterday.'

'More can't hurt,' Robbo coaxed. 'My car's over there,' he said, pointing to an orange Holden Monaro. 'I need a few minutes. Got to have a word.'

Lou walked over to the car, leaned back on the bonnet and watched Robbo. She liked the way he walked, although his clothes were ridiculous – tan pinwhale cords, a dark blue reefer jacket, and cuban-heeled elastic-sided leather boots. It was what her little brother would wear when their parents told him he had to look decent: Levi cords and a jacket with a name he could at least feel ironically cool in. She watched Robbo pulling off his tie and stuffing it in his pocket. It made her realise she should get out of the bloody mini skirt. She put her fingers between her lips and whistled. Robbo turned and she gestured to her skirt and then to the pub. He nodded as if he understood and turned away. Lou half-walked half-ran to the pub and took two stairs at a time up to her room, where she swapped skirt and tights for jeans and boots for sandshoes. She jammed everything into her bag.

Lou could hear the cop snoring on the balcony. She opened the door quietly and tip-toed to the edge for one last look at the town. Robbo was in the centre of the square, shaking hands and nodding his head as he went from one person to the next. He seemed to know everyone. He stopped when he reached the elderly couple

seated in the middle and squatted down to talk to them, one knee up and leaning forward on it, resting his arm there. Lou noticed how respectful it was, allowing him to look upwards at them as he spoke. If he'd stood, he would have looked down on them. She made a mental note of the pose for future use.

The only person on the south side of the square was the old woman who still sat on the verandah of the house next to the police station, staring into the square. Leaves circled in the wind on the empty court house steps.

Monk the mechanic was on his knees poking at the engine of her car, which was still on the street outside the service station. The doors were open and the back seat had been pulled up so he could get at the battery with jumper leads. Lou went back into the room, picked up her bag and swung it over her shoulder. She had to find out if the car would get her home tonight.

The barman didn't seem surprised when Lou handed him the key. The cops had probably already told him she was leaving. When she offered to pay he told her it was only $5, seeing she'd only used the bathroom and not the bed. She wondered how he knew she'd used the bathroom and if he'd been in her room. She'd never felt so watched in her life. She handed over the cash and winked at the old bloke at the bar on her way out the saloon doors.

She dropped her plan to go to the service station to get Monk's diagnosis when she saw Robbo walking towards his car, running his hand through his thick dark hair. He waved and smiled at her with that delicious smile. Lou swerved towards him. The Beetle could wait. She met Robbo at the Monaro. He pulled the car keys from his pocket and made a show of opening the passenger door for her. Lou grinned, got in the car, threw her bags onto the back seat and swung her feet up onto the dashboard.

Mission

Robbo drove out west out of town. Lou had expected to go to over the bridge to the settlement up on the river bank.

'I thought we were going to the mission,' she said, pointing back behind them.

'Going to the new mission,' Robbo replied.

'New?'

Robbo didn't answer. He was focused on the road, resting both his arms along the steering wheel and leaning forward. Despite the pall of cloud, mites of light danced in the dust above the scrubby paddocks. Skeletons of last summer's thistles hung over the new green growth. Thin grey sheep nosed at the grass. Suddenly Robbo swung into a one-lane road that led towards the distant line of trees marking the river. The big Monaro rolled over the potholes as if they were pebbles. Lou slid lower into the soft seat. Her knees nearly touched her chin. The Monaro was more comfortable than their lounge room.

After ten minutes a clump of trees and rooftops appeared on their left. Robbo turned in the open gate and bumped over a cattle grid. He went slowly down the dusty track in which the potholes were deep enough to rock even the Monaro. Broken down vehicles lay either side of the road, bonnets agape, doors and wheels missing. A couple of young men who appeared to be working on the engine of one of the cars straightened up to watch them pass. Robbo wound down his window and yelled out g'day. They waved

back and put their heads back under the bonnet.

'Getting scrap,' Robbo said in answer to Lou's unasked question.

'Scrap?' Lou had no idea what he was talking about.

'Scrap metal. To sell. To buy grog.'

The first building in the little settlement was a corrugated iron shed the size of a double garage. It was partly closed by a long rollerdoor with a deep dent in it. Robbo craned his neck to see if there was anyone inside, then drove on. They went slowly down an unmade road lined with small houses with fibro-cement walls and unpainted corrugated iron roofs. Some houses seemed abandoned, with doors missing and windows broken. Through big jagged holes in the walls Lou could see timber frames and plaster linings. Several had no guttering, or it was so rusted that rain pouring off the roofs had gouged little ditches like mini moats around the houses. Torn old couches and iron bed bases littered front yards. There were no gardens, save a few straggly oleanders and wattles.

They turned into another street that looked even worse. A gaunt man sat on an old iron bed base out the front of one of the houses with a blanket over his shoulders, but otherwise the street was empty. Broken bottles lay on the dirt paths. Lou was sitting up now, paying attention. She had never been anywhere so poor. She glimpsed a small animal shooting across the road.

'What was that?' she said, pointing in the direction it had gone. 'Possum?'

'Rat,' Robbo replied without looking. He turned another corner, into a street where children in holey sweaters, shorts and bare feet were playing cricket. Preschoolers with runny noses stood on the sides and watched. The kids stood aside to let Robbo drive through. He wound down his window. The cool air had an unexpectedly fresh eucalyptus scent.

'Hey, Bradman,' Robbo called to the batsman, 'Aunty Nellie

home?'

'Yeah, she's there. Everyone else in town. We ain't allowed go. Ain't fair,' the kid called back, rubbing the ball against his groin.

'Strong sense of justice, kids, don't they?' Robbo laughed, looking at Lou. It was as if he'd stopped thinking about whatever it was that had turned him monosyllabic and remembered that she was there. Still, he didn't seem to be looking for an answer. And Lou couldn't think of anything to say.

Robbo pulled up outside a house with a picket fence and curtains. It was one of a group of five well-kept houses that clung together against the misery that assailed the rest of the settlement. The click-bang of their closing car doors echoed. Robbo lifted open the gate and held it open behind him for Lou. A middle-aged woman in a thick green cardigan, faded floral dress and bare feet was already standing at the open flyscreen door.

'G'day stranger,' she called cheerily, in a wide loud country voice.

Robbo gave the woman a hug and they went into the house. Lou tagged along, taking in the tiny front room with its couch that clearly doubled as a bed and the worn lino floor. Through a door off the lounge Lou could see another tiny room with two sets of bunks in it. She followed Robbo and the woman into the kitchen. Beyond that Lou could see a dark lean-to with corrugated iron walls and a dirt floor. Towels hung from hooks dangling in holes in the iron. Through the kitchen window she could see washing blowing on long lines in the back yard next door, and a tumble-down outdoor toilet.

The woman pulled out a couple of chairs at the kitchen table and motioned to them to sit. Another woman, ancient, tiny and thin, with wispy white hair pulled into a bun at her neck, sat at the head of the table in a carver chair, just like the one Lou's father had. Robbo introduced Lou as a friend from the Smoke. Lou nodded

hello and smiled and held out her hand. Both women smiled. Nellie said 'G'day how are ya?' and grasped Lou's hand firmly. Gran's hand was so frail and her skin so papery that Lou was scared she'd break it.

'Tea?' Nellie asked, pouring water from a plastic jerry can into a kettle.

'Water supply's *still* buggered?' Robbie asked in a shocked voice. Nellie began shaking her head. She put the kettle on the little black stove and opened a door on the front and pushed a piece of wood into the firebox. She banged the door hard to close it, turned the knob with a heavy dark piece of towel, then looked at Robbo.

'Three months now,' she said, her head still slowly moving from side to side. 'Nothin but promises. Promises don't wash the clothes.'

'That's just bullshit, ya can't accept that,' Robbo replied. 'Ya gotta keep filling in the complaint form til they fix it.'

Nellie grimaced and shrugged her shoulders. 'Why didn't you come before?' she asked, folding her arms and leaning back against the sink.

'They'd have been looking out for me, Nel. Would have had me up on riotous assembly with Davo and Blakey. They were looking for an excuse. I'm keeping me nose clean on this.'

'Not like you,' Nellie replied. 'Usually keen to get in the middle of it, stand up for your rights and all that. Instructions from above?'

'Yeah,' Robbo laughed. 'Wal! Chewed my bloody ear off! "Time to start actin like a lawyer instead of a lout." You know how Wal is once he gets going. Said he'd send me up to do the court today on the off chance I might manage to stay on the right side of the law, as he put it. I did ok too, Nell,' he added with a proud note and a smile. 'But the main reason he sent me was to come see you, get some facts. Find out what happened with telling the family and the

identification and everything. We can't get a straight story on it. Cops have got their mouths shut tight. The Minister issued a statement before the riot cops even got airborne.'

'Smart bloke, that Wal. Smells trouble from hundreds of miles away. Always had a nose for it. They flew those riot boys in real fast – they were here before the funeral began. Soon as Murris started gatherin in the square, those fancy out-of-town coppers were ready. Walked into the middle of that wake and picked up those boys without nothin havin happened. No wonder people got angry.'

'What happened? Were you there?'

'Earl banned everyone from the pub, as usual, and then sold beer and flagons and that out the back to anyone who wanted it. Underage and all. Like pourin kero on a fire. Young blokes were already riled up ... No one believes it, *no one*,' she wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. 'Larry was the last person who'd take his own life. He had too much to live for. He loved that little boy. Do anything for him. And he loved his grandma Irene. They're saying on the telly that he couldn't take bein locked up! *Larry!* He's been in and out of jail so often it was like a second home. And anyway, Connie says he was too pissed to tie up his own shoes, let alone get his sock off and tie it up …'

'Shh, Nell,' said the old lady from the end of the table. 'Don't be talking like that. Kiddies'll hear.'

Lou turned around to see two of the little snotty nosed kids leaning against the wall. Their hair looked like it needed a good wash and comb. They both smiled shyly at Lou, who winked and smiled back, and reached out to tickle the nearest one under his ribs. The kid grinned and dodged away.

Nell got up and took the boiling kettle from the stove and made a pot of tea. She put it on the table with cups and sugar and a biscuit tin.

'I got to tell him, Mum, so he can tell Wal,' Nell said gently to

the older woman, stretching out to pat her hand. 'Kids have to learn sometime anyway. Did Herb tell ya he went in the lock-up and tried to do it himself? He reckons it was hard enough tryin to make a noose out of a football sock. And then, even completely sober, Herb couldn't balance on the top of the door while he tied the football sock around the grille. Reckons his face was up against the grille and he couldn't see what he was doin.'

Lou shuddered as she recalled the macabre mock-hanging the cop had done for her benefit. It was as unreal to her now as the skull-swinging highway murderer. All she had learnt from it was that the cops knew how to turn a sock into a noose that could hang a man from a door. And that they didn't mind dealing in terror. Bloody Bern, she thought, fuck him for sending her to talk to them. Everyone already knew their story.

'And he's strong and fit, Herb is,' Nell was still talking. 'If he reckons it couldn't be done sober I don't see Larry doin it when he's oh-point-three. Specially not if he was already beat up, which Larry was, according to Julie.'

'Yeah, heard that on the news,' Rob said. 'Saw Julie on the tv saying she watched em chuck him head first into the wagon and heard his head hit the end like a crack of lighting. She's gone to ground since, though. Says she was with Con all the time. Wal thinks they're hiding something, or someone told em to shut up.'

'Yeah, that Julie…,' Nellie said, with a disapproving tch. 'But someone must have seen em take him out of the wagon at the station. Wal needs to find out if someone saw.'

'He's making enquiries, as he puts it. So far he's heard that it took three cops to get Larry out of the divvy van and into the lock-up. Apparently they had to drag him in. They reckon they didn't fingerprint him or take his photo cos he was too drunk.'

'Too drunk,' Nell repeated. 'But sober enough to hang himself. It was only an hour and a half later when the lock-up keeper found

him dead, hanging with his feet on the ground.' Nell shook her head.

'Yeah, it's insane,' Robbo said gently. 'But there's another story around Wal specially wanted me to ask you about. He's heard something about retaliation for making em look like idiots one time too many.'

Gran pressed her thin lips tightly together and looked hard at Nell, who picked up her cup and slowly sipped at the tea.

'You have to tell him Nell,' Gran said in a whisper.

Nell stared at her hands. Her face hung with sorrow, framed by lank grey hair down to her shoulders. She had hard tight crevices between her eyebrows and rows of thinner lines across her forehead. Her eyes receded deep into her skull and her cheeks were deep hollows beneath strong cheekbones. Black sunspots flecked her skin. She had a little moustache above her thin downturned lips and deep gouges of wrinkles either side of her mouth. Her scraggy neck made her face seem even longer. A mournful cry of crows broke her reverie. She looked up at Robbo.

'That new copper's got a thing for Connie. She went runnin to him everytime they had a blue, dobbin im in. She should bloody well have made up her mind – kick Larry out or put up with im.'

'Too late now,' whispered Gran. 'It's too late now. The boy's gone now.' She was stirring sugar in her tea, the spoon scratching around the bottom of the cup in the silence.

Robbo pushed his chair back, got up and went out the back door. A blast of cold air rushed into the room. He came back with his arms full of wood, kicking the door closed behind him. He heaped the wood in a corner of the kitchen. When he opened the stove heat radiated out, chasing away the cold. He fed in a couple of pieces of wood, poking them with a metal poker, then shoved the door closed and sat down again. Lou sat with her hands under her legs. No one took any notice of her. It was as if she wasn't

there.

'You know they all took off to Thunder Valley not long after they put him in the lock-up,' Nell resumed. 'Closed the station and took off. In a big hurry, Herb said. Said he saw them chargin down the highway like there was an accident somewhere.'

'Yeah, we heard that,' said Robbo quietly. 'They've already got their story together to cover that. But, shit, it's only been six weeks since Birdie died up at Thunder. That's still a mystery. And there's more, up and down the country Wal says. They're not going to get away with it this time, but we've got to get all the details right, be real careful, get an airtight case, he reckons.' Lou watched Robbo while he spoke. His eyes seemed to smile even when he was completely serious. His voice was delicate and soft and masculine at the same time. 'We've been hearing they didn't tell the family, and then they tried to stop them going to identify the body, like they were trying to cover something up.' He leaned in close to Nell. 'We need some details on that, and we don't want to ask Irene. The way they did it might have been illegal. Wal reckons you'll be able to tell us more about what actually happened than anyone else.'

'Oh, I thought it couldn't have been right. They told Rene, oh, poor thing, she can't hardly talk, she's so upset,' Nell said. 'They said she didn't have to go and identify him. But she's his Gran, she brought him up, she should have gone. They told her some relatives in Thunder were going to do it.'

'We heard that they didn't tell the family, not Irene, not anyone, until a few hours later, after they'd moved the body up to Thunder. That true?'

'That's right. Said they didn't know who the family was. *Here!* In Collooney! With bloody Bob publishing everyone's name and address in the paper if they go to court or get cautioned or anything. Bob was there, in the lock-up, before they moved him. As

if he'd not know who the family is!' Nell scoffed.

'They should have contacted the family straight away,' Gran said quietly. 'Common humanity should have dictated it. Imagine if it was Bob's boy, or Earl's. They would have gone straight to the family out of respect.'

Robbo nodded and covered Gran's frail hand with his, quietly repeating her words, 'Common humanity should have dictated it.' Then he turned back to Nellie, leaving his hand on Gran's.

'Hang on, Nell. Go back one. I got to get this straight. Are you sayin' they told the family not to go and identify?'

Robbo was patting his pockets. Lou pulled Trewie's leather notebook and a pen out of her duffle coat pocket and passed it to him. He opened the notebook and picked up the pencil without taking his eyes off Nell, and leaned his knee against Lou's under the table. Lou tingled from head to toe.

'It's not that clear,' Nell replied. 'One of the boys phoned the hospital in Thunder and the hospital said they couldn't see his body. It's a long trip to make if you can't get in. Then Harry's girl who's working there said she would be allowed in, and by then there were already some family from up that way who'd heard and they'd been waiting at the hospital. The Legal Service was sposed to be there but there was some mix up.'

'So who identified him?'

Nellie stood up and refilled the teapot from the kettle then put the empty cups in a line, filled them all and redistributed them around the table. Lou beamed and said thanks, as much for the acknowledgment that she was there as for the tea.

'Harry's girl and a couple of cousins. She said Larry was six feet away on the other side of a window. The police kept telling them to stand back. The sheet was only pulled back enough to see his head. Although she reckoned she could see the big red mark around his neck. Didn't look like a sock coulda done it, she said. But it was

weird, wrong, all wrong. It was like they was hidin somethin, she said.'

'Someone from Thunder said the doc doing the autopsy was only there for ten minutes. What can they find out in ten minutes?' Robbo asked, stirring sugar into his tea. 'It's just going through the motions.'

Everyone sat quietly, listening to the calls of 'Howzat' and arguments about LBW from the road.

'What charges they got Davo and Blakey on?' Nell asked.

'Riotous assembly. Although Wal reckons two people aren't enough for a riotous assembly. Reckons some ancient Gubba law says so,' Robbo said.

'Might just need a riotous assembly to get those bastards off our backs,' Nell muttered.

'Shh,' said the old lady, quietly, from the head of the table. 'I'll have no talk like that in this house. You have to tell him Nell, Wal needs to know.'

One of the children climbed onto Gran's knee and wrapped his arms around her neck. The other climbed onto Robbo's knee. He cuddled her and muzzled her hair. When Gran covered the ears of the child on her knee Robbo followed suit.

'Sometimes I think I dream it or it's a horror story someone tells,' Nell says. 'That it's just a nightmare, it's not real.'

'Oh Nell,' Gran sighed. 'Tell him about the last time, so Wal knows.'

'When they came the other night,' Nell began in a whisper, 'it started out as the usual so-called rabbitin: spotlights, nasty loud music, calling names and makin threats from the safety of those big vehicles they have. Larry was out here, in the workshop. It was after footy trainin. Maybe he knew they'd come. Anyway, Larry was waitin for em. He walked out into the headlights when he heard em

comin. Had the bloody double barrel in his hand. Stood in front of em and shot it. Twice.'

'Fuck!' said Robbo quickly, sitting up, then, just as quickly, 'Sorry Gran, sorry.' He patted her hand and smiled sweetly. He turned to Nellie.

'Did he hit anyone?'

'Shots into the air, Alex said. He reckoned Larry looked like Ned Kelly. You know, the Mick Jagger one? I wasn't there. Heard the music. Heard the shots, louder even than that bloody music – that music is just bloody awful. Terrorises the whole place. That's the point I spose. Anyway, the shots, then the music's off and you could hear the engine roarin and they're backin up and chargin off up the road.' Nell giggled. 'Scared the livin daylights out of em I guess.'

Robbo sat shaking his head. 'Idiot! … That woulda raised the stakes.'

'Yep,' said Nellie and Gran in unison.

Robbo closed the notebook. He hadn't written anything. The kids climbed down and went out the front of the house. The adults sat quietly. Apart from the kids playing cricket, all Lou could hear was the crackle of the wood in the stove, the wind whistling at the window, and a dog barking in the distance.

'What's happenin in the town, then?' Nell asked, collecting the cups in front of her.

'Irene's in charge. They're gonna sit there til it's nearly dark then everyone's sposed to go home and stay there. She's not saying much. The old man's real angry. Doesn't want any more trouble. Says Larry deserves a dignified wake. I think everyone'll do what they say now. Even the young blokes.'

'Good, that's proper,' said Gran.

The four of them sat a while longer in silence. Then Robbo pushed his chair back and got up. He hugged Gran and Nellie. Lou

did the same, not knowing what else to do, and followed Robbo back out to the car. The kids ran up to him, grabbing his legs and imploring him to bowl. Lou sat on the bonnet while he began to bowl in a slow exaggerated movement, a proper overarm bowl intended to land gently in the right spot for an easy shot. After two bowls he caught the kid out, then bowled a couple more for a second boy. Then he batted, hitting an easy catch for the biggest girl and going out. The kids clamoured around him when he said he had to go, holding him by the legs until he promised to come back soon.

'So,' Robbo said, back in the car, 'I promised you I'd show you around.' The anxious distance that had overtaken him during the trip to the mission was gone; the warmth and promise of their first meeting took its place. Lou slunk down in the seat and put her feet on the dashboard. As they drove past the workshop Robbo pushed the on switch on the cassette player. Lou recognised Midnight Oil's new song, 'Beds are Burning'. Robbie sang along loudly – 'the time has come' – banging the steering wheel with his fist – 'to say fair's fair' – in time with the beat.

They drove out of the compound and turned down the track towards the river.

River

'See that branch, hanging out over the water?' Robbo said, slamming the door and pointing downriver. 'Spent half the school holidays swinging off that branch. We used to have a competition. See who could get a somersault in before you hit the water. One time Fish got in two somersaults, but he was amazing, better than anyone you ever see diving in the Olympics. Bad drought that year, but Fish could land on his feet. Dry years we'd all get somersaults in but we had to be bloody careful how we landed.'

Lou began to pick her way towards the tree. It leaned towards the water, a riot of desert reds, golds and ochres lacing its trunk. The faint low sun spiked through the bitumen-blue cloud and made the colours sing. Ribbons of silky bark dangled from the trunk. Lou pulled off a strip and absentmindedly shredded it while she watched Robbo sauntering towards her. She leaned back into the tree, hoping it would ground her.

'How did you get up to the branch?' The lowest branch was beyond Lou's reach.

'Had to get a lift up by someone else, then lie on the branch and pull them up while they kind of climbed up the trunk. We were pretty strong them days, fit too.'

'Show me,' Lou smiled.

'You won't be able to pull me up, skinny girl like you,' Robbo grinned.

'Try me,' she grinned back, tossing the bark away.

Robbo stood under the branch, getting a good footing in his cuban-heeled Williams boots, favourites of country singers and boarding school boys out for a night on a town. He'd changed his reefer jacket for a worn leather jacket that hung well on him, ditched the tie, and undone the top buttons of his white shirt. It was a short step from dull country lawyer to James Dean.

'Right-ee-o, got the spot,' called Robbo. 'Ya still game?'

'Course.'

Robbo pulled off his jacket and threw it into the grass then he made a step with his hands, bracing it against his bent knee.

'Come on then. Climb.'

Lou sat on a fallen branch, and bent to undo her laces. Robbo leaned back against the tree and watched her. She pulled off one shoe, then slid the sock off, pulling it from the toe. And then the other, Robbo watching all the time. She'd never known that taking off sandshoes could be so erotic.

When she stood, Robbo laced his hands together again and half squatted for Lou to climb. She put one foot in his hands and her hand on his shoulder. She could feel the heat of his body and smell the musty scent of his sweat and coconut in his hair. It would have been the simplest thing to kiss, but they just gazed into each other – his eyes solid dark dark brown, nearly black, and hers an opal pastiche, one blue as the midday sky and the other green as the sea, both flecked with blues and reds, both ever changing as if struggling to find the right colour to settle into. Lou pulled her other foot up onto Robbo's shoulder. He stood, raising his hand and her foot, so that she lifted towards the branch. She reached up and grabbed it. The branch was smooth. Lou struggled for a good grip, pulling her other foot up to Robbo's other shoulder. She balanced precariously, searching along the branch for something to hold onto, but she reached too far and lost her grip and began to fall. Robbo half-caught her as she tumbled down. They collapsed

together, laughing, on the edge of the river bank, then slid towards the river. Lou grabbed at a clump of grass and held it tight, but not before Robbo's feet were in the river. He pulled himself back up along Lou's legs until he could sit on the bank. He slipped one boot off and poured water out of it.

'Well, that was pathetic,' he laughed, emptying the other boot. 'Must have been fit when we were young! Or maybe it's cos you're a girl,' he ventured provocatively, giggling, wriggling backwards to avoid Lou's punch.

Robbo went back to the car to get dry shoes and socks. Lou sat on the fallen branch in the noisy quiet of the bush and wiped the dirt off her feet with her socks before she put them back on. Beautiful river gums stretched into the distance, weeping gently towards the dust-brown water. The distant bank was deeper, cut by the turn in the river. On the cleared land beyond the bank Lou could see white-faced red cattle lined up, looking at her. A blur of darkness appeared in the sky over the river. As it came closer, Lou could see it was a flock of cockatoos. She shivered at their sinister blackness and their accusative cry. She'd had a neighbour who would always go indoors if a flock of cockatoos flew overhead. He reckoned they were the souls of the Aborigines whose land it had originally been, before they were driven off so it could became farms and then suburbs.

Robbo appeared beside her suddenly. She'd expected to hear his footsteps crackle on the dry twigs and leaves that made up the forest floor, but he was quieter than the black cockatoos receding along the line of the river. Lou told him her neighbour's story.

'Yeah,' Robbo said. 'My mum used to say that too.'

Robbo threw a check car rug on the ground. He had an army disposals bag slung over his shoulder from which he took a thermos, two chipped enamel mugs and a Madeira cake still in its cake shop wrapper. Lou laughed.

‘You carry this stuff around in your car in case you get lucky?’

‘Yeah, absolutely,’ Robbo pushed his chest out and his shoulders back. ‘This happens to me everyday. I’ll be minding me own business and some spunk with curious eyes will appear and give me the come on and I end up having to provide afternoon tea.’

Lou grinned and kept quiet, smoothing out the rug, picking out sharp sticks and stones as she went, heaping them into a pile next to the rug. Then she sat cross-legged and laid out the picnic, setting the cups carefully on a flat piece of ground before unscrewing the top of the thermos and pouring the tea. Steam rose from the red-black fluid. Robbo passed her a bone-handled butterfly knife for the cake.

‘Do you know how to use one of these things? They’re illegal, aren't they?’ she asked, looking up at him. He was kneeling close by, gazing downriver after the cockatoos with one hand shading his eyes. He reached out for the knife with his free hand, without taking his eyes from whatever it was he was looking at, and flicked it open in a smooth single-handed motion. He passed the knife back to Lou, handle first. She recognised the knife because she'd had to have them explained to her when she’d queried whether butterfly was an appropriate adjective for a knife in an inner city crime article. Old Jeffries, who'd been reporting crime for decades, showed her one and explained how they worked. He couldn’t open it one-handed though. Jeffries told her that the knives came from the Philippines and that only the really serious criminals had them, or knew how to flick them open in a fight.

‘Illegal, yeah. Strange world, ain’t it? Only the cops and the crims are armed. Rest of us are expected to toe the line and live safe happy lives. My life ain’t like that. I live between the cops and the crims. It’s a lawyer thing,’ he laughed. ‘Got one of the crims to get me one of these and show me how to use it.’

‘Have you ever, you know? Stabbed anyone?’ Lou asked.

‘Only ever used it for Madeira cake. Once you’ve got one in your pocket it's like having magic protection. Dunno why, but it does help me stand me ground if anyone wants to go me.’ Robbo grinned. His teeth were white and strong and his smile was generous, lighting up his whole face. Lou felt like she could get smiled at like that forever. She slit open the plastic covering on the cake and sliced four pieces. She was ravenous. The slice crumbled as she picked it up, so she ate it by scooping it from the palm of her hand with her mouth. Robbo laughed at her.

‘Thought you fancy reporter girls were sposed to have proper manners,’ he teased. He eased himself down into a lying position, a Roman at a banquet, and sipped at the hot tea. He shut his eyes tight and grimaced as he swallowed.

‘Jeez, she makes it sweet. Must be half a kilo of sugar in that cup.’

‘Who?’ Lou ventured, suddenly imagining a wife tsking at the kids to stay quiet while she got Daddy's lunch ready.

‘Me Aunty. Aunty Margorie. Got aunties all over the place. Always somewhere to sleep, get me thermos filled, get something to eat.’

Lou sipped at the tea. He was right. She hadn't had tea that sweet since she fell off her bike when she was eleven and the girl guide next door had put straight Dettol on her knees and made her sit down and drink sweet tea as though it was medicine. She hacked off another piece of cake and scoffed it as though she hadn't eaten for a week.

‘Big appetite for such a skinny thing,’ Robbo murmured. Lou had to lean in close to hear him. She wondered if he did it on purpose, but she didn't care. The closer he was the better she felt. He traced circles on her knee and ran his finger slowly down her calf to her ankle, and ever so slowly moved it back up again. The tingling sensation reverberated through Lou’s body. She didn't know

whether to move towards him or stay still. She tried to cover her unease with chatter.

'You grow up around here?'

Robbo kept stroking her leg.

'My mob are from all around here, but I mostly grew up in the Smoke, the city's my country really. See that place across there?' he asked, gesturing with his eyes across the river. Lou looked up. The red cattle along the bank were grazing quietly.

'It's a farm?' Lou asked.

'Big station. Buckley's place. Used to be our place, both sides of the river.' Robbo sat up and pulled Lou towards him. She nestled in between his legs, her back against his chest, her knees pulled up to her chin. He held her tight between his thighs and wrapped his arms around her.

'There was a big massacre there, across the river. One Christmas about a century ago. Gubbas rounded up a posse and went out for a fight, chasing all the Murris towards the river, rounding them up like they were animals. A few got away by jumping in the river. Some died from the fall. Some drowned. Most got shot.'

'Why? Why did they round them up?'

'Stealing sheep, they reckoned. But our people had been hunting in this place forever. Figured it was their right. And what else were they going to eat? It was out of season for fish. They had strict rules about when you could and couldn't fish and stuff like that.'

'Hang on,' Lou said slowly, 'What do you mean, a massacre?' The enormity of the word. 'Like Hoddle Street last week? That weirdo killed seven people, injured another twenty.' She'd typed copy coming in over the phone as it happened, and there'd been debate in the newsroom about how many people constituted a massacre. It was horrific. 'How many people died here?' Lou was

taken aback by what she'd said. It seemed a bad reaction, to want a head count. She twisted around to look at Robbo. His dark eyes were close, looking into hers as if to try to read her. His breath was warm and sweet.

'More than thirty Murris died they reckon,' he paused, looking up at the cattle who were looking at them. 'They're fancy people, the Buckleys. Parliamentarians. Bankers. Respected pillars of the community. Victors write the history, so they say. And you know, Murris worked for Buckleys from the beginning, for nothing, or for rations, or for a pittance that they never saw anyway. Built the station up from bush. They worked side by side, a handful of Buckleys and heap of Murris, a few Gubba workers too, each dependent on the other. The Buckley men helped themselves to the Murri women whenever they wanted. Half the Murris round here are related to them. You can see it in people's faces, in the way they walk, in the shapes of their hands. That land should be ours. We should try an inheritance claim. We'd have more bloody luck with that than land rights claims.'

'The massacres, though, it is history, isn't it?' Lou ventured. 'It's not like that anymore.'

'That history's built into everything, from the bottom up. Buckleys have got a mansion over there they built using rocks from the fish traps the Murris had in this river. Buckley family don't even live there most of the time. You think the people who got chased off that land chose to live in the missions? In those crappy fibro houses?'

'Whoa,' Lou protested. 'Now you're starting to sound like Trewie. Australian History 101.'

'Hey, that's a bit rough,' Robbo responded, his voice as firm as his hold on Lou. 'Anyway, Trewie's a saint. Old-time commie agitator, our Trewie, went all over the bush fighting for equal rights. There's people who talk history and people who try to make it. The

world could do with more Trewies.'

'I just meant,' Lou stumbled, embarrassed, 'well, he does go on a bit.'

'True enough. Jam to my vegemite, Trewie is! Don't worry – you won't get a lot of talk out of me. I'm a man of action,' Robbo replied, tickling Lou under the ribs, making her giggle and squirm against him.

A kookaburra called out a laugh from high in the tree above them. 'Piss off up there,' Robbo called out, leaning back to look for the bird. 'Mind ya own bloody business ya fuckin stickybeak.'

Lou moved away from Robbo so she could look at him.

'Trewie told me about Birdie, this horrific story, and he said there were more, ten more Aboriginal deaths in custody, here and Queensland, just this year. Is that true?'

'Trewie told you that? Gets around, that bloke,' Robbo said slowly, admiration in his voice. 'Wal told me just before I came up. He said they're still checking the details, but it seems that way. Birdie, Larry, another bloke from around here, and seven in seven months way up north. Who knows what's happening in the rest of the country.'

'It's really suspicious, isn't it?' Lou asked.

'Well, at uni you learn that suicide in custody happens when someone gets put in jail and they freak out cos they've never been locked up before. Or they've been in prison so long they've had enough. And there's copycat stuff. But these blokes don't really fit the picture. Most of them had only been in the lock-up an hour or so. Lock-ups, prison, even the Homes, it's familiar. They've all been there before. Used to it.'

'Yeah? What else did you learn at uni?' Lou said, in a tone somewhere between envy and sarcasm. She wished she could go to uni. She'd heard it was all sex and drugs and rock and roll. Robbo

laughed and scratched his head.

'What else did I learn?' Robbo screwed up his eyes and clenched his teeth to indicate great effort. 'OK, got something: Aborigines make up about two per cent of the general population but 28.6 per cent of the population in police custody. In normal language: nearly a third of the people being held by the cops are Aboriginal! It's higher in the Territory and the West than here and down south, so that skews the figures, but still. Point is, the lock-up don't hold no terror for these boys.'

Lou wondered how to reply. From what everyone was telling her, if there weren't any Aborigines the cops wouldn't have much to do. She knew that was the wrong way of thinking about it and struggled to find a way to express the idea. Robbo began speaking again.

'The other thing is most of them, not Birdie, but the others, were real drunk. More than oh-point-two. Some, like Larry, more than oh-point-three.'

'Oh-point-three?' Lou was credulous. 'You sure?' Lou drew both numbers in the dirt with a stick. She stabbed at the decimal point in 0.3 with the stick. 'Oh-point-three? Can't be. Point-oh-five and they reckon you're too drunk to drive!'

'Sure I'm sure. Oh-point-three,' Robbo replied slowly. 'Sounds like they just about carried Larry into that lock-up, and no sooner are their backs turned than he's tying intricate knots in socks and balancin on doors.'

'So, man of action, what are you going to do about it?' Lou challenged. 'I haven't found out what really happened to Larry. Haven't got close. I've heard a few stories that might add up to something, but there must be a way to actually know what happened. And Birdie?' she challenged. 'He goes to hospital and ends up hanging in the lock-up a few hours later? How does that work?'

Robbo picked up one of the stones Lou had cleared from under the rug and threw it in a long high arch into the river. There was a big splash and a loud plop as it landed and disappeared.

'I don't think we'll ever know, really,' he said slowly, staring at the river. 'Won't know what really happened to Larry or Birdie or all the other young blokes, and women, who supposedly killed themselves while in the gracious custody of her majesty's finest. The cops won't tell the truth, that's for sure, even if they hate each other.' He reached for another stone, leaned back and threw it higher. There was a loud splash as it entered the water. 'Best case analysis,' Robbo went on, picking up another stone, 'is that some kindly, wise old judge will travel around the country on an expensive investigation, squeeze the old ladies' hands and weep crocodile tears with them,' he picked up another stone and arched it through the air, creating a splash as wide and broad as a fountain. 'Everyone will think something grand and spectacular will happen and things will be different, but in the end he'll write it all up and put the blame four-square on history and make some recommendations for piecemeal little improvements that won't change a thing.' Robbo paused and arched two stones into the air. Together they followed their trajectories and watched bubbles bouncing off each other as they splashed through the surface. Robbo leaned over to pick up the last stone. 'And the truth'll be lost somewhere deep below where no one can see it,' he finished, leaning right back, holding himself taut with his stomach muscles and launching the stone into the air.

Lou didn't know what to say, didn't know what to think even. In a day her world had somersaulted. She stared into the river. The longer she looked the more eddies and currents she could see, some languid, some whirlpools, breaking the apparent stillness of the surface.

Robbo tapped her gently on the shoulder and pointed to the long red cloud on the western horizon.

‘Dark’s coming,’ he said, pushing himself up from the rug and holding out his hand to help Lou up. ‘Time to make tracks.’

Light

The western sky was blood-red when Robbo and Lou got back into town. In the square two young men held branches in the fire until the leaves caught, and then waved them above their heads, tears of eucalypt flaring in the sky. Everyone else was on the move, saying slow goodbyes, making their way to cars, some already crossing the bridge to the settlement. The elderly couple were folding up their campchairs. The wake was over for today.

'Drop me off at the servo, I guess,' Lou said. 'Betta pick up the Beetle. I'm sposed to be at work in the morning.'

Robbo pulled off the road behind Lou's car. As they got out Monk came over to meet them. He and Robbo greeted each other like old friends.

'Car's buggered love,' Monk said to Lou, shaking his head solemnly. 'It isn't the timing. There's a crack in the block. You know what that means?'

Lou nodded, recalling how generously her ex had insisted that she have the car while he would make do with the stereo. Bastard must have known, Lou thought.

'It's building up rust in the pillars too. Barely worth fixing,' the mechanic said, speaking gently, breaking bad news.

'I'm going back to the Big Smoke tonight,' Robbo said, grinning as though he won the lottery. 'Give ya a lift if you'll do your share of the driving.'

Lou looked at Robbo with relief and felt a surge of joy as she

remembered Bern's offer to reimburse her for the car. This was turning out better than she could have imagined. She'd get to hurt Bern via his expense account *and* get to go home with Robbo. Bern wouldn't have to know the car was beyond repair, and it'd be fun telling him she had a new boyfriend. It couldn't get any better.

'Could you, you know, take it off my hands?' she asked Monk.

'Sure,' he replied. 'Any number of blokes around here happily take it apart for scrap.'

'Deal,' she laughed. 'I'll get my stuff.' Robbo went for hamburgers and chips while Lou cleared her belongings from the car, finding scarves and rings and pens she'd thought long lost. She threw everything in Robbo's boot and got in the passenger seat. Across the square she could see a weak light on the verandah of the house next to the police station. Lou regretted not talking to the elderly woman who sat there. She regretted not talking with any of the people in the square. She could have done a whole lot better, even with the little time she had.

Robbo opened the passenger door and waved a big newspaper parcel smelling of hot chips under Lou's nose. She reached for the parcel and he pulled it away, giggling.

'You drive. I'll eat.'

'Ain't fair! I'm hungry too.'

'I'll feed you m'dear.' Robbo put his hand on Lou's shoulder. A hot tingle rippled through her body. 'Come on, shove over. We've got a long drive ahead.'

Lou slid across the seat to the driver's side. She'd always wanted to drive a big V8. They were soon on the open road. Robbo fed her chips and held her hamburger so she could bite into it. Every now and then he offered her a sip of Coke. When the food was finished, Robbo wrapped up the paper and threw it in the back seat. Lou couldn't remember the last time she felt so content.

Robbo curled up sideways, hugging his knees, his head resting against the back of the seat. He looked at Lou for a long time, stroking her arm and neck.

'You're alright, you know,' he said.

'Yeah, you too.'

'Lou's a funny name for a girl.'

'Lucia,' she turned and smiled. 'Mum's Italian.'

'Ah, explains why you're so, well …' he said, sliding his hand between her legs. 'Lucia's pretty, sexy, sort of sophisticated. Lou's a bloke's name.'

'Got teased about Lucia the whole time at school. No one would ever say it right. Loo-see-ya, they'd say, or they'd call me Lucille Balls. Or Lucrezia Borgia, after god-knows-what – my old man said it was the name of Buffalo Bill's gun and that I should be proud of it. Or Lulu after that movie. I couldn't take that. Dad calls me Lulu sometimes, but I wasn't going to have kids at school calling me that. Mum even changed it to Louise on all the school forms but it didn't make any difference. My best friend, Noelene, called me Lou, and it just kind of stuck. We got to be Lou and Noel – you're right, blokes' names – like we were brickies or something.'

'Your old man Italian too? Williams isn't an Italian name, is it?'

Lou was surprised, flattered. Robbo must have been paying attention to know her name.

'Nah, he's, I dunno, Australian? Irish? Always singing Irish songs, does that make him Irish? He's just an Aussie bloke, you know. What does Australian mean, anyway?' Lou sighed and shrugged. 'What about you? Your family?'

'Mum's a Murri from up around here. Dad's a Gub, so was Mum's father. Neither of them were around much. I grew up with uncles. They taught me how to box, look after myself.'

'Box? Is that you got so, um,' Lou was fondly remembering the

firmness of Robbo's body, 'strong?'

'Manly and muscular, you mean?' Robbo laughed, 'yeah, training seven days a week. I'm a disappointment to them as a boxer, but they like that I show up for training.'

'Well, sure looks good on ya,' Lou said, glancing across at him.

Robbo rifled through the box of cassettes with his free hand, muttering to himself as he read the album names. He chose one and held it aloft as if it was a prize.

'Found it! Music to sleep to ... You ok with Leonard Cohen?' he asked.

'Perfect.'

By the end of 'Dance Me to the End of Love' Robbo was asleep. Lou sang along quietly to each song. She'd heard the album at her first journo's party, not long after she starting working for the paper, and had gone out the next morning and bought it. Lou took it as a good omen that Robbo had chosen to play it, she had so many good memories associated with the album. She and Noel even did their own rendition of 'Hallelujah' when no one else was around. Singing along with it was making her look forward to getting home, to seeing Noel and telling her about Robbo and Collooney. Tomorrow she'd have to start trying to understand everything she'd learnt. For now it was enough to watch the V8 eating up the white lines in tune with the song.

Lou glanced in the rear-view mirror. The light that had been hovering behind her was now much closer and brighter. With a shudder of fear Lou recalled the terrifying encounter with the road train on the trip up. She crunched down through the gears and put her foot on the brakes, pulling off to the side of the road. The car didn't slide at all. Robbo woke up and sat up straight, wondering what was happening. Suddenly a siren burst through the music and a flashing blue light throbbed through the car as a police car overtook them and pulled up in front.

‘Shit,’ Robbo gasped. ‘Where did that come from?’

‘I thought it was one of those road trains. I got pushed off the road by one on the way up,’ Lou was rattled, worried and speaking too quickly. ‘I just reacted. I'm sorry.’

‘No worries,’ Robbo said calmly. ‘Bastards probably just want to let us know they’re watching.’

Lou was relieved by Robbo’s composure and reassurance, and glad he wasn't angry. The cop was getting out of his car and coming to speak to her. As she wound down her window Robbo said ‘Show him your licence and say as little as possible.’

The cop leaned his head into the car, too close for Lou's comfort, and looked around.

‘Evening Robbo,’ the cop said. Robbo nodded but said nothing. Lou was surprised that they knew each other. She handed the cop her licence.

‘Lucia Williams, eh? And what do you do down there in Surry Hills?’ he asked, reading her licence and writing her name and address in his book.

‘Investigative Journalist,’ Lou replied coolly, using her best posh accent.

‘Keep yourself out of trouble, Miss Williams,’ the cop said as he handed back her licence. ‘Or did someone already tell you that today?’ He smirked, closed his book and walked back to his car. Robbo began rifling through the cassettes for something different. The cop did a u-turn and headed back towards Collooney. Lou started the V8 with a roar and pulled out onto the road.

Mary

Mary could feel the dark of night descending, the shimmy in the air. The people were beginning to leave the square. She heard the footfalls on the roads, the footpaths. Heard car doors bang, two three four times the *err-err-err* of struggling starter motors, the rising *raa-raa-raa* of engines engaging, the crunch of gravel as vehicles pull on to the road, the spin of rubber as they take off. Irene will come soon and say goodnight and Mary will go inside.

Will they come tomorrow? How many days' wake for that poor boy? How much longer does Rene have to sit there in the cold, sit proud and tall on that splintery bench? She'd rather be home crumpled in a heap and weeping. Mary crumples and weeps for her in the night. Feels for Rene crumpled and weeping over in the settlement. During the days they'll sit under the sky, separate but together, until the worst is over.

Every day the same. At dinner time, when the sun is high, the gate squeaks and then it scrapes on the path and Esma's there with her meals-on-wheels and she says 'Mary I told you not to sit outside it's too cold' and Mary says 'Who's going to fix that gate Esma? It needs fixing' and Esma sighs and says 'Kev's gunna do it Mary, just his busy, ya know.'

Every day the same conversation. Mary is sick of it. Every day the same squeak the same scrape. Esma with the same talk, the same tray, the same fuss. Ya should do this Mary ya should do that. Esma leaving, scrape squeak. Kev never comes.

'Why ya sittin out here in the cold Mary? Ya should be inside. It's

winter Mary.'

Mary wishes Esma would speak properly. She taught her to speak properly at school. The girl was bright enough.

Esma pulls the wicker table in front of Mary and puts down the tray. Takes off the tin lid. Food from the hospital. Tastes as plain out of hospital as it tastes in. Lukewarm. Better than nothing, Mary knows. She doesn't complain. She eats it all. No one takes dinner to Rene. She eats for Rene too.

'Get ya some tea Mary, while ya eat that up,' Esma would say. Eat that is enough. Eat that up is for little kiddies. Esma would go inside and be forever making the tea. Going through the cupboards probably, getting the little bits and pieces that she liked: Mary would never notice. Mary doesn't care. She can see now that it is all just things. Things cause more trouble in this world than anything else. 'It's mine.' 'No, it's mine. Give it back.' All those schoolyard fights just practice for being grown up.

She and Rene had to share because Rene had nothing. Rene never played with dolls before she came to work here. She didn't know her own mother or father. She knew her sister but her brothers were sent somewhere different, a different Home. After Rene got married and she had to leave she went and found her brothers but they never found their mother or their father. Rene's life was so much sorrow, but she laughed and sang anyway.

Rene had to do all the sweeping and the washing and the washing up and lots of other jobs, grown-up jobs. She had to clean Mary's shoes for school. Mary went to school while Rene worked. She was just a girl like Mary, just a year older but she had to wash Mary's clothes and everyone else's. Rene had to be up first in the dark and get the fire started so that the kettle would boil and old Annie could cook the breakfast. When she was little Mary had a hollow rotten feeling down to her socks when she thought about Rene having to wash her clothes and the floors and work all the time while Mary went to school and did piano lessons and played

with her dolls. At church they said everyone was god's children and equal in god's eyes. No one ever piped up in church and said if we're so equal why is it that they wash our floors our clothes our dirty dishes. Everyone just said amen amen. Even the blackfellas said amen amen from the back rows. In the picture theatre the blackfellas got the front rows and in the church they got the back rows. Mary never knew how they worked it out. She wanted to know why, if everyone was equal, some nights there were gangs of white men in front of the house, at the edge of the bridge, to stop the blackfellas coming into town from the mission. Mother told her it was just how things were and to stop making a fuss. When Rene left and Mary started to help at the school and then she became the teacher and it seemed normal for the blackfella kids to sit separate it just seemed normal she didn't think about it just went along with it. It was only after she stopped teaching and started losing her eyesight and living in her memories that the hollow rotten feeling came back and she knew by then that the feeling was called shame.

That day when Mary heard the feet dragging on the gravel, the lock-up door banging, then the low slow screams like a trapped animal bellowing it made her go to that place in her head when she and Rene got in trouble for cutting the doll's hair. Rene wanted to be a hairdresser she never wanted to be anything else. Mary could never decide what she wanted to be sometimes a nurse sometimes a teacher it was hard to know which one but she never wanted to be a hairdresser or work in a shop. One day when it was real hot it must have been summer holidays she and Rene sat in the shade on the verandah with their feet in a bucket to keep cool. They sat on the verandah with the dolls and they examined their different hairstyles. They both hated the hairstyle on Elizabeth the doll named after the queen. Mary sneaked inside and got Mother's dressmaking scissors from her basket. Rene did the cutting. It was a real modern style, short and snappy, that's what they called it in the magazines short and snappy for the modern girl they turned

Elizabeth into a modern girl and she looked a lot happier. Rene was going to make a real good hairdresser. They were both very proud.

But the yelling burst through, quiet yelling, that yelling and screaming that isn't loud because you don't want anyone to hear but you want to make it real clear that you're yelling and screams too but muffled as if they were covered up with blankets. At first Mary thought everyone could hear and she waited for the tramp of feet someone coming running but no one came. It was getting near teatime and mothers noisy in the kitchen and kids squabbling and the telly is always on everywhere now some people even put them in the kitchen no one can hear anything else any more. And next door the other side was the court and it was empty. And behind was the car yard and it was closing up and everyone starting their cars and listening to the radio and going home. Mary felt so lonely there the only one to hear the screams the muffled screams and the quiet yelling. She hated that noise hated to think what was happening and she went back to that hot day and she and Rene playing hairdressers. Rene was going to be a real good hairdresser and she knew exactly what she wanted to be but Mary still couldn't decide. Rene had a beautiful smile and eyes dark as night and teeth white as the little jasmine flowers that smelt so sweet. She was Mary's best friend but Mary wasn't allowed to tell. Mother wouldn't approve.

The screams-under-blankets stopped and the quiet yelling stopped and then there was whispering anxious whispering on the driveway on the other side of the hedge. Boots crunching on the drive and car doors opening, three of them and banging shut one two three and the car started first time and backed down the drive and onto the road and took off in a hurry and then it was all quiet, dead quiet. Then Mary remembered the end which was the only bad part, when Mother comes and sees Elizabeth's hair and she's so angry and how could you Mary what were you thinking your Aunt Phyllis gave you that doll she was lovely like the queen she was your best and now she's ruined how could you? Even though Mary

was little she knew it wasn't a question and that's when she thought she might be a teacher after all. Mother talked as though Rene wasn't even there. Mary and Rene didn't say anything and looked at the ground. After Mother went away they held hands and didn't talk just listened to the flies buzzing and watched the magpies chasing away the little birds.

Late in the night there was noise around the town. Something was up.

The next day when Esma brought the meals-on-wheels squeak scrape and stayed to make a cup of tea and rifle through the cupboards Mary asked her if something was up. One of the boys, Esma said, one of Irene's grandchildren she has so many she'll look after anyone's littlies she's a saint, one of her boys hung imself in the lock-up. Those boys always hanging themselves these days she said. Which boy? That one who was so fast you know he played centre, sometimes half forward flank, and if he was playing their side would always win no matter who we put against him. You know the one, she said.

Mary knew him from when he was little. At school he was a happy smiling little boy he was a pleasure to know. After he grew up he always said hello Miss Mary when he walked by always called out hello Miss Mary as though she was young and pretty. Sometimes he said I hear your gate squeaking Miss Mary do you want me to fix it and Mary would say thankyou Larry but it's alright Kev is going to fix it one weekend when he's not so busy. Over and over Mary heard the screams in blankets the quiet yelling the car starting first time and tearing off down the street like there was an accident somewhere. She couldn't get rid of that sound.

It was quiet for a couple of days real quiet. Esma would come squeak scrape and talk about the fight down in Tassie or the footie or anything but not about Larry. Mary wanted to ask about Rene but Esma didn't talk to Rene.

Then there was the funeral. Mary knows what a funeral sounds

like she's heard so many she'll hear her own coming. After the funeral she could hear the family gathering in the square, making a fire in a drum so they wouldn't be too cold. So many relatives they have to go into the square even Mary's garden wouldn't be big enough. Rene stopped at the gate when she was walking home and called out and Mary stood up on the verandah. She called out Rene Rene my deepest sympathy Rene I'm so so sorry. Mary wanted to go out to the street and hold her but she couldn't manage the steps by herself. The old man was with Rene he was alright, Mary knows he'll look after her. And all those kiddies they'll look after her.

The young ones must have stayed on in the square Mary could hear them talking still when she went to bed. She couldn't sleep she hardly ever sleeps properly anymore. She heard planes and thought how rare it was to hear planes except when it's cropdusting and they never do that in the night. She heard vehicles coming and going from the police station next door something was going on and boots scrunching on gravel, proper leather boots like Father wore when he was a soldier.

Something happened. Then silence for a moment as though everyone got a surprise. Then bad noise. Glass shattering. Fight noise. Bottles breaking. Over on the far side of the square. Esma told her the next day it was outside the pub. Some of them were arrested she said.

This morning the wake again. Rene stopped at the gate to Mary's house on her way to the square and made a low sing-song whistle and Mary limped to the front door. I won't have this trouble Mary, Rene said, I won't have this trouble in Larry's name. We're going to sit in the square in peace. I won't have my boy associated with this trouble. Mary clutched a verandah post for support, stretched out her arm, extended shaking fingers, Rene, Rene, my deepest sympathy, I don't know what to do Rene. It's too late for us now Mary, Rene said, reaching out across the gate, we should have done something a long time ago.

Irene sits in the square and Mary sits in her wicker chair. If Rene can sit in the cold square then I can sit here on the verandah Mary says to herself, I sit and she sits. Mary wears her old garden coat and does her knitting even though she makes too many mistakes at least it keeps her hands warm. And when Esma comes squeak scrape she says it's too cold Mary what are you doing sitting out here in the cold you're a stubborn old thing. And Mary says I wish I'd been a lot more stubborn a long time ago.

Acknowledgments

This story comes from a visit to northern New South Wales in 1987 to investigate widely reported 'race riots' that followed the death of a young Aboriginal man in police custody. It was the second Aboriginal death in custody in that area in six weeks, and the 16th in Australia in eight months. A report of this visit appeared in the Marxist newspaper *Australasian Spartacist*. Discussions we had with people in that town at that time are echoed in this story. Visits to Aboriginal 'mission' settlements in other northern NSW towns, and discussions with Aboriginals in Sydney during the heated build-up to the Bicentennial celebrations also find their way into the story.

Among the many histories and social studies that informed this work, two noteworthy sources were *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History* by Stuart Rintoul (Heinemann, 1993) and *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert* (Allen Lane, 1977; Penguin, 1978). Also useful were the publicly available reports of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody whose investigations exonerated police and upheld verdicts of suicide, death by misadventure or by natural causes.

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