

Something

Secret

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## **I**

ON THE sun-bleached top path that blinding afternoon, I paused, looking down through those pathetic shrub things clinging to the rock. Down into the Archie “Bonko” Graves Reserve.

There was a strange moment. A trick of the light, perhaps.

The incident stuck in the mind and, although I stood still for the duration, it was a turning point.

A hot day. Going home from Mad Bob’s. Low ebb. Struggling shrubs. All that.

I paused, looking down.

Suddenly something massive, strange, transparent and amorphous undulates down in the public space where only grass should sway and naught but trees, clouds and sundry solids are permitted to cast shadow.

It catches the eye, this undulating thing.

It would.

Down in the paddock, on the reserve, there was something big, big and shimmering silver black, hovering on the grass, largely invisible and resembling a force field in a sci fi movie.

Down in the reserve, inside this near-transparent lobe of rubbery restraint, something suddenly eddied and swirled like a writhing shoal of countless tiny silver fish.

It was big, the size of a tennis court, and near that ridiculous bandstand that was a beacon to perverts far and wide. The mysterious thing was a great kidney-shaped loaf of frantic energy contained by who-knows-what.

Just for a moment, a second or two, imposed on all that normal green and gravel path, came a great blister of translucence containing a foaming alien frenzy, flashing silently and incomprehensibly into life down in the Archie “Bonko” Graves Reserve.

How can this be explained?

As suddenly as it came, it was gone. No trace remained. No print remained upon the sward.

People nearby showed no awareness of this alarming curiosity.

One woman walked quite close. Five metres. Good legs. Didn’t turn a hair.

Nobody cried out. Nobody fled in horror. Only I, or so it seemed, could see this fleeting, menacing, powerful thing as I looked down through shrubs and mocking wind from the top path.

It could have been a trick of the light. I could be fucked in the head. It could be something else but, trust me, no good will come of it.

## **II**

FAT EDDIE called this morning. Of all fuckwits!

It being one of Every Second Tuesday I was due for early release from not-particularly-gainful employment at Mad Bob's Bottle Magic so Eddie and I met at the huge, sprawling, much extended, vaguely historic Town Hall Hotel just after two that afternoon.

In the thirst and thrust of daily life it had slipped my mind that the huge lummoX was deeply stupid, frequently broke, swirled with malice and offended all senses.

I hoped Eddie might say something encouraging. It emerged, however, that he was upset about fat boils swelling and bursting in the crack of his arse, near the top. Fortunately I was not required to check the veracity of his unexpected confession.

He was, he claimed in hushed solemnity, secretly using tissues to staunch the flow of pus and feared some sort of rampant, stigmatising growth edging beyond conventional bodily coverings like rotting ratatouille with crumbled Stilton cheese.

I was taken aback. Certainly his gait seemed less spontaneous than of yore, and he did squirm and labour somewhat over his bar stool, but I know nothing of arseboils nor their treatment and said as much in a cold mumble strewn with harsh obscenity.

I am tall and thin and like to think that, in my own modest way, despite budgetary constraints and indolence, I cut something of an elegant, Bohemia-tinged dash.

Eddie was repulsive with or without anus issues.

We were an unlikely duo and I regretted my weakness in coming.

Along with bum crack conflict it turned out that Eddie also suffered an infection and discharge of the left ear and hoped that ear medication provided by some 24-hour bloke in Redfern might help the bum boils get better.

As evidence of this aural ailment a vile wad of sodden cotton wool was wedged in the orifice in question. I preferred not to consider that.

For reasons of his own, Fat Eddie couldn't bring himself to mention arse pus to The Quack but he had no such compunction about keeping me firmly in the loop.

Eddie: never pure, painfully simple.

It must be six weeks since I'd seen the pus-arsed twerp. Easily. It wasn't as if we were close, thank fuck. He said nothing in the least encouraging, it was his shout, four knuckle-dragging footie fans had annexed the jukebox, the new barman looked like a psycho and my outlook was bleak.

A large silent screen overhead showed fierce creatures catching and devouring their prey in particularly lurid Barvision™.

Ed feared, as well he might, that the crack boils unchecked would wholly infest the sultry territory about his loins and completely ruin some improbable social adventure he had in mind.

Lying fat bastard. Suppurating boils I could come at.

Crocodiles above erupted on an hysterical horsey thing and snapped it by the fleshy throat and by a hawser tail and dragged it down and slaughtered it in horrible muddy silence.

Somehow, Eddie acquired a bowl of hot chips and started talking of his links with a local conspiracy to produce and freely distribute a fortnightly magazine or newspaper of cultural matters. I grunted like a cynical elk and grabbed a few chips as Eddie insisted that this proposed periodical would be good for people like me.

I drew no comfort from his prediction. My spirits slithered to new depths. The Pub carried on regardless.

“Here’s Dan Lute,” said Eddie, his slimy face suddenly aglow.

A thin, sharply dressed man with a white leather belt arrived, threading through the scabby furniture and smattering of lacklustre patrons. By the sub-standards of the venue this visitor was scrupulous in personal hygiene.

The Town Hall, of course, was slumped in the post-luncheon doldrums of disparate desperates, dickheads and neo-derelicts, many of whom gaped openly at this so-called man who exercised power over the smoothing iron and, conceivably, its associate board.

I wasn’t much taken by Dan Lute, who seemed a bit full of himself in a smug, well-laundered manner, but at least he had a white leather belt and bought a round without demur.

He looked about 30 and turned out to be the putative, part-time editor of this cultural waste of time and other resources mentioned earlier. He said it could be very useful for people like me. Eddie had mentioned my name. Wanker.

Rank conspiracy hung in the air. I couldn’t help but feel that, in some mysterious way, I was being set up.

I’d never heard of this Lute fellow. He was a bit wispy all round, pale, tall and thin, he was made all of long cylinders, and wore a rabid-red business shirt and crisp charcoal trousers with, of course, the white leather belt.

He was a skinny bastard, intense, possibly Pommy, probably queer, nicely spoken and full of crap. To be fair, quite out of sequence, he did buy the next round to celebrate what, as I recall, he called The Moment.

It was his money to do with as he saw fit.

Dan Lute didn’t seem clear as to why people such as I might find his publishing folly useful nor was he across much else of the project. He did, however, think I might care to contribute. Payment in the perilous early days of publication, he explained without shame, would be in kind, probably in the form of CDs and invitations to cultural things with free drink.

Bastard.

To end this bread-line publishing drivel, I agreed with everything said and enthused briefly about a time when firm detail from Dan would allow me to really get to grips with the print concept, the aims and needs of the project and my modest capacity to make meaningful contribution.

Of diaries with never enough days on offer I said I would say nothing.

They seemed totally taken in by this last bit which, I thought, was quite a reach.

The bar grew busier and they wouldn't let the bloody subject drop. Eddie, it seems, was expected to comment in the magazine on something that meant Computer Games. That wouldn't do his arse much good.

The unfortunate truth of the matter was this: in preference to engaging with this depressing and doomed enterprise I would rather, as my dear old Mum used to say, suck diarrhoea through a sweaty stoker's sock in a sewer.

Ignorant of my true feelings, with a straight face, soft with due solemnity, Dan Lute said this publication was to be called CityZen.

He wrote it on a coaster.

CityZen.

This fool was not prepared to give me a break, fucking or otherwise.

I didn't even smirk as Dan launched a commentary on the masthead of his unborn organ but a gobbet of scorn crystallised and lodged in my throat and rivulets of perfectly good beer came down my nose.

Dan Lute was so disturbed by the gasping and flailing that he got yet another round in.

"Steady on Dan," I wheezed pitifully. "It must be my go, or Eddie's."

Possibly moved by my abundant, but tasteful, battler spirit Dan said he had certain limited funds at his disposal to further the interests of CityZen.

"Good man," I spluttered.

Hunched over the bar, shaken but determined, I put the dramatic spasm of contempt down to a subversive sliver of Eddie's hot chip and graciously resigned myself to Mr. Lute's hospitality.

### ***III***

FEELING SHOCKING I phoned in sick, hid marinating in the bath, smoked and listened to choir and orchestra rubbish on the radio. I really don't know why they bother.

Spent most of the afternoon sprawled in curtained gloom, trouser-free, moaning a bit and half-watching episodes of *Mega Man* on TV.

I was polishing off a nourishing bowl of Wanky Wheatie Whatever's when fucking Fat Eddie called on an unexpectedly sticky telephone to simper on about how well things had gone yestere'en with Dan Lute.

I missed his prefatory ramblings trying to work out what the bloody stickiness was all about. Fuck knows. Harken to the Fat Boy.

Dan, it seems, really liked my energy. Fucking idiot. As far as he and Eddie were concerned my energy was excellent and it had been a great night.

It was pointless to argue. I told him my telephone felt strangely sticky and quite unpleasant but he chose not to pursue the matter.

Eddie recognised the short notice but wished to invite my energy and I, to a Trivia Night that very night at The Last Goose.

I gave him smooth busy-busy-bullshit leaving me looking good, in demand and, moreover, free to sample the cheesy pleasures of The Last Goose or not as whim or desperation dictated.

“Might see yuz later,” he burred hopefully down the line. Revolting creature really.

Questions, questions, questions . . .

Would another serve of Eddie’s arse issues bring it all crashing down? Would the company of strangers, horny or otherwise, mitigate these repellent matters?

There was little cash to hand and nothing but grief with the plastic. The Goose was a shithole and its master, Tony Barnet, a complete sleazy wanker. Still, one never knew.

Started watching a lurid gangster thing on TV with dashing Nick Loftus being loud, mad and violent. There was a sub-plot in which a very attractive woman got her gear off twice before being placed sleeping in a shallow trench, woken for gloating purposes and slowly nail-gunned to death by the whiney ex-cop photographer jerk.

Hunger was the decider; burgers, chips, sauce and green stuff de jour to be precise, and then, if inclined, on to the oblivion of The Last Goose.

A gloom, comparable to that of a black cat’s colon, prevailed at Mr. Barnet’s parlour of piss. I groped through the light fug of body fragrance, ullage and a sparse, nerdy trivia crowd.

No sooner did I enter The Goose, saunter to my notional host, stand by his busy table and note a couple of half-decent women at it, than did Pus-arsed Eddie, a fool at the best of times, ask pointedly if my attractive and exciting new business associate, crucial to the bullshit excuse liberated earlier, had got back to me or had I given up hope?

I smiled.

“Our discussions were wide-ranging,” I remarked airily, “but it’s too early to start celebrating yet.”

“Very wise,” said Eddie, gyrating uncomfortably in his bentwood chair.

A half-decent woman was looking at me expectantly. So was Eddie, the sweaty cretin.

Eddie had given me a big build-up. One night only. I was the unofficial, unpaid cabaret. A fucking raconteur. That cheered me up no end.

## *IV*

ALL THE bottles were lined in wait that afternoon at Mad Bob’s Bottle Magic. I had to go in. Two to ten.

Slept to the crack of noon, ate Wheetie shit, wrote yesterday stuff, hit the forlornly echoing ATM, came in.

Squat, dark and hairy, Ron Monkhouse was in residence and, in the light of yesterday's dive on my part, doled out a bollocking to blister asbestos.

Grotesque little freak. His face was like a hairy bowl of autumn fruits as he slammed out into the blinding afternoon shrieking about lefty thieves and piss taking bastards.

I sat there surrounded and looking at all those bottles and flagons and cans, casks and jeroboams and jars and I was forcibly struck by the sheer amount of piss the human animal consumes. They're chucking it down all over. Global.

Historically, of course, everybody was pissed all the time.

I needed to turn up that day because there was to be an appearance from a wholesale rep called Trevor who supplied a bit of excellent weed and often had free samples of grog to splash about the twilight world of The Independent Pissmonger. Trevor had been known to take a cash cheque at a pinch and was often seen about the local dens of iniquity.

Trevor had two piss promotions to push this day, the first, for Old Kilty Global Blend, and the second for a hitherto unknown beverage called Satan's Fire, a blend of vodka, alcoholic fruit derivatives and permitted additives which Trevor confidently characterised as liquid crap with a kick like a shotty.

Old Trev still had half a cardboard display thing and several cases of stock to throw up when indifference demanded a break from ceaseless toil.

As Trevor and I concluded a modest private transaction in one of several security camera blind spots, my associate was distracted by his mobile telephone and wandered away making conciliatory gestures to me and speaking, hushed and in earnest, to someone else.

So many bottles.

The unused mind at my disposal drifted back to Trivia Night at The Last Goose.

One of the half-decent women, whose name was Nash, or something very like, seemed to interrogate me. Pale. Conspicuous tits.

"What are you working on now?" she asked as if it mattered.

"Hangover," I smirked winningly. This woman had the oddest gums, not unattractive exactly but unexpected. Was she on drugs?

She looked about thirty and, in my swift appraisal, possibly up for it.

"Seriously," she almost twinkled. "What's next?"

On the spot, and wholly without a safety net, I improvised a broad line of bullshit about a six-part television series based on the life of a serial killer called Rufus Preston (1792-1834). I went on to claim that the producers were talking to Liam Flank for the title role.

"Wow," said Nash.

So-called reality struck. Recollection of events at The Last Goose had to go on hold as Trevor returned to the checkout looking somewhat shifty and of unhealthy high colour.

“Jew live near ‘ere?” he asked, scanning the deserted place anxiously for eavesdroppers, and I said that I did, just round the corner.

With impressive speed and clarity, wiry Trevor, 31, explained his predicament.

Rampant Alcohol Theft had prompted a wide-ranging security clampdown by his employer. A timely telephone call had, that very minute, alerted him to a secure clamp unexpectedly in wait at his next professional port of call.

Trevor insisted that coarse and self-serving claspers could easily misconstrue the history and purpose of certain beverages currently in The Van, and this could wrongly result in pain, loss, shame and two years in the slammer to some sorry scapegoat if not Trevor himself.

A history of malicious and largely unproven allegations calculated to undermine his creative marketing and stock control systems would, Trevor felt, further mar his prospects in both the adult beverage industry and the wider community beyond.

Urgently Trevor suggested the following plan: he would finish building and stocking the cardboard thing and man the checkout if necessary while I hastened to my nearby home in The Van. There I would unload, leave and lock from the world certain bottles and other receptacles the contents of which were for my own consumption. These bottles and other receptacles were for me, to keep, to use for free, gratis, buckshee, zip, no strings, no questions, and, into the bargain, I would be warmly thanked and not forgotten for helping a mate at a difficult time.

“Take those, those, those, those, them and those two. There’s a shit-load of packaging but take those two big ones as well,” said Trevor. “And use the trolley or you’ll bugger yourself. Better take all those promotional mini-casks as well. It’s a mystery where those fuckers came from. Take them chips and nuts. And them. Can’t remember why but they are quite shonky.”

“Are you sure?” I asked with a tremor of child-like wonder in the voice.

“Fucking oath!” Trev insisted with sudden, unexpected cheer. “I’m going right up The Man with all things pointy and rough!”

I departed my place of employ with The Van, enough piss to float a convocation of Catholic clergy and a rare lightness of heart.

With free provisions stacked and scattered all over my lounge room, I was back at Mad Bob’s Bottle Magic beaming and unbuggered within forty minutes and, for a while, I was greatly cheered and determined to show those bitch bastards out there!

Brilliant score but.



# V

A FEW days drooled past and nothing much happened at all really. Nothing out of the ordinary. Usual crap. Life went on.

I felt a bit tender following a personal visit to my place of work from Stacey.

I was sitting there amid the flasks of fiery fluid not particularly minding Ron Monkhouse's business when, suddenly and unexpectedly, my colleague Terry Winston is up off the deck and shoots through with naught but a simple: "Fuuuuck!" of explanation.

I am face to face with the mother of children recognised as mine.

Without so much as a by-your-leave, she told me I was a completely useless piece of shit and a waste of DNA, she spat at me and demanded the repayment of so-called monies and claimed that the mere sight of me made her sick and that the vile trauma of our former relationship was a corrosive damage from which she was unlikely to wholly recover in this life or, should one prove to exist, the next.

Christ, she went on!

Terry Winston had the right idea, I reflected through the torrent of spittle and verbal abuse.

Terry had been contentedly failing to fix a fridge, recognised that old redhead psychopath look and buggered off round the back. Smart move.

Stacey scared a couple of customers away with her innate warmth and snappy one-liners and all things considered, well, several of them, I thought she looked pretty good, actually.

But I'd heard it all before. A root was clearly out of the question and there was nothing to be done.

"Why are you such a mess?" she demanded.

At least she shut up to wait for an answer but still she stood at the checkout, staring madly and wheezing like a walrus in heat.

As far as the answer to her question was concerned, I neither knew nor cared but suggested she shut up and fuck off lest I felt constrained to call the cops.

There was more from Stacey touching a range of failings she found in me. I pointed at the security camera and I started to poke at the phone.

"We're leaving the State," Stacey observed firmly. "Me, Davy and Lolly. Leaving. Permanently. I won't say where. You can get fucked."

And off she flounced leaving me to reflect on what an unrelieved pain in the quoit she had become.

There was no point kidding myself: I wasn't much help to Davy and the whiney girl in these difficult times. No illusions there. Stacey going somewhere else seemed best for all concerned.

Stacey. What kind of a name is that? Who thought that one up?

It's the sort of name historic window cleaners would invent by accident.

In grand, dark, Dickensian squalor one of their window cleaner women would be darning a washcloth, or whatever it is they do, and, without benefit of thought, an impromptu noise would come out of her.

"Sta-cey."

This would happen in one of those moments where conversation falls off all about, rats cease their scuttling, dripping water dries. Sudden silence is shattered by a barely-human, singsong croak.

"Sta-cey."

One minute a mechanical noise, lifeless, hard, rasping and meaningless, squeezed from a grindingly poor, brain-dead window cleaner's woman, the next, a popular forename with deplorable parents everywhere.

Food for thought.

## VI

WOKE UP. Day off. Got stoned and continued so. Stayed in The Unit.

To a stirring aural backdrop provided by anthologised episodes of *Tongs Of Terror*, I gleefully sorted and stored most of the generous donation of unexpected beverages from Brother Trev, ate fried eggs and ran aging Chinese through the microwife, drank some of the Satan's Fire piss, draped self about the furnishings watching episodes of *Tongs* followed by the strangely subversive *Pacific Nations Poptacular* on commercial free-to-air.

Filled in gaps in this masterpiece of memoir and took in a bit more *Mega Man* and Satan Piss later.

Got to sleep early, oddly enough, and dreamed about Stacey living somewhere dry and demanding south of Darwin. There she would grow reptilian wrinkles and a huge, black, wiry beard, carry a mattock and obsess about tattoos and body piercings.

Woke up gravy-eyed in the crapper and went to bed.

## VII

IT WAS accepted wisdom at Mad Bob's Bottle Magic that a fearful change often o'erwhelmed citizens on the night of the Sabbath so, to avoid a wage burden and drunken nutter health and safety issues, the business closed at ten p.m. sharp.

At the stroke of nine, I'm out and gone into a very pleasant, balmy night, striding purposefully across the road and into The Town Hall Hotel.

Beer good.

Friend.

A deliberate noise from loudspeakers made me realise karaoke was coming so, rather than slash my wrists, I grabbed a second schooner and sailed off to the extensive beer garden which, I'd have to say, was busy with the boozoisie and pleasant enough.

I scouted for a seat through flurries of youthful drunks losing perfectly sound inhibitions wisely sown by evolutionary aeons, when that fat buffoon Eddie was wobbling before my eyes with an unsettling expression of moronic glee on his greasy chops.

"Fancy seeing you here!" he cooed like a drunken fat slob.

There's an old Belgian saying: "Sometimes you're better off going along with shit because a kick in the balls so often offends."

Keeping far from Eddie's pelvis, I allowed myself to be chivvied through the throng to a table and there we found long and wispy Dan Lute, cashed up putative part-time editor of the unborn and doomed CityZen magazine; that trivial gum woman Nash, or whatever, from The Last Goose and a thin and interestingly weathered hippy woman, mid-30s maybe, selfish, hard, relentless, dauntingly self-assured.

Eddie's introduction got lost in transit. Sounded like Donkey.

Was she spare?

I couldn't see sort of this quality purposely hanging about with turkeys like Don Lute or, heaven forfend, fucking Eddie. Not for any intimate sort of purpose. I don't want to think about that.

Take this long, bright, athletic, defiant, smouldering hippy woman, for example.

Would she, by any chance, drain a man of his few remaining vital essences and, without a backward glance, toss said man to despair (bleak) and destruction (slow) for a crack at some serious Old Money with a smooth Continental type, a twice-married Sardinian, perhaps; mid-50s probably, nice hair, bit of a larrikin, spoiled but not too demanding, family tree like a jungle, likes to do business, loves travel and meeting people?

I thought there was every chance.

At the end of the table sat a chunky sort of bloke who made a point of not turning around until a television advertisement for Discount Queensland Holidays had undeniably ended. Silly twat.

"I auditioned for that," he beamed a fat-faced, matey greeting and stuck out a pink, puffy hand. Fucking actor.

"Andy Carter."

I seized the proffered limb with lashings of bogus bonhomie. My, what a firm handshake.

Eddie chivvied me to a chair and I sat, but not before noting that Mr. Andy Carter wore leather pants which, in almost every context, is the sign of an irredeemable knobhead. When you're built like a jam doughnut it could mean the difference between life and death.

To excuse his obvious failure in the audition for Discount Queensland Holidays, Andy said something about self-serving cultural apparatchiks and establishment media drones fleecing and mocking the masses with impossible caricatures of health, vitality, wealth and physical beauty so I let that one through.

He also claimed that the performer actually awarded the coveted Discount Queensland Holidays role of Dad was a notorious child molester.

Trying, with modest success, to sound like a mutant compounded of Noel Coward and Jack Thompson, I said: "I thought all actors needed something to fall back on," and got a much better reaction than I deserved.

"Hmmm," I thought.

Andy was a hogshead of a man, literally a barrel of lard but, unlike Eddie's horrible pink wobbly fat, Andy's pink fat was more compressed, largely self-supporting, and not, I imagined, so unwholesome and blotchy.

A red-faced, unknown, short-arsed, over-weight, envious actor, about my age, thinning hair, leather pants. Does it get any better?

These people had been drinking.

My arrival, it seemed, had postponed Eddie's expedition to the bar. Did I require more refreshment?

"My fucking oath," I thought and said.

Eddie and his anus horribilis waddled off making shrill social noises, possibly of humorous intent, that I could not interpret.

I took a slow drink to get the lie of the land.

On the surface, Andy Carter appeared to be deep in thought but this observer concluded that he was watching every move, and considering commission of sin, re. hippy woman.

To be fair, she was quite a stunner for my age.

All around were summery, flummery, clumsy youths at play while, with professional mien, this valuable, slender hippy woman closely studied a peculiar exchange of conversation between spurt-of-piss Daniel Lute, exhibiting a lurid green business shirt this night, and that whatname, gummy, Gothy woman from The Last Goose.

Nash.

I had fallen among useless bastards and women. Who were these bastards and women?

Danny Boy was talking about some sordid social phenomenon allegedly sweeping wealthier suburbs. Dozens, it was called, because a dozen people were required to satisfy what appeared to be arbitrary and silly rules of engagement and all in the name of a casual root.

"Minor variations on orgiastic themes," The fair and sacred Valkyrie observed and, believe it or not, she actually had a Scandinavian accent!

That'll do.

"I wouldn't like all that compulsory darkness," Nash reported. "No way." And she adjusted her ample bosom to confirm the matter. "What if people made repugnant advances?" Nash asked. "What do you do when their advances are repugnant?"

Daniel Lute, tail-gunner or no, was leaning back and quietly enjoying these themes openly discussed by rootable women.

I didn't mind myself actually so I couldn't be arsed to open my mouth one way of the other but Andy Carter saw an opening and was in.

"Nine times out of ten," Andy opined sagely, "these group things end badly. Take it from me, the imponderables are quite beyond all human . . ."

"Pondering?" I ventured and regretted it immediately. Just for an instant Andy Carter's fat face flushed and his piggy, lard-encrusted eyes narrowed and hardened malevolently. Then he smiled again.

"Yeah," he said.

I filed that and shut up for a while leaving Mr. Carter free to express enthusiasm for, and claim proficiency in, certain martial arts that sounded like edited highlights of a sneezing fit. He hoped he would never have to kill a man with his bare hands but theorised that, should necessity call, preparation was the key to success.

Silently and to myself I theorised that dejerkification was just the ticket for Andy Carter.

He gibbered on.

I thought I had a fair idea but, according to Andy, I wouldn't believe the ways they can come at me.

I didn't ask.

Fat Eddie came back with supplies – never so glad to see the oaf in my life - and the inevitable shambles of piss distribution put paid to Andy's pugilistic piffle.

As Eddie handed our proud Flower of the Fjords an unsettlingly flattering Guinness, I learned that her name was Dawn Something Undulating.

Dawn Something Undulating.

As those shithouse porn magazines for truckie wankers would have it: "Phwoar!"

Clear and meaningful expression often eluded Fat Eddie and that's probably where the Something Undulating came from.

Time passed, burdened with an impressive range of frustrations.

Blah, blah.

Given the clemency of the elements it might lightly surprise some minorities to learn that this Andy Carter was, that night, accompanied by a jacket. The jacket, he discovered, had fallen from the back of his chair and this less than startling discovery became the trigger for Andy's pantomime of grave concern.

He fished the precious family remembrance from the floor and sat, tenderly cradling an ice-blue denim thing of no distinction. Schmutter.

Who, on earth or elsewhere, would give a crap?

Nevertheless, he went whinging on themes of thoughtlessness, jackets, chairs, gun control, stress and licensing regulations and he wafted his hands about in a living sculpture of look-at-me-I'm-sensitive gesture.

It was a special jacket, we learned. It was a very special jacket of great sentimental and slight historic value having been worn by Andrew's late brother Spastic Ian at the farewell concert given by notorious New Zealand heavy metal louts Crucafox.

Andy's voice went to crap with the heart-felt emotion of it all.

"How did it happen?" I asked but Andy thought I was enquiring how the apparel had come adrift from his stupid bloody chair rather than probing the cause of Spastic's demise. It took a decade or twain to sort that out.

This, I thought testily, must be boring these women shitless but, foolishly, I had another go.

"Spastic Ian," I said. "How did it happen?"

"Who?" said he.

"Spastic Ian," I persisted, "how did he come to . . . forego the jacket?"

"Spastic Ian?" he spluttered. "Who the fuck is Spastic Ian?"

"Your brother," I very nearly expostulated.

Andy Carter was deeply offended. As it turned out, he often was.

"My brother's name was Sebastian," he explained in a wounded whine and he went all pale and thoughtful while I maintained dignified silence thinking: "Whoops!"

If only gibbering dickheads would speak more clearly the rest of us could tell them to shut the fuck up with complete confidence.

Nobody else seemed to give a rat's.

Paralysed by fraternal nostalgia, Andy couldn't quite get in a shout but the lovely Aryan Dawn elected to get the same again. With the most affable smile available, I congratulated her on the decision.

I've never seen a woman look so good just holding a Guinness.

I've had enough of this.

## *VIII*

BIT OF a gap in the account.

Had to go to go to Bathurst to see The Old Man. He might have recognised the trousers but you couldn't be sure.

Took the opportunity to relish the full spectrum of inland pleasures and, next morning, borrowed the wrinkled veggie's vehicle and drove to Cowra to spend a few days with sister Jill and her new husband Oliver who is a third rate used-car salesman trying to develop a new carburetor hose clamp torque wrench flange or something.

Beyond automotive realms, and possibly within them, he was just another babbling idiot.

Slept a good deal. Ate a lot. Packed a standard matchbox with fabric filaments picked from a tartan picnic rug. Went to The Club with Jill and Oliver where I think I might have drank and sneered too much.

I should finish off the business about that night in The Town Hall.

It could not be said that Andy and I had started our relationship well but, as The Town Hall Hotel's midnight closure crept closer things got matier or, as they say in the industry, "pissed".

Eventually even Andy cracked under the strain and got a round in.

While Andy The Actor busied about childishly pulling focus at the bar, Dan Lute, bade crane-like au revours to those of us at the table. I thought his manner unusually unusual at the time.

Dan changed from shallow, slimy, smart-arsed inner-city layabout to man discomforted by carrot where none should lodge.

His smile was thin; he was prissy, swift and away. Pausing only for a quick word with Andy at the bar, Daniel Lute scuttled off somewhere I'd never heard of that could easily have been, amongst other things, a controversial late night haunt.

As Dan departed, I might have been the only one to see Andy Carter's hearty smile dissolve into a tight-lipped, pale, malignant glower.

Lute plucked off and Eddie crooked a finger to lure me closer. The unpleasant bastard had information to impart.

Dawn and Nash were talking about heart disease.

I inched as close as taste and social convention would allow and Eddy spoke in the strictest confidence.

I was to keep it under my non-existent hat but the distinguished thespian Andy Carter was, according to Eddie, also the putative publisher and owner of that currently non-existent bloody thing CityZen.

Dan Lute and even Eddie himself were Carter's playthings merely!

Andy Carter, it seemed, was a mover and shaker.

It was little wonder he moved and shook hanging out with those two.

I was supposed to be impressed but the significance of owning CityZen was hard to calculate. Ownership of CityZen probably meant five eighths of bugger all but there were free drinks and that should not be underestimated.

And that, to cut a long story short, was how the remaining four of them; Andy, Dawn, Nash and Eddie, came that night to visit one's Unit and sit on one's balcony thing and sample one's Satan Piss and one's salty freebies from the bounty of our inestimable Trevor.

You never know, I reasoned; I could get a crack at Dawn. There wasn't much wrong with Nash if it came to that and those gums interested me strangely. Both women

were worlds beyond sack-of-shit, half-dugong Eddie and I'd gathered earlier, from mercifully fleet reference to his partner's copious natural discharges, that Andy Carter was married. Poor bitch.

Not that marriage means a thing these days. Satan's Piss and salted snacks come free. Godless times, by fuck.

I had, I must confess, been a little cunning earlier.

Having arrived unexpectedly and late from business commitments, this lot were well on the way and I had deliberately lagged in the evening's charge for cirrhosis. I knew little of these people. I didn't want misunderstanding or any more unpleasantness. There was the outside chance of a few quid and I didn't want to screw that up.

Manimal Eddie sat at the balcony table producing spliffs with mechanical precision and obsession. There was smoke everywhere and a significant spliff backlog even before I farmed out a second serve of individual mini-casks.

Dawn and I were on Guinness. There had been a full slab amongst Trevor's largesse. We found it perfectly acceptable at room temperature.

"These are bloody good, these mini-casks," Andy pontificated. "Three generous glasses and no larger than a paperback about space aliens. It would slip into most jacket pockets with ease although it would probably spoil the line a bit with some of the classier tailoring."

"When you can find it these days!" I chipped in.

"You are so right," said Andy nodding and poking out his jaw like some kind of nodding imbecile.

"And what of you?" said Dawn, looking and speaking at me with a Scandinavian accent. "Tell us about yourself. Please."

Then they all looked at me, waiting.

This was all wrong. I was supposed to be doing the probing not copping one. Up to a point I had denied myself beverages earlier that night in pursuit of purposefully probing these people at the earliest opportunity.

For what? For naught!

Dawn had got in first.

"Not much to say really," I snorted inanely. "Bit of a Work In Progress me, y'know."

"You own a bottle shop," pissed Eddie chipped in unhelpfully as another number fell from his fat roller fingers.

"I do not own the bloody place!" I remonstrated. "Wish I did. I'm helping a mate through a difficult patch."

"I didn't think Ron Monkhouse had any mates," Eddie remarked petulantly. "The word on the street is that Mad Bob's Bottle Magic is actually owned by a mob of Canberra-based Turkish pimps."

"I'd heard that," Andy added.



“Come on,” said Dawn firmly, looking straight at me, “tell us about yourself.”

Sensing a need to keep the bullshit straight, I tried to remember that television drama drivel I’d fabricated and dropped on the lovely Nash at The Last Goose.

Beyond the Historical Serial Killer and Six Parts business I couldn’t remember a bloody thing.

I said the situation had changed rapidly with the Historical Serial Killer.

Our Six Part Historical Serial Killer teetered on the brink of announcement as a Major International Motion Picture or M.I.M.P.

“Starve the lizards! That’s bloody terrific, mate,” said Andy in a Jolly Swagcunt accent intended to amuse. “You’re a man to watch. You’re a man on the move. Would you have the need of a sturdy character actor, Captain?”

Early days, I confided, but, as far as I could see, creative attitudes on the project were vibrant and exciting, receptive, sensitive yet strong, fresh but practical. The opportunity could be unique and, fingers crossed, lucrative in the extreme. Negotiations were at a difficult stage, I said, and I asked them all excuse me if I seemed a little tense.

They appeared to swallow that old cock so I flung something in to interest the ladies. I asked them all to excuse the state of the place, explaining that the bachelor life was ever one of domestic turmoil.

“Is there is no lady friend?” Dawn asked deadpan, which was not only cute but obviously meant *something*.

“It’s a simple story of ugly, ugly divorce, Dawn,” I said sensitively. “I’m afraid it was very nasty. A simple, ugly story on the one hand and, on the other, a complex ugly one.”

The punters were agog.

“Along with confusion and heartbreaking complexity there were issues. Poor Stacey had issues beyond her capacity to cope. Her final words were wild abuse and taunting and then, without a word, Stacey, little Davy and the other one left my life one final time. Took the kids. Both. Shrieked a spiteful oath to deny me my own flesh and blood. Her needs and issues could not be curbed nor resolved.”

The drink and drugs were kicking in and, seeing no sign of boredom in my audience, I bumbled on: “If only I’d spotted those subtle early signs sometimes discernible to outstanding healers of the rarest skills and wisdom. Had I more than lay familiarity with bizarre psychological disorders, things could have been very different. Very different indeed.”

This shameless old flannel went down so well I couldn’t resist.

“There came a tipping point,” I added with a tasteful, throat-clearing throb, “and things went too far. I was powerless.

“In so many ways, time and again, despite endless cautions, Stacey went too far. Time and time again she went far too far and now she has finally gone far too far

geographically and for a long time, taken the bloody wosnames, and I doubt we shall meet in this life again.”

Pure gold! They were gobsmacked and I made an incredibly dignified exit to the dunny.

“Life goes on,” I said, en route.

## ***IX***

BACK AT Mad Bob's Bottle Magic. A lull in commercial transactions.

There was another thing that Sunday night at The Unit.

It's quite nice my balcony. Quite large when you consider the squalid shithole Unit. Post-piss we sat out there, under the stars, over the neighbours, visitors fairly hammered.

I felt sure that I was up to something but couldn't quite work out what.

It didn't really matter. This was far better than rubbing cats with wire brushes and mercury.

This was Social Life. This was what proper people with hope and purpose did. Sea eagle priestess Dawn and The Gumster Nash, brim with lowered inhibitions, were unmistakably on the premises in the wee small hours. I could see them. Chatting. That was something. That had to be better than *Mega Man*.

I wouldn't have minded a bit of a bounce on Dawn or, if necessary, The Nash even if I did have to be pissmongering at the crack of arvo.

Then for an instant, or several billions, I felt the full weight of my forty-one miserable fucking years. It was a heavy bastard weight indeed and I had to snap myself out of a slightly whoa-fuck moment.

Eddie was off his face, slack-jawed and immobile, a revolting sight with outsized jeans and a fatuous T-shirt strained with a surreal burden of melting flesh, a greasy wash of perspiration, lank locks and laser-guided pustules.

The aroma wasn't built in a day.

The ladies were enjoying a slow, considered conversation about genital mutilation. With nothing better to do in a free country, I listened supportively.

Where was that bugger Carter?

I shimmered off unnoticed, perturbed by absence of Andy.

With a curiously militaristic air, he was lurking in what the prick of an estate agent had actually called a Living Zone. Should've hacked that fucker down on the spot.

Anyway, pompous and full of piss Andy was lurking in the charmless mess of the Twilight Zone as if I had kept him waiting for an appointment.

“Ah, there you are,” he said.

I could not deny it and wondered if this drink-sodden, leather-trousered tit really was tolerable for the outside chance of a few buckshee beers?

I'd put up with worse.

"What can I do you for, Andy?" I asked. "Piss? Nuts? Inflatable women?" and I detected a glint of turbid suspicion glooping through Carter's piggy peepers. I leaned against the fridge with all the insouciance at my command and chewed Trevor's chilli cashews.

"At this precise instant I don't quite know what you can do for me and vice versa," Andy replied with piss-pot gravity, "but I've heard good things. I know about your work and, since we met, I've quietly kept my ears on you. My eyes are open. I'm interested. I don't mind admitting interest when it's due.

"And I have irons, Rex. I have to tell you that. I've got irons in fires. I've paid my dues but I'm an optimist, a bit spiritual in my way, and I have various irons in several various fires. What's done is done. It's a juggling act but I'm convinced it's in the blood."

"Wow," I ventured, wondering what the fuck the germ was on about and wishing he'd bugger off or pass out and give me a clear shot at the women.

Well off his florid face, Andy was, even so, behaving strangely. He was acting something. His accent had gone upmarket and, as he paced The Dead Zone, he seemed to have something wrong with his leg.

He went on: "We should get together. Shoot the breeze. Soon. Lunch. I'll pick your brains."

"I prefer a pie."

I don't think Andy caught my drollery.

As we shot breeze, I twigged that he was pretending to be a wounded British air ace in a World War Two fillum.

How the fuck should I know why this was so? Fucking weirdo.

"We should get together, Rex. Consider things," my briefing continued. "Things in common and, all too often, left in drawers to gather dust. The System does not exist to serve the likes of you and me nor does it!"

"Eh?"

"I'm talking about perfectly viable projects with nowhere to flourish, Rex" he continued, "projects that just might need The Right People on side to be nothing less than a cultural phenomenon. I don't know about you, old son, but I'm thirty-fucking-eight and I'd like more serious points on the board!"

"Shoot the fucking breeze!?" I thought outraged and incredulous, but I smiled kindly and spoke similarly. "That's the way Old Son," I said. "Get points on the side and you'll be the proud owner of your own phenomenon before you look even older. Would you care for a seat? I really should get back to the others. I'm bloated for my hospitality."

Andy looked confused and made for the dunny.

"I need a dump," were, I think, his final words on the subject.

I darted to the balcony but Dawn and Nash were poised to leave and Eddie was in a coma.

At the earliest opportunity, before Eddie became mobile or Andy ceased dumping, I fled to the virtuous (fuck it) couch, feigned and found sleep. Fuck it again.

## X

A DIFFERENT day. Still at Mad Bob's. Business is crap.

A Pirate-Pete-Pisserama opened on Friday where that old bank used to be in Culloden Street, on the corner. Doom is in the air. Ron Monkhouse can't compete and pimps can be so unforgiving. Many, if not most, of Ron's business practices were wholly dishonest and corrupt.

I sat at the checkout while Mr. Monkhouse fretted, fumed and turned his face from hope.

"This is bad," impassioned Ron wailed. "If half this crap gets scrutinised I'm history. He waved a hairy tuber hand at the wall-to-wall temptations of Mad Bob's Bottle Magic.

"I'm buggered I tell you, stuffed, finished, rooted, cactus. One wrong word or deed and I'm dead or worse.

"If I'm lucky and keep out of trouble I'll do Three. I'll be ruined. Worst-case scenario; the cock-sucking cops start digging around and I do seven or eight. If my Brief is crap I'll do ten. If that Russian tart venture comes out . . ."

Briefly Ron let the facts stay silent for themselves before he continued: "No way am I doing seven or eight or ten. There is no bastard way. Bloody penal servitude. I'd die inside. Completely. I'm buggered either way.

"Others would fall with me," he confided. "People would be deeply pissed off. Even if I stay out of The Slammer and them fucking Turks have a go I'm dead. They do not fuck around."

To tell the truth, I didn't give a shit. Ron was a miserable, tight-arsed piece of pond scum. I could walk straight into another gig, just-as woeful, at Pirate Pete's. On the up side it was elsewhere, on the down side Pirate Pete made hirelings wear paper pirate hats and other tawdry accoutrements of Hollywood's romance with History's pirate scourge.

As part of this hearty campaign of product identification, thin polystyrene cutlasses would be distributed or Pete's pirates would carry a foam-rubber belaying pin for a while; a folding parrot here, a plastic eye-patch or golden earring there.

Staff were known to particularly resent bizarre celluloid teeth and a series of unruly elasticated crepe moustaches.

A cardboard crutch, for peg-leg sea dogs, had to be hastily withdrawn when someone had her eye out in Gosford.

I was surprised when Ron, who had veered into a nasty yarn about a taxi-driver, a dead Bangladeshi and two prominent accountants, suddenly seized me firmly by the shoulders and stared stupidly at my face.

“Fuck off Ron,” I said.

“If them Turks have a go at me,” said Ron in a low, action-adventure voice, “who knows where they will stop? Who knows what price will be paid?”

“I’d like them to stop with you, Ron, and think they might do that,” I said. “I know nothing of industry standards in this field but they should be paid well.

“Regardless of any constructive activity earlier or later in the day, doing you, Ron, is a good day’s work in any man’s language. These people could return to their homes and loved ones knowing that the world was a better place for their labour.”

Ron let his failing hands fall from my shoulders but still he looked hard at me. I realised how much he resembled a dwarf moose.

“Is there anything I need to know?” Ron asked with urgency. “Is there anything noticeable that I haven’t noticed; records, stock, customer relations, bastard regulations, bastard legal requirements, anything that might show up if bastards looked? This is serious. We’re in this together.”

“Like fuck we are,” I observed.

Ron slammed out.

## *XI*

POOR OLD Ron Monkhouse didn’t come in at all yesterday until closing time when he gathered up the day’s meagre takings and a bottle of vodka, each in a brown paper bag, and bugged off into the night.

I’d long shot through by then but heard all about it later.

It had been another quiet day, becalmed, but I lurked after I trusted keys to the helm of commerce to young Terry.

Beyond a fondness for the turps, Terry kept very fit and knew occasional outbursts of thuggery. Terry fancied himself a serious connoisseur of multi-racial pornography and also sang in choirs in the hope of meeting women of foreign extraction and persuading them to get their gear off.

He had a vast, extensively annotated personal porn collection.

We got slightly buzzy by the air conditioner and, back in the public areas of Mad Bob’s Bottle Magic, said stupid things to infrequent customers and tried to humiliate them.

All good things must come to an end. I had to hit Lo-Mart and gather essentials but I saw a weirdo lurking in Premium Reds, apparently giving Terry and I the once over.

“Deadshit up the back,” I notified Terry.

“I’ll grieve the joker if he tries one thing,” Terry muttered brutally.

The Deadshit was coming towards us. He had a private detective's raincoat and hat on and looked like a private detective's private part with a hat on. A pale, tense, skinny bastard with red-rimmed eyes, late twenties. Black trousers with creases, yet. Shiny bloody lace-up shoes for Christ's sake!

He took off the hat. Unfortunately he looked vaguely familiar.

"Excuse me, sorry," said The Deadshit coming straight at yours truly, "but am I right in thinking that you are Rex?"

This was no Turk and, besides, feisty wee Terry would gladly have this tosser apart in no time regardless. What was going on here?

I smiled but gave nothing away.

"Can I help you, Sir?" Terry menaced.

"My name is Reinhardt Goolie," said this vision in a high, girly fluting. He extended a long, limp arm. It was like shaking hands with an eel.

I'd heard of Reinhardt Goolie. He had some sort of following in the arts of primping, pimping and poncing and, as I now discovered, looked a complete joke and had a squeaky voice.

Unfortunately the instant Goolie uttered his own name, Terry near soiled himself in the rapture of raw laughter and, unable to reign in amusement for an agonising span, staggered out the back.

Mr. Goolie pretended not to notice.

"Excuse my associate," I requested earnestly. "He's been sent as part of a scheme to get them out of The Bin and into The Community. He's probably medicating as we speak."

"I'm an associate of Andy Carter," trilled Reinhardt without humour. "I've just left Andy at The Town Hall Hotel. I'm off. Duty calls. Ars, vita, pshaw! Andy sent a message. Andy Carter."

From the depths of his wanky raincoat, Goolie produced that old familiar beer mat from The Town Hall Hotel and handed it over. That coat must have been like a sauna.

The provocative message was, for emphasis, scratched on the coaster with a ballpoint pen in capital letters: "JOIN US FOR QUICK ONE. ANDY C."

The prick must have seen me through the window.

Who was this "us" bandied so freely?

I thanked Reinhardt Goolie profusely, pissed him off, borrowed two fifties from the till and bade adieu to a still prostrate and gasping Terry Winston round the back.

Lo-Mart would have to wait.

Us, as it turned out, was Fat Eddie and Andy Carter.

## *XII*

ABOUT SIX schooners and a bag of nuts later, the sight of Eddie made me queasy.

A russet Andy Carter was grinding on about enduring some shameful fucking injustice or other while Eddie writhed unpleasantly in his chair and the look of freshly goosed nun morphed from the blubber of that tragi-comic face.

Ghastly thoughts of mass bum boil eruption and squirting were rarely far from my mind. I wondered if Andy knew of Eddie's condition. I doubted he did.

Embarrassed by conspicuous and pervasive uselessness, the flabby grotesque spluttered something about getting more piss and something else about which I couldn't give a fuck and he waddled away taking his bottom with him.

That was a relief.

The pub buzzed all around with primitive life and chemical additives.

Andy had maintained a shocked and wounded expression during the interruption of Eddie's little performance but, as soon as the oaf was gone, Carter's demeanour changed. He shifted in his chair like a cross between Eddie, fearful for his fundament, and Napoleon surveying a troop.

He gave me a sort of grim squint with the pretensions of a searching gaze. He was, it emerged, significantly bladdered.

"Rex," he slurred, like a seasoned old Spymaster briefing a younger, sharper, sober and better-looking agent, "I'm glad Eddie's pissed off, Rex because there's something I want to tell you in the strictest confidence."

"Fuck me," I volleyed wittily.

"I think I know the answer to this one but, well, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't ask: can you keep a confidence?"

"I kept a cat once," I lied.

"This is serious, Rex. As serious as it gets. If I seriously neglected my duties, legal and moral, to you or to The Team then, obviously, you would be perfectly within your rights to doubt not only my word but also my capacity to get the ruddy job done. That's the fair way to go about things. Surely that's the point. It gets no more serious than this."

What was this fucking blather?

"Say no more, Andy," I tossed in jauntily as a bit of incidental rhubarb but then, for a particularly thick moment, Andy was genuinely torn between pursuing a natural disposition to verbal diarrhoea and seriously considering my apparent suggestion that he should say no more.

Diarrhoea emerged victorious.

Andy went on: "Silence is not an option. Inaction cannot be excused. For some time now, Rex, in the strictest confidence, I have been disappointed by the approach Dan has been taking to the birth of CityZen. Deeply."

"Have you?" I enquired brightly. "Deeply?"

“I’m a man of my word, you’ll learn that, and I’m among the first to admit he has a stunning wardrobe; I, for one, have never seen so many fucking belts, but it grieves me . . .

“The wardrobe?”

“It grieves me in a general, serious, essential, cultural calling sort of way, Rex, to see that sad, sorry, uncooperative man fall catastrophically at every intellectual and creative fence that must be seen to be scrupulously clean if, with or without The Establishment, we are to cement CityZen into the Australian cultural woof and warp so they can’t chip it out. I tried to help. Nothing. Not a bloody sausage.”

Heedless to drive! Andy drivelled on: “Lute knows very few women and Blind Freddie can see he’s out of his depth with neither compass nor propulsion. You’ll go with me that far?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No-one is sorrier than me that this part-time unpaid post is part-time and unpaid but CityZen must have compass and propulsion, relevance and depth skills and so, my friend, must its Founding Editor if he, she or it is to edit and edit well and make a difference. In my book it stands to reason.”

“Goes without saying, Andy.”

“I’m gratified, Rex, deeply gratified by the gifted team of gratifying men and women that I am putting together for this one. We’ve got one shot. One shot and one shot alone. Any slip can be fatal. Awards can be won.

“I plan well and I think deep. It’s as simple as that. When you know me better, Rex, you’ll find serious thoughts behind the much-loved laughter.

“I am a true believer,” he said with laughable earnestness. “This project is awhirl with ideas and it takes a special kind of man or woman.”

“Dan seems qualified to bridge that divide,” I quipped.

With an unconvincing chuckle, Andy told me that I thought outside the square and that he liked that and I sat there half listening to similar old shite for, at least, a coon’s age and possibly more.

I was looking at, and thinking about, the fantastic stomach on a lightly clad woman standing with some casually rich young cruds across the way when Andy suddenly lurched forward like a fucking maniac.

I was not only shocked but feared the worst.

“Rex,” he growled, complexion like port, eyes out like dog’s balls, fists clenched, “be my editor. You know I’ve had my eye for talent on you. I’ve done my homework. Take the reins of CityZen and gallop into the dawn! This could be the making of us all!”

You could have fucked me for four pence.

## *XIII*



PROFESSIONALLY BECALMED at Mad Bob's by the cut-price pulling power of Pirate Pete only to be wracked by the short, hairy tempest of Ron Monkhouse in rapid physical and mental decline.

As working environments go, it went bad.

As Mad Bob's languished in unprecedented drink dispensing doldrums I thought scathing thoughts of Andy's offer of the part-time, unpaid editorship of CityZen, how the contemptibly sketchy scheme was a crock and how I could avoid committing to anything while continuing to enjoy the meagre social and professional potential of our relationship.

The clod had been reasonably content with my pledge to consider his flattering and generous offer, see if I could fit such a demanding undertaking on my crowded schedule and get back to him at the earliest.

But shortly thereafter I had a stroke of luck. Luck for me, not so fortunate for others.

I tripped over Oscar Lung outside The Stockade.

Literally tripped over him. The peculiar old journalist was crawling around on the bloody pavement looking for something. Maybe some dignity.

"What the fuck?!" I cried.

"Fuck me!" cried he.

"Oscar!" I cried.

"Fuck me!" cried he again.

We flopped about and said, "fuck" a lot. Weakened by this palaver, and savouring a gamy resonance from The Old Days, I agreed to join him within to refresh the present with reminiscence and unstipulated amounts of piss.

I had not frequented The Stockade for some time having sickened of its ceaseless parade of pompous dipshit tree-huggers, alternative animal nuts, vegans, contemporary folk singers and other musical wannabes, genetically modified conspiracists, loud, sanctimonious de-caffinated ninnies, Celtic rubbish, garrulous gap year backpackers back with the pack, political bores, condescending half-wit tourists, domestic and imported, astrological blockheads, crackpot crossword fanatics, trainee deities, muesli shaggers, Acting students, fanatical gamers – Filthy, Repulsive and Moronic - and their spotty mates, Hobbits, wholemeal, heritage, hemp and its stomach-churning, malignant bitch of a barmaid Connie.

But Time, as the sages say, is a great healer and owing forty bucks to Liam at The Town Hall Hotel is a great incentive to drink at The Stockade.

As to the wretched Oscar Lung mentioned earlier: well, you probably won't remember him and, frankly, I wouldn't blame you.

Oscar was burdened, even to decrepitude, with a slightly creepy, posh, 70s mod look and used to be a gossip columnist on the long-dead Daily Clarion, back when he looked a fuck's sight better.

Occasionally, back then, our paths crossed. We did actually do a little business together many years ago.

Opinion differed as to how bent Oscar was. I'm talking about business here. Back in the day rich people gave him lots of handy stuff, often money. They would invite him to things and smile on him. Sometimes they would hire him to open something undemanding – like a nice shop or his mouth.

Others would fawn. It could be quite disgusting.

Half the time Oscar's core business was basically Guilty Shagging, which left scope for ethical dilemma and correspondence of colour.

Oscar was usually tolerable to wee fish such as I but essentially he was a vain, shallow, greedy, silly, moonfaced old shit and occasionally a useful, moonfaced, greedy etcetera.

He married a rich South African lesbian, years back, Katie Booner-Dooglash to be precise, and is perfectly happy for her to lezz off at will without so much as a by your leave.

A couple of years back Katie's lezzing homed in on that ABC newsreader whose name escapes me and the upshot is that they live together freely as Kate and Lez in a rustic hut south of Wollongong, Nobody seems to give a fuck apparently. The masses have spoken. How times have changed.

As to Old Oscar's preferences?

Frantic guesstimate: fuck knows.

Actually I don't think Oscar has any. I cannot imagine how Oscar perceives and satisfies those fundamental and almost universal urgings that we find ever echoing down the ages.

It might have something to do with fabrics, twine, and cloth. Oscar might yearn for carvings, sculpture, statues, mannequins, inflatables, that sort of gear. How would that work? He loved kitchen utensils, I remember that.

Oscar wants to be painfully humiliated. Bit of ritual, lots of pain. I think Oscar likes to be degraded with kitchen utensils. Locked away and tormented with a grater. It would account for much of his subterranean pallor.

He probably doesn't bother much these days, pathetic sod. Five minutes with a frisky fondue set would probably do the fucker in. At least he'd have a smile on his blotchy head.

When The Clarion closed about twenty years back, Old Oscar was out on his arse.

For a few years, from about the time I first met him, he was seriously on the slide and did odds and sods about the place and gradually wafted into a sort of de facto retirement and an erroneous, often pissed, belief that he remained a Media Identity with Some Clout.

God help us. You had to laugh.

When sober and coherent he was a good source of tittle-tattle.

Anyway, I go on about Old Oscar Lung at particular length because that night, unexpectedly alone with the ridiculous old sot, unexpectedly discovered in The Stockade, after work, that night, then, that night, that night then changed not only the course of my life but also the life courses of others.

The personal impact of that night was profound.

Very profound.

What I learned from Lung was long in the listening and alarming all the way. Try saying that to one of those obligatory new Asian cops and see how far you get.

Things were getting out of hand.

Things had to change.

They did.

## *XIV*

SORRY. BLOODY phone cut me off in full flight!

Then things got busy, things changed, shit, in fact, happened and this is the first chance I've had to catch up.

OK.

The Stockade had changed. Gone were the twats of yore and in was a general infestation of would-be smooth, borderline chin-deficient fellows. Fucking yuppies. This bunch seemed to be doing well for themselves insofar as trappings were concerned.

The place had been cleaned up and well yuppified. Happily Connie the Barmaid could not be seen maiding the bar. I gave a wry smile and, in a spirit of resolution, wished her, wherever she may be, an impoverished, unavoidable, slow, disfiguring and agonising death.

I bought. We sat.

Oscar, already massively hammered with flecky dried drool at one corner of his mouth, seemed to believe that his historically flexible approach to truth in journalism had earned State-wide immunity from prosecution in road traffic and modest criminal matters on the understanding he didn't get too silly. Now, he claimed, The Bastards had reneged on this agreement and, as a result, he was due in court the following day facing a swag of serious drink, stupidity and arrogance related charges.

"That's Agreements for you, Oscar," I ventured.

"There was a time," Oscar nearly wept, "when I could have bounced that bloody Commodore from stationary car to stationary car from here to Parramatta with complete impunity. Parra-bloody-matta! Complete! Impunity for all my impurity poon! More wine for my funds!"

Fair dinkum, he was losing it.

Then he found some of it again: “Not so very long ago, my moustachioed friend, I was a near-legendary figure in the ranks of the Road Traffic Police. I want you to know that.”

“Riotous fun,” I said.

I wore no moustaches.

I only had myself to blame for being there and, to tell the truth, I vaged off staring at the optics, leaving Oscar free to gibber relatively harmlessly.

Two words triggered something and I snapped to attention. The words were Dan Lute.

“Dan Lute,” Oscar declared, “is nothing but a superficial, cock-happy cunt.”

“Cunt?” I enquired winningly.

Oscar dragged detail from the sump of his brain: Mr. Lute, who minced our cultural tepid-spots quite a bit, had been seen by gossips to feature prominently in a crude but effective docuarty DVD called *Young and Foolish* in which a clearly recognisable, uninhibited and very vocal, Dan Lute is seen, alone and in company. Throughout the entertainment, I was given to understand, Daniel appears hardly young but very foolish and loving every hard-core minute.

Mr. Lute’s performance caused comment in certain circles. Murmurs were murred. Media Awareness, even Media Frenzy, were real possibilities. Oscar thought copies of *Young and Foolish*, a Mischievous and Filthy production written, directed and narrated by award-winning artist and iconoclast Apia Kilt, were plentiful and free and could fall into the hands of kiddies, even sharp and sober journalists.

I said casually that I had met Dan Lute recently in company with Eddie and, through them both, had been introduced to mysterious sheilas and a bloke called Andy Carter.

“Fie and for shame!” Oscar declared. “Andy Carter is nothing but another superficial cock-happy cunt but worse. You must be fucking kidding!”

“Do you think he *is* happy with his cock?” I asked, taken aback by the vigour of Oscar’s assessment.

Then it all came out.

The story of Andy Carter.

Born on a mountaintop in Tennessee, Victoria, Andrew Bracewell Carter, late thirties, came from a long line of nuisances in and around the entertainment industry. His mother Dot was an ex-tart from Albury-Wodonga and his old man was the sometime performer, sideshow, circus and theatrical entrepreneur Koala Kowalski, an assumed name.

Koala’s brother Wally and his wife Hoof ran a sort of primitive artistic rehab cum brothel atop Tennessee’s principal peak and made good money doing so by all accounts.

During a family visit to recover from Koala's untimely karking in a modest Melbourne payroll acquisition exercise, Andy was born round the back, behind a shed.

As a pretty youth Andy appeared in such Australian cinema classics as *Give Me The Child* and that thing about trainee nuns on a Kimberley sheep station and several other bits of classic crap.

Time, the crafty fucker, worked his mischief. There was nothing lasting for Andy. There was the occasional ad.

Suddenly Oscar leaned to me and said clearly: "Take it from one who knows, my friend: the bloke's a fucking nut job. A menace. His powerless and disillusioned victims stand mute, frustrated, often in debt and bordering on legion.

"Fantasist, con-man, spiteful troll, hypocrite, incompetent clod, sanctimonious despotic narcissistic fuckarse bastard, call it what you will, Andrew Carter is not to be confused with anything but a major skidmark on the soiled sheet of life. Have nothing to do with that fat bastard, darling, nothing at all!"

I probed further. Andy, when not failing auditions, made a habit of launching bold cultural projects – plays, books, exhibitions, even films – scooping up available cash or kudos and oozing off before the shit hit.

According to Andy, someone else was always to blame, the vision splendid had been corrupted, there was little in writing and he didn't have any money anyway.

Despite all this, Andy desperately fancied himself a first class Working Class Hero. Fucking nonce.

"No money?" I delved more urgently. "He must have money! Luckless Dan Lute, accidental porn star or no, has been doling out costly drink to the needy on behalf of some idiotic pull-out-throw-away arts rag. Andy is the eminence greasy pulling all the strings and Dan has some of his dollars."

"Pah!" Oscar ejaculated sharply.

"How are you spelling that?"

"A scam," Oscar fulminated, "classic Carter, a ruse, carrots and sticks to stir the miasma of Andy's ego, a doomed exploit destined to bring nothing but shame, pain and poverty to all available suckers. You should meet his bitch of a mother. It explains a lot.

"Dan Lute is spending Dan Lute's money to buy into Andy's fuckwit arts adventure. Both of them: bastards, germs, mongrels and maggots!"

"CityZen," he sneered, like a man once sorely stung and still vengeful. "I know all about that tripe. It's tripe!"

And there we had it.

Five seconds ago, bloody Andy Carter was actually offering me disgraced bum bandit Dan Lute's delusional gig commanding Crap and Confusion Central, a.k.a. CiyZen!

What the fuck, I wondered, was going on?

Oscar babbled and I thought of much that had passed in recent days and weeks.

I realised I didn't care what was going on. Not at all. I couldn't give a fart if CityZen or Oscar Lung or Andy or Eddie or Gerhardt or even the eminently shagable Nash lived or died but of one thing I was sure and resolved: I would kill Andy Carter personally.

If not the answer to all my problems, this firm commitment to Andy's annihilation seemed to offer not only the attraction of Andy a-mouldering in the shite but a real break from recent run-of-the-mill stuff.

## XV

STILL AND clear of mind amid the storm of Oscar's vituperation, and the swelling tide of horrible little wanker customers, I cast my mind back to that night with Andy Carter amid the Town Hall tosspots.

When offered ill-defined authority in the affairs of CityZen and the fucked for four pence feeling had flown, I tried to ask Andy questions pertinent to this pox-ridden publishing project that only I could steer to glory.

He was quite smooth, in a gauche, blokey sort of way, but it was all transparent, neurotic, button-pushing, airy-fairy bullshit really and none but a nincompoop could be taken in by it.

What use was my contempt for this inner-city wanker? Could a few buckshee beverages compensate for the company of this tiresome buffoon?

Then, thanks to Oscar, I knew Andy had to die. I had a hobby. A purpose. What fun. There with Oscar Lung and The Stockade's new labels, scattered sluts, haircuts and suits, I had made up my mind.

To advance my newfound cause I dumped the semiconscious Old Sleaze at the earliest opportunity – a simple case of Slash and Dash – and went into the night, bound for The Town Hall Hotel to give Liam his forty bucks with all good grace. This was no time to be denied access to such a social hub for fear of acrimony and biff.

'Twas bound for The Town Hall then, was I, considering colourful and amusing ways of croaking Andy Carter.

A swiftly stifled scuffling spat from shadows behind. I continued walking.

"Fuck off footpad," I called in a rough Northern Irish accent kept for just such inner city nocturnal encounters, "can't you see I'm on the bones of me arse? Are you blind, man?"

"Pssst!" hissed the shadows. "It's me!"

It was bloody Ron Monkhouse, characteristically hairy and squat, emerging from the gloom and clutching something squarish in an electric lime Lo-Mart Eco Bag. He looked anxious and foul.

"It's me. Ron Monkhouse!"

"Fuck off faster then," I suggested with no trace of feisty Gael. "What are you up to Ron? Do a lot of Lurking? Nice handbag."

“Come with me,” the bossy troglodyte demanded twitchily, “help me make it better.”

“What?” I enquired.

“Where’s your fucking loyalty for Christ’s sake!” Ron snapped. “There’s plenty of space in the sewers for shit like you. I made you and I can break you. What kind of a heartless bastard are you?”

“An unbroken one with very little loyalty,” I beamed. “What’s your problem, Mr. Monkhouse?”

“Security,” Ron spat the word and scanned the street for insecurity.

“Hold this,” Ron insisted, pressing the Lo-Mart bag in my suddenly self-governing hands. “I need you for an hour. Two at most. There’s fifty bucks. In the hand. No questions. Stay close. Keep your eyes peeled. Follow me.”

If Ron thought I was the man to lend meaningful muscle to his mysterious enterprise, he was seriously off his thick and hairy scone.

“Get fucked,” I suggested. “Seventy five.”

“What?!” Ron squeaked, his baggy peepers darting hither, yon and elsewhere.

“I don’t even know what I’m up for,” I explained brightly with an up-you-for-the-rent-take-it-or-leave-it-I’m-down-the-pub sort of expression. “Get fucked.”

“Seventy five,” Ron winced in agreement and, wheezing and snuffling like some class of bronchial wombat, led the way to Mad Bob’s Bottle Magic and in round the murky back.

“She’s right,” said Ron with a nutter note in the voice, “the cameras are off. Small business bears the brunt. They can be here in ten.”

“Can they?”

I had no idea what Ron was on about but, since he was clearly way up shit creek, it behoved me to exploit the hairy bastard to the limit.

“They’re waiting for my call. Right now. I need back up,” he whined. “The cameras are off. There must be no record. One minute it’s all sweetness and light but They can turn so quickly! That’s where you come in.

“Here’s sixty bucks,” he snarled, producing and parting with the notes, “that’s all I’ve got on me!”

“Lying cunt,” I observed as I tucked the notes away with care. “I’ll give you thirty minutes and then off I jolly well fuck.”

I didn’t like these security, back-up, eyes peeled, They, camera, brunt, turn and coming words nor their potential for harm.

Ron wittered on: “They can be here in ten. Easy. Let’s keep this calm and bloodless. When they come just give them the that,” he pointed at the Lo-Mart bag as if it held a transplant organ, “don’t take the piss and keep it nice.”

“It is ever my endeavour to keep it nice, Mr. Monkhouse,” I schmoozed, “or may I call you Ron?”

The bag had money in it. I knew it. He knew it. I knew he knew it but did he suspect that I knew it? Fuck knows. It will remain forever a mystery.

And then opportunity did not so much knock as kick the bastard door in.

Suddenly it was over. I was cool, calm and collected and Ron Monkhouse lay near-as-damn-it dead in the crapper.

First up, without warning, I slammed his head with the brick-like corner of a square Battersea Gin bottle. That blow alone could easily have proved fatal but, you wouldn't read about it, despite a modest trickle of claret the bloody bottle didn't even break!

Without more ado, I dragged Ron, dazed, floppy, well buggered but still erratically ambulant, dripping blood and spluttering incoherently, into the dunny by the scruff and gave him a few taps with the resident branch baseball bat collected en route.

Deftly employing paper towels, I doused all possible prints from the bat and the Battersea bottle with bog bleach and, as I bent, I thought I heard Ron Monkhouse gurgle and hiss a bit.

It was fine by me if Ron died slowly and stuffed up the timing for those high-tech cop and coronial characters. At the very least our Ron would be a full-time veggie and I'd be far, far away.

Ho-ho-ho. I had a bag with money in it and it was necessary to act with speed and care.

I wrapped the conspicuous Lo-Mart Eco Bag in a plastic Mad Bob's Bottle Magic bag and that in a yet another Mad Bob bag.

I pushed the back door closed with the mystery miracle money I had in bags, went straight to The Town Hall Hotel, gave Liam his loot, tried to be visible, bought the bastard a beer, said hello a lot.

Got out when I couldn't stand it any more.

Can longing give you a hernia?

Closeted in the security of The Unit, the enfolding bags fell away.

Mine unbelieving eyes have seen the glory.

With trembling hands and disbelieving eyes I counted the content of those blessed bags.

There were two hundred thousand dollars in those bags.

Before my very eyes.

Dollars. Australian dollars. Exactly two hundred thousand of them, out of their bags and piled in all their used and untraceable dollar glory.

These bagless dollars, even now, pile before me as I write and they are two hundred thousand in number and seem, in themselves, fully kosher.

As a trusted employee of Mad Bob's Bottle Magic, it seemed inevitable The Police would seek to eliminate me from enquiries into the terrible wastage of Ron



Monkhouse and it behaved me, on behalf of getting away with it, to hide this journal and this two hundred thousand smackers and hide them well.

You fucking beauty!

## *XVI*

THE MALIGNANT police station had been designed by enemies of the people; Cold War saboteurs disguised as architects. Sleeper Agents such canker worms are often called, but these particular agents do not sleep but sow slow disaffection in the very fabric of our homes, business chambers and entertainment venues.

These creatures are enemy operatives, slow poison bosom traps planted in the boobies of our motherland, each indoctrinated to design tacky town or country shitholes that mildly amuse for a minute before deeply depressing for a generation or three.

The malignant police station was well due a lick of Semtex.

As a person in need of elimination from police enquiries, your humble narrator got a lift from the tumultuous scene of crime to The Sty with a reasonably civil, knackered old cop in a knackered old cop car.

Driver Plod, who seemed a bit pissed or punchy to my way of thinking, filled me in while I sat in the back uttering little expressions of dismay and incredulity as befitted a bereaved underling.

Plod reported a sorely hung over, Terry Winston, unphased by Mad Bob's unlocked premises, who stumbled on Ron's stiff that morn in pursuit of a pre-opening piss and fag.

Terry downed most of a bottle of bourbon before The Filth lobbed and young Tezza had been off his face and worse than useless since, according to well placed informants.

I was at pains to be prompt at Mad Bob's for my two to ten pissmongering and, once there, I could not believe my eyes.

Talk about throng!

Honestly!

"Mate!" I cried to an intense young policeman patrolling the perimeter. "Mate!" I cried. "What's going on?"

Ignoring his recommendation to piss off, I goggled at the grim confusion throughout Mad Bob's garish structures and appurtenances and pressed my point: "But I work here!" I insisted.

The intense piglet grew deferential at this stage hoping, perhaps, that bagging a live one might merit scraps from his piggy overlord. He ushered me to a tea urn and asked a thick looking constabulary lad to look after me.

And so it came to pass that I waited in the suicidally depressing Interview Room Two in the hideous, over-lit Police Station and a uniformed woman, not a bad sort actually, gave me nasty coffee in a plastic cup.

Some kind of uniformed Oaf entered followed by a heavy-set, sombre bloke, about my age, in a shiny suit with loosened tie and dark hair awry for that up-to-the-minute, hard-at-work look.

He introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet, which was all well and good. He shook hands, sat, asked obvious questions, which I answered diligently. He took desultory notes.

The Oaf just stood against the blue pastel wall, demeanour set to dull menace.

"I last saw Mr. Monkhouse, Ron, only yesterday," I explained wearily but ever-so helpfully. "I am appalled, Detective Sergeant. Appalled!"

"These are appalling things, Sir," Derek opined.

"As usual it was quiet at Mad Bob's," I continued. "It was about midday but I can't pin it down Derek. Sorry. It all blends where you're stuck behind a cash register but it was definitely about noon."

Derek, I suspect, was already consigning your correspondent to the Inconsequential Loser file kept for occasions such as this.

"Hey," I urged with a stab at schoolboy enthusiasm, "you need security footage. I don't remember customers when Ron came and went but, between you and me, this is all a bit of a shock and you never know. There could have been someone skulking. I might not have noticed a skulker. A few camera blind spots evolved from Ron's risky obsession with cost cutting but, trust me officer, for pin-point accuracy you need that footage."

I paused for max effect. Then: "Derek," I muttered urgently, "you don't think there's anything recorded on the security disc about what happened to poor old Ron?"

"We've looked," The Detective huffed. "Nothing."

"Shame."

"Security cameras were switched off by an unknown hand. We don't know when because the time coding was ratshit. Did you switch off the security cameras at any time, Rex?"

"No way! My safety and that of the public could depend on those cameras! They are for our security."

"Do you know the hand, or hands, that switched off those crucial cameras, Rex?"

"I do not," I said firmly, "and I'm dismayed to hear of it. Are none of us safe in our bottle shops?"

"Could the late Mr. Monkhouse have switched off the security cameras during his brief midday visit?"

I let a pause for thought sink in.

"It's possible," I answered softly with a lovely, vulnerable, open quality in the voice, "I suppose it's possible."

This went down well with Derek so on I went: "Ron came in briefly yesterday. The last I'll see of him in this life. Just in and out really. Not happy. He has been erratic lately,

Old Ron. Tense, you know? Moody. Irritable. Even for a short man he could be very short at times. Gave me a right bollocking the other day. No idea what I was supposed to have done but Ron didn't like it. I thought he was just letting off steam, you know, as you do, in moderation."

He did seem to do a lot of running around recently, I opined. I thought he had a few business worries to tell the truth. Issues.

"That cut-price Pirate-Pete-Pisserama opening in Culloden Street didn't help his fragile state of mind, I can tell you," I confided. "Of course there are economies of scale, Derek, I know that as well as the next but I really do not know how they do it for the money. I'm not suggesting anything shonky, don't get me wrong, but for a small-businessman like Ron that must have been an absolute nightmare. You could see the concern etched on his head. I could. For the past few weeks he's been really etched.

"Ron wasn't such a bad bloke once you got to know him but, well, he had let things go to the pack in the past few months. I don't want to speak ill of the recently deceased but he was certainly drinking more, poor devil."

Detective Sergeant Mehmet appreciated a member of the public so happy to assist.

I had to be right up front with the detective and admit to knowing next to nothing of Ron's business dealings but his manner had been particularly hostile in recent weeks, tense, boorish and unpleasant really; in particular he had fulminated about certain people he was associated with. I assumed it was business but it could have been personal. He just kept on and on about these people from an ethnic minority. The line between individuals and entire communities was frequently blurred with Ron. Nothing more than furious abuse really, irrational really. Ignorant, redneck, racist rubbish. Embarrassing.

All I could tell Detective Sergeant Mehmet, I claimed, was that the unfortunate targets of Ron's Monkhouse venom were Australians of Turkish heritage. Perhaps these good citizens could shed some light?

I reluctantly confessed that Ron could have been on something. He hadn't looked at all well.

"I suppose it's possible," I mused. "He has been, I don't like to say this but he has been erratic recently. More erratic."

Have a word with young Terry, I suggested. Terry Winston probably knows Ron better than I do.

"I like a beer myself but I wouldn't really know if Ron was on something illegal. Not my cup of tea. Poor bloke. Who'd have thought? My heart goes out to Mrs. Monkhouse and their partially orphaned offspring. It genuinely goes."

This was going magnificently. Derek was bored to sobs.

“You know Old Ron had a little hairy family?” I volunteered. “Doreen, the hairy wife, and a brace of hairy little kids. It’s the hairy kiddies I feel sorry for. And Hairy Doreen. And Ron, of course, hair and all.

“I’m pretty hostile towards the drugs menace actually. It’s a recognised scourge.”

## *XVII*

GENIUS. COLD, motherless genius.

On reflection I was pleasantly surprised how easy it had been to top Old Ron.

Wallop, slap, push, drag, drag, lurch, drag, thrust, drag, drag, fling, wallop, wallop, wallop, wallop, boot, wallop.

No trouble at all really.

And how refreshingly easy it had been to re-direct his untraceable two hundred grand up my fake chimney. I was now in the enviable position of being a mature, adventurous, unattached male in Sydney, Australia, with a sense of humour and two hundred grand up his fake chimney.

There was no hint of Pig trotting the horizon. Excellent.

A call from young Terry, who still seemed to have drink taken: Mad Bob’s Bottle Magic was closed until further notice due to outbreaks of shitfight.

By and large our chat was confined to predictable Ron Monkhouse territory and saying “fuck” a lot.

Marring the noble legacy of The Late Ron Monkhouse - the gift of unemployment - I was rudely roused at the crack of nine thirty the following day by Andy Carter on the dog.

Ron’s slaying was all over the media, he confided. Everyone was talking. They got Ron’s name wrong in The Standard. Andy said we should all stick together on this one. Blithering idiot.

He poked me for juicy bits of goss. I was having none of that and parried his tasteless inquisition with a pledge to be in The Town Hall at twelve.

I regretted my folly with a spasm as the hand released the telephone but then a calm, wiser counsel infused my doings.

The impromptu slaying of Ron Monkhouse had, in many respects, proved an invaluable trial run for the extermination of Andy Carter. I had, as Andy might say, pushed the envelope. I had a stack of untraceable money, no bastard knew about it and I was confident I had learned much. I had that stack of money attractively stacked. That was extremely encouraging.

Killing Andy Carter, however, called for something unlike the blunt instrument. This was how my mind ran at the time. Andy needed something more complex, sophisticated even, something elegant, resonant, finely wrought, more appropriate for the narrative requirements of a dramatic, three-part television series based on actual events where I get away with it.

There is nothing wrong with a blunt instrument. I know this better than most. It holds a distinguished place. I would not stand nor speak against the blunt instrument. We are friends. Brothers. Cousins. Symbiotes. Man and blunt instrument.

But, and it's a big one, I have ever enjoyed the pleasures of the Baroque and am set upon becoming a most remarkable executioner. A piquant combination. To serve all in this intriguing game I needs must know the man that I will kill and I must know him well.

I must play him like a great game fish and, when he is most vulnerable, get a number for that Dawn woman.

Or the other one.

Then kill him.

Ha-ha! Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!

But the fact remained: I hardly knew much at all about this tubby pillock plodding to his doom.

Curious that.

Beyond Oscar's observations and the palpable fact that he was an A-grade twat, I could tell you little of Carter's antecedents and, even if I knew all there was to know, couldn't be arsed anyway.

He would die like a dog.

But I needed to know more, I told the breakfast Wheetie things, if I were to devise a magnificent blueprint for murder to delight the ghoulish Tabloid herd and baffle the finest minds and keenest instincts of Australia's crack law enforcement agencies, if any, and fully imported experts.

The Wheetie things were congealing slowly.

All this, I reasoned, was good reason to reconnoitre the toxic, leather trousered crackpot lurking behind The Intended Victim. Knowledge was needed of this Low Clown about to be immortalised in the annals of unsolved Australasian crime. All good reason, it seemed to me, to tune up the antenna and turn up at the Town Hall.

Knowledge, as they say, is power. Actually, it's not but they do often say that it is. Repetitive bloody nonentities.

Is a narcissist more or less likely to die of shame?

I felt strongly that Andy's actual death should have a strong element of shame in it. Heart-crushing shame. There was need of that. Embarrassment if possible. A pungent burst of abject failure would be good. It was a creative decision. For those few, final gasps I wanted Andy to feel deeply, hopelessly ashamed of himself and of the shameful things he had done in a spiteful, whining, fat, wasted life. All this would have to be factored in.

I wondered if I could make a quid on the exercise. Quid or not this exercise needed thought, deviousness, calm, intimacy, planning, trust, ruthlessness, knowledge,

patience, time, phone numbers, strategy, Trevor's sly piss and more and more weed and more.

Another call from young Terry. Well pissed. The Respectful Pause was off. Mad Bob's was on tomorrow. I was two to ten.

A new cunt was coming to take over from Ron, I learned, and his name was Kemel.

Grimly I noted the brevity of our Respectful Pause but Terry was even worse off. He was meeting the Kemel character cold, in the morning at Piss Central. I commiserated and recommended The Stockade for his evening's recreation.

"What about all those wankers?" Terry asked.

"Different class of wanker entirely these days," I explained.

## *XVIII*

ANDY CARTER did so deserve it.

My considered opinion follows: if that night at The Town Hall Hotel did not prove, conclusively, that *it* was richly and repeatedly deserved by Andy Carter, then I fear that strenuous night proved nothing but costly and injurious to health.

And that, sweet babes, would be a waste. Can't have that.

A brief selection from Andy Carter Sings The Fat Fucker Songbook: "I'd fall apart without Chris and Little Andy. It doesn't help when your agent's a moron. Them Lapps walked in like they owned the place and, in ten months, they did. Nobly-knees much obliged. There has to be space for creation. I have never seen tits like it! It is an urge but it is also a need. How long before this bloody place wakes up to itself and stops this madness. Don't talk to me about Dan Trouser Flute! You have to keep pushing the envelope. She saved me from my self. Just so long as they don't do it in or around Mum's pool! I've never been to Darwin but I believe the beards are amazing. Biggest nymphomaniac in the entire Surfers' area and that includes the hinterland. The whole industry is run by lesbians! Bloody ex-communists everywhere you leave one."

Beneath veneer of hale, if somewhat confused, cultural warrior bastard, the man was a mess. Christ, the inner city life could be a challenge!

I got very pissed towards the end. On the way home, I threw up on a tiny trusting dog lounging at its front gate. The dog gave an expressive yap and fled to safety within. I could hear more yaps. I fucked off.

I haven't heaved on a dog in years. I did piss on that astonished spoodle last Easter but that was no more than justice served.

The big event, of course, was my first meeting with Kemel. Ron's replacement. A lot could depend on that.

I rose from slumber late and dreary but dragged the carcass, five minutes early no less, to Mad Bob's Bottle Magic there to greet my esteemed colleague Terry Windsor and my new master. Kemel.

I quite liked the air of hoon-in-a-suit emanating from Kemel as he sat on the counter at Mad Bob's unexpectedly Terry-free cash register. I expected Terry for back up and helpful hints during the casual banter of shift change.

Kemel was, perhaps, 23, tall, dark, comfortable, confident, casual but alert and astute. Here was a young man of Turkish extraction if ever I saw one. Kemel would probably be considered very attractive to quite a lot of a younger sort of woman. I'm not sure if he would appeal to the older woman. I really can't say.

Some older women perhaps. Certain older women. American older women probably. I wouldn't like to say.

"G'day," said Kemel, "I'm Kemel," and, I must say, it all went very smoothly thereafter.

We chatted amicably, Kemel and I.

Topics covered included The Fucking Cops, The Bastard Government, Licensing Authority Slags, the inconvenience of Ron Monkhouse's demise, Christ's foreskin and the outrageous price of proscribed substances, petrol and legal representation.

On his return Terry was clearly off his face but he graciously took charge of the shop while Kemel and I had a getting-to-know-you toke round the back.

It turned out that Kemel's dear old Dad, a lovely bloke and self-made man in most respects, was as cold as a fish's tit in his business dealings.

A few years back, the old rascal found himself owed a significant sum by the late Ron Monkhouse. In default of this sum, Ron handed over a sum-sized chunk of Mad Bob's Bottle Magic to the damaged party.

Within a few years Kemel's Dad owned pretty much all of Mad Bob's Bottle Magic but bitter and repeated experience revealed that Ron was a thieving little bastard who had bled the place, and its Roto Fields sister branch, dry. Kemel was of the opinion that it was the maintenance of a tart in Greenmeads that started him on the slippery slope.

After all he had done for the hairy runt! Kemel's Dad took Ron's deceit much to heart.

Rather than go public and toss the massively guilty Mr. Monkhouse to the forces of whim and chaos, it was decided that the cringing, worthless, hairy toad should discreetly return a significant slab of the spoils ASAP. Two equal payments would be made, token amounts, in cash and Ron would fuck off thereafter and never more be seen.

On the evening set for the first payment of Ron's ill-gotten gains, Kemel's Dad was but ten minutes from Mad Bob's in his room at a boutique guest house watching *Flying Vet Supermodels* and other broad entertainments on Seven.

This perfectly legal occupation was clearly and consistently witnessed by Kemel, his older brother Farin and an associate called Pete Fennick. As arranged, Kemel's Dad

was waiting for a telephone call from Ron after which payment would be made. In, out, no fucking about.

“Fucking typical,” Kemel declared with heat, “that the fucker got fucked before he could hand over even half the bastard token restitution. It’s even more fucking typical that the murdering bastard who murdered the thieving Monkhouse bastard bugged off with the bloody bastard money. Thieving bastards everywhere! This is my Dad’s bloody money!”

“Quite right,” I trilled.

“Dad’s not often a violent man unless it’s essential so, without genuine provocation, there was a Strictly No Walloping policy but, given the way things turned out in hindsight, I’d give Ron Monkhouse a flogging myself given half a chance and the unexpected restoration of the sacred miracle of life.”

Kemel was greatly indignant that The Authorities seemed bent on rejecting his Dad’s alibi for the night of Ron’s decease, his own sworn undertakings, his brother Farin’s account and, while he could “kinda” understand given Pete’s form, the recollections of Pete Fennick.

In a travesty of Australian justice the blameless old bloke had become Prime Suspect in the brutal croaking of Ron, however understandable that croaking might be.

Even as we spoke the much loved and respected elderly businessman was getting a thorough going over by racist shit in the local sty.

Stoned, but still in the early stages of our relationship, Kemel adopted an unexpectedly intimate tone to explain: “Mate, the thing is this: the bloody token restitution money is gone. Whooshka! That’s an end to it. I know that. Dad knows that. It’s known. There is no way we’ll get that money back and, sure as shit, we’ll never know which lucky fucker’s got it. Fair enough. He wasn’t to know. There was nothing personal. Some you win, some you lose. I’d probably do the same meself. Subject closed.

“Course, if we did find out that you or Terry or both had taken possession of, used and/or retained our property, there could be issues and medical stuff to consider but we’ll burn that bridge when we come to it.

“As far as the other business goes, I don’t much care if you or Terry or both thumped Ron Monkhouse repeatedly or not. He was a thieving, piss-taking little bastard, also old, gross and hairy, and if anyone deserved a good fucking kicking he did.”

All this, of course, was music to the ear and smoke to the brain. What could be jollier?

Perhaps an arrangement to our mutual satisfaction?

“The way I see it is this,” said Kemel, “you, me and Terry can walk a small fortune out of this dump, still make Ron look woeful and Dad feel good. Give me a few days to settle and for The Filth to fuck off and there’s a grand a week over the odds, each, to



you and Terry. Your end of the deal is to notice nothing, move a few boxes as and when and continue doing five eighths of fuck all most of the time.”

“That’s very nice of you, Kemel,” I said. “I don’t mind if I do.”

## *XIX*

I WAS at my place of employ musing on life’s curious and unpredictable shifts when, shortly before Terry was due and I could cease pissmongering, I received a visit from my old chum Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet.

Derek asked me about Kemel’s Dad. He also asked about Kemel, Farin, Pete Fennick, the tart in Greenmeads, Terry Winston, Ron, Mrs. Ron, all the little Monkhouses and a mysterious Dr. Borrage.

Brim with the kindness of the semi-imbecile, I could find nothing but faint praise for all persons named save Pete, the tart and the doctor, claiming, essentially honestly, to I know nothing of these persons.

During the course of our chat it became clear that Derek didn’t really think Kemel’s Dad had done Ron in but, realistically, there was no one else for his colleagues to shout at. Derek was shitty about the whole business and it was perfectly obvious The Filth had nothing. I suspected he had popped in merely to keep away from his revolting colleagues.

Derek thought the increasingly shady looking Ron might have been taken out in some kind of underworld execution thing.

Despite my tutting noises, such thoughts were fine with me.

As Derek was getting ready to piss off, who should amble in but the posturing, prancing nitwit Reinhardt Goolie. The raincoat was gone, replaced by a candy-striped blazer of surpassing silliness, but the black trousers, hat and bloody lace-up shoes lingered.

He took off the hat. Unfortunately he still looked vaguely familiar.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything pressing,” Reinhardt squeaked.

“I’ve got a few shirts out the back,” I quipped but Reinhardt looked blank so I introduced him to Derek Mehmet.

Goolie looked the disapproving officer up and down and squeaked: “Nice,” without sincerity.

Derek buggered off sharpish, as though Reinhardt might be contagious. You couldn’t blame him.

Goolie had another message from Andy, hurriedly inscribed by a virtual illiterate on a Town Hall paper napkin with six spelling errors and no punctuation across thirty words, which pretty much said it all really.

To the chase: Andy Carter had called a sudden summit of sad-arse suckers up for disappointment with The CityZen Project. Negotiations, it appeared, had reached a “crushal” stage. Would I take the editor’s job? Andy needed a “defernat” yeah or nay. He

wanted me to join him at the pub at two that afternoon to “meat and geret” key members of the CityZen team.

O tempora! Oh mores!

Since dope was barred at The Town Hall Hotel, it was clearly time for piss *and* getting off the pot.

I informed Mr. Goolie that I would join the merry wordsmiths and urinobibes when liberated from the day’s commercial grind. If nothing else, this got rid of Reinhardt. Not, unfortunately, for long.

Pausing only to give my employer a loyal telephonic appraisal of the kind of dumbsam and uglisam patronising his business premises, delivering tiresome messages and generally lowering the tone, I handed the dump over to newly-arrived, deeply wasted Terry and shot through.

I had every intention of accepting Andy’s ridiculous part-time editor’s job being confident of my ability to extract piss *and* play Besties with Mr. Carter for his few final weeks amongst the living. Regular and easy access to my target was essential if I would do the twat in.

Ho-ho-ho for The Town Hall Hotel!

## XX

RARELY, IF ever, have I seen a more vile looking bunch of plug-ugly bloke scum as blighted Andy’s table at The Town Hall Hotel that afternoon.

Dawn looked a superior species by comparison and Nash wasn’t so bad either.

These ghastly lads were so horrible that I feared, unbeknownst and over time, I had metamorphosed from a tall, thin, budget Bohemian to the ranks of the rank and insults to human dignity.

Was I, even now, being inexorably wound, like attracting like, into the fold and foul embrace of witless freaks, losers and sad grotesques?

I dismissed such nonsense swiftly.

Yet if Andy had picked me for Token Normal, he was in for a huge fucking surprise, ho-ho.

Mine Publisher rose to greet me as a latter-day Henry IV, Part One, might greet a repentant Young Hal of similar location.

“Good to see you, Mate!” boomed Andy, obviously much relieved by my appearance. “Couldn’t be happier to have you aboard the wisest ship of fools in Christendom!” he gibbered. “When I get two seconds to scratch me bum, I owe you a drink.”

“No worries,” I lied.

“I’ll get it,” Eddie sucked and he ebbed off on his self-inflicted errand.

“Onya, Mate!” Andy called too loud.

He turned to me all warm and healthily paternal and then transferred this façade to his congregation:

“Friends,” he slobbered, “I give you your Founding Editor.”

Thin applause.

Andy truncated an ailing clap by turning to me again and rubbing those nasty little fingers: “Eddie, of course, “you know but, just for the record, I should introduce you to the cream of the team. The physical and intellectual engine room of CityZen. Grab a seat and meet the gang.”

I sat.

He turned his beam on a table of male tripe and female unavailability.

“In the immediate future, I shall be CityZen’s Acting Executive Advertising Manager, or C.A.E.A.M., and the lovely Nash here is to be our tireless Administrative Assistant, or A.A., and a vital clog in the mill.

“While we’re on the subject, I’m pronouncing that C.A.E.A.M. as “Same”. Just thought I’d mention that. If we’re all on the same page we should be home and hosed.”

With woeful timing, Andy gestured wide towards Nash and said: “Nash.” I said: “Fantastic.”

“Eddie is CityZen’s New Media correspondent, it’s the worst kept secret in town.

A giggle flecked the room but I could not bring myself to say: “Fantastic,” for Fat Eddie.

“I know that you and Dawn have met more than once Rex,” the fucking idiot actually winked, “so you will be surprised and delighted to know that on behalf of CityZen she will cover today’s all-important health and wellbeing issues with particular reference to thinking outside the spiritual square.”

Andy gestured towards Dawn. I said: “Fantastic.”

“Reinhardt Goolie needs no introduction from me,” Andy alleged. “He is a significant figure leading the cultural van and, without fear or favour, will cover the full plectrum of The Performing Arts and contribute an occasional Think Piece which we’re thinking of calling *Think Piece*.”

“Or *Truth and Beauty*,” squeaked Reinhardt dead seriously. This interjection did away with the need for me to say “Fantastic” again and risk pissing myself with laughter.

Andy turned to a sinister Indonesian midget, aged anything from thirty to eighty, dressed in a tiny green corduroy suit, plimsolls and an hysterical Hawaiian shirt. “Our good friend Ahmet is our man for all artistic seasons: from street art, sculpture, installations, fashion, trends and things on walls.”

Ahmet, it could be observed, was not only as ugly as a hatful but had an alarming collection of tics and bodily tremors. I said “Fantastic” anyway.

Andy blathered on. Nothing short of brutal sudden death would suffice to stem his effluent: “No relevant cultural organ can hope to hit the right note in Australia without

a firm grasp on the World of Sport – fair enough - but I think we are breaking new ground in sports journalism with the exciting appointment of Bruce Hinge.”

I followed the line of Andy’s gesture to an almost invisible, featureless blot looking like a vague sketch of an overworked dental technician.

“Avid sports buff and qualified dental technician,” Andy continued, “Bruce brings a whole new dimension to our sporting coverage and, through extensive contacts in the medical, scientific and prosthetic worlds, we seek nothing short of a revolution in the way we look at ball games and stuff here.”

Bruce brought a lifeless, light grey sigh of a voice to the table.

“The world of prosthesis at large is a long and fascinating one,” Bruce exhaled, sounding as wispy and insubstantial as he looked, “but I won’t go near the ins and outs of today’s more exotic appliances in present company, nor their place in the modern sporting context, or I’ll spoil the surprise.”

“Fantastic,” I said and chucked down the remnants of my beer to avoid honking laughter to his featureless face.

H.M.A.S. Eddie moored alongside and discharged a fresh beverage to my advantage.

Andy pointed to the final specimen at his grim board.

“As an equal opportunity employer, particularly after the gutless flight of that treacherous shirt-lifter Dan Lute, CityZen is particularly proud of to see Roseanne Chang as our Chief Reporter. For news, views and equal opportunity you can’t go past Roseanne and we extend a warm welcome to the CityZen family regardless.”

My suspicion was that many people had passed Roseanne Chang over the years and many would have remarked, in passing, on the happy scarcity of such repulsive, unconvincing, half-tonne, Chinese male transvestites.

The wig, incidentally, could have been recycled from roadkill.

The cosmetics were shocking and it was all too sad.

“Fantastic,” I said.

By Christ there was a lot of fat around. Were all these fellows’ appetites rampant? Is gluttony the new masturbation?!

This nauseating thought sent me back to Andy Carter’s seemingly endless introductions.

“Unfortunately there are two relevant people who can’t be here with us here today,” Andy explained. God he went on.

“All things in print go to Marco Flint, which rhymes. His regular contribution will, in fact, be called *Flint on Print* which is pretty damned clever even if I do say so myself.

“Unfortunately Marco can’t be with us today because of a prior engagement. A minor procedure at Prince Phillip’s but we won’t do detail.”

“At times like these people need support not snide laughs,” Eddie added.

“Our Electronic Media correspondent has yet to be selected so I think we need to get out heads together quick smart on that one.”

“Fantastic.”

Andy maundered on about me. Half-truths and bollocks mainly. I smiled modestly as Arsewipe Andy proclaimed me the living distillation of Leonardo, Marlowe, Byron, Orson Welles and Oscar Wilde.

Prat.

One could not help but note that Andy had the names written on a coaster.

Tenderised by Andy’s shameless pocket pissing, and caught with eyes closed in full appreciation of a solid draught of beer, I was disconcerted to find silence about and all eyes on me with what I took to be a thank-fuck-that’s-over look of hope.

“What?” I improvised.

Andrew pinkened and slowly repeated his most recent words through teeth gritted to a level of about five point five on a scale of one to ten in which One signifies no gritting at all and Ten represents teeth immovably gritted.

“You’ve heard enough from me, Rex, perhaps we could hear something of your thoughts on the future for CityZen.”

“Mine?”

Of course I hadn’t got a fucking clue. I had no simple or repeatable thoughts on the future of CityZen. It had no future. I had no real idea what the fuck CityZen was supposed to be about or how it differed from or resembled a thousand other dying periodicals run by cretins.

So far as I could recall, such matters had never been discussed in my presence. I needed bullshit and I needed it fast!

“My thoughts . . .” I mused. With a bit of luck I could make this parched patch seem like some kind of dramatic pause or rhetorical device.

“You da man,” Andy grinned uneasily and there was something about his tone and his eye and his uneasy grin and today’s cheap, turned-up, balding fat boy jeans that made me feel certain that he was luring me into some kind of trap.

The eyes of my adoring Editorial Team implored me for pearls but all I could consider was a sudden flash of understanding: Andy Carter was setting me up as Senior Prick for the inescapable Burst Bubble Scenario.

Bastard!

All the more reason to waste the dag sooner rather than later.

At last, to the relief of all, I got going.

I smiled. Often a good start. I spoke.

“A wise man once said ‘Give me a child to the age of seven and we’ll both do ten years’.” I paused for an appreciative murmur of amusement. Zip. I ploughed on: “Give or take, that is as true today as it was when those wise words were first uttered.”

The suckhole Team let out queer little grunting noises of ambiguous intent but these failed to mask general incomprehension.

“It’s OK to laugh,” I preached. “Laughter is a wonderful weapon and we must never take ourselves, or others, too seriously.”

Bastard Andy was in like a shot. “That is so true,” he interjected, “no, seriously, that is absolutely right, I’ve often thought that is exactly how it should be don’t you think Ahmet?”

Fucking cheek. I wasn’t having my go turned into a bloody pisshead’s gabfest!

I got in fast: “Laughter, courage, commitment, wisdom, laughter, strength, experience, passion, co-operation, loyalty, courage, compassion, commitment, truth, beauty, beauty, truth and laughter: these qualities will serve us well in the unpredictable struggles and challenges that hide ahead but I can tell you now my friends, without fear of successful contraception, that I have a good feeling about this one. A very good feeling indeed.”

Perhaps, in some silken recess, Dawn divined a sense of what I was up to with this impromptu old flannel but the rest of the silly fuckers just inhaled every worthless word.

## XXI

AS WITH so many horrible, self-obsessed bastards, Andy Carter laboured under the misapprehension that he was a champion of the Little Guy. Like Hitler, these Carter types often fall for their own fabrications. Perhaps that is why, over the ensuing week, my Publisher and Acting Executive Advertising Manager introduced me to a seemingly endless succession of cripples, nutjobs, gay Christian activists, weirdoes, greenies, clowns, drug-addled nincompoops, small business identities, fuckwits, local councillors and unsuccessful stand-up comedians.

And then there were the ethnic minorities.

Andy seemed to know a businessman or community leader from every bloody ethnic minority in this wide brown land and if he managed nothing genuinely constructive in the course of our relationship he did, at least, introduce me to my only Eski-fucking-mo to date. Dreary man. About 50. Worked as a public health inspector. Had a neck a bit like a turkey. Apparently folk from the frozen wastes don’t like being called Eski-fucking-mos these days preferring the term Inu-bloody-it. Generally speaking I couldn’t give a fuck. Who do these people think they are?

Gradually it became clear why Andy knew and encouraged these hordes of hopeless, oppressed buggers: befriend a fragile loser, minority knobhead or pervert and he, she or it might work for nothing.

Lightly cosset a marginalised clod and who knows where it will end?

The Losers loved the attention and Andy loved the admiration.

The Arts is riddled with 'em, pitiful wankers just waiting for someone to lead them out of their hopelessness and confusion. Being friendly towards the fucked and unthreatening was all a part of Andy's shtick. We were inspecting prospective slave labour, to say nothing of soliciting the sucker sympathy vote and copping a free crack at any Charitable Chicks pronging about the lovely, charitable, feel-good, feel-up landscape.

In truth the depressingly few Charitable Chicks dotting our landscape were little older than that daughter I once had. These graceless sheaths of hormonal dough might have thought I was merely some peculiar old geezer indulged by Good Ol' Andy.

I think a couple of these pubescent waifs actually wheel two crippled dipso fuckers to the pub twice a week, Tuesday and Thursday, as part of some school-based social service rort.

At some point, according to our diligent rumourmongers, these aspirational wee slappers conspire to change from their school uniforms into a thin coat of Duco, grab the crips from their criphole, hit the piss and put it about a bit. Needless to say, they didn't put it near me.

Perhaps they just pretended to put it about.

This remote trainee tottie knew nothing of the fortune up my false chimney. A fine head of hair, a lapsed subscription to the Sydney Morning Yuppie and an air of superiority counts for little at times such as these. As far as Charitable Chicks were concerned they were not concerned with me.

My only consolation was that Andy Carter also got absolutely fucking nowhere.

So, when not doing my regulation five eighths of fuck-all on Kemel's behalf, I was being nailed down at The Town Hall by Andy Carter, introduced to Losers and forced into alcohol abuse and Maureen's pub cuisine to escape the intolerable melding of irritation, frustration and tedium of it all.

This madness had to cease.

By this stage I was well over the big, beautiful, Baroque murder. One day, perhaps. For the time being simplicity would be the name of the game.

Walloping Ron with a thick bottle had been an inspiration and minor masterpiece of simplicity, unless you factor in the complex processes of manufacture, packaging, promotion and distribution of Battersea Gin. I chose not to consider these factors but it was important to learn from experience.

Something simple.

Put simply, the more simple the environment, the more likely it would be that simple Cops would be paralysed by the inability to distinguish wood from trees, wood from other Cops, trees from small bushes, copse from Cops, shrubs from ministers of the Thorny Crown, pine planks from plastic laminate, wheat from simple chaff and international terrorists.

Inability to distinguish between things confuses them. Whiteout. Simple.

Kemel's poor old Dad had been reluctantly released without charge and was, by all accounts, deeply dark, dirty and skulking at a holiday property near Yass. Derek's mates had given Terry an unnecessarily aggressive interrogation during which he was very nearly accidentally thumped. All this in the very same Interview Room Two that introduced me to Detective Sergeant Mehmet.

Mrs. Ron and The Hairys had gone bush to stay with her wombat-in-law or something.

No Pig patrolled my horizons.

How odd it was that, for one so recently mired in a collapsing cash economy, I thought so little of the two hundred large up the fake chimney. Funny that.

I was certainly spending more money than was usual but this was the result of crafty and creative Kemel coming through with the new Big Bent Bonus initiative almost immediately. For Terry and I, this greatly enhanced that cycle's issue of emoluments.

Terry immediately purchased a big digital camera and booked a Peruvian woman to pose in his carport for a private session of ethnoporn. Her useful alpaca could be procured for a standing fee and modest additional hourly rate but Terry didn't feel creatively comfortable with that and feared the creature would crap.

And yes, it did amuse me slightly to play the secret assassin and insinuate myself in the circle and dealings of my target on a path smoothed by discreet disbursements of buckshee pub burgers, pies and piss.

A man must have a hobby but I saw very little of my Mistress of Mumbo-jumbo, the lovely Dawn.

Which actually reminds me of the point of this bit: simplicity, action, focus.

Drum roll, drum roll.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised I needed an iron bar.

The odd thing is, it's not that easy to get iron bars in our area. And where the fuck can you procure lead piping if it comes to that?

I don't know if it's just me but I didn't know of a single iron shop for miles, if at all, and there is no meaningful guarantee of appropriate rods when you get there. If fortune smiles, a limited range of rods may be offered for sale but woe-betide those swollen ranks of unhappy iron consumers who find no rods or bars. Bitter disappointment is their lot and satisfactory bars their tattered dream.

"After all that fucking about, the available rods or bars, if any, may not be of iron!" I cried aloud to my shabby furnishings. "What use conventional ingots, sheets or wire extrusions to me? 'What use?!' say I."

I only wanted a small bit for my own consumption, some iron about the width of a broom handle and the length of my ulna, reasoning that if you really fucking whack 'em with such iron, they shall surely die.



Only personal experience with the implement itself could hope to happily resolve the vexed question of a homemade handle of tape or twine or both or something else entirely or nothing.

I would steal the bloody iron if necessary but couldn't find a place where appropriate iron was available that I could travel thither for theft.

Anyway, I happened to be threading through Blue Level at the Lo-Mart car park thinking thoughts of iron when something quite extraordinary happened. I found the perfect piece. It was just lying on the concrete between a shitheap and a BMW. The perfect piece of iron.

I stopped and gazed upon this iron and knelt low to gaze more closely.

Stark, savage and sceptre-like, heavy and hard, this was, by any standards, an iron bar and it was quite as long as my ulna and was formed into a long cone which, at its greatest diameter would exceed, perhaps by twenty or thirty per cent, that of most broom handles. This solid spawn of industry tapered down gently, steel grey, to little more than the radius of a broom handle. Each end of this skilfully tooled artefact was domed with greater and lesser hemispheres of its unyielding metal. Remarkably, given my concerns for a home-made handle, this baton's narrowed end was evenly blistered with a warty metal area set to offer, perhaps unintentionally, excellent grip – or so it seemed to my iron-starved eye.

And there it was. On the concrete. Before those very eyes.

A dead set miracle, had I gone in for such bollocks.

Without more ado, I had snatched up the wonderful bar, concealed it in my Eco Bag and, on the spot, resolved to call that bar WonderBar!

I would hold that bar in the highest regard!

I was dragged from my reverie by the car-park echo of terse, vulgar voices and, concerned for red-handed discovery, popped my head up and had a butcher's hook about Blue Level.

Scarcely a soul to be seen but tucked round near the bins a fat blonde tart was having a go at a middle-aged poof.

Hang on a tick Dick. That fat blonde tart was not any old fat blonde tart. This particular F.B.T. was none other than the detested bartrollop Connie, formerly of The Stockade Hotel. I mentioned the foul harpy before.

And while we're on the subject, that middle-aged poof was, in fact, that middle-aged poof Mr. Tony Barnet, preening tyrant of The Last Goose, a profitable licensed shithole of this parish. I mentioned that bitch before as well.

"Fuck me," I thought.

There's every chance that Connie and Tony also thought, "Fuck me," as I ambled up affably.

Both saw me, leapt like startled guinea pigs, moved apart swiftly and stopped whatever acrimonious bickering had consumed their worthless lives.

“Connie,” I said with a big cheesy grin. “Tony,” I said with the same.

Connie made a vague and wobbly smile and opened her vile mouth a bit. Tony drawled: “Hello,” but they couldn’t quite place the casually elegant, confident, man-of-the-world advancing on them.

I don’t think they ever did.

The fact is you can do a fierce amount of damage to two flabby, defenceless, unsuspecting dickheads in a deserted car park with strength, speed, passion, determination and WonderBar, or reasonable facsimile thereof. You’d be amazed.

I seemed to have an aptitude for this.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Tony Barnet spluttered, bewildered and nervous as buggery for some reason. But, before I could insist, for sanity’s sake, that I did not fancy seeing myself here at all, my hand was in the Eco Bag and my fingers curled about the knobby end of WonderBar, exultant slayer of bastards and thirsty soul stealer of wankers!

Connie copped it first, a massive backhand across the chops, followed by three swift and unrestrained thumps on the crust. Thud, crack, slop. Happily the results were not too messy beyond the extremely messy area of impact and Connie was, to my lay eye, well dead before she hit the deck.

Tony Barnet went quadro with fear and astonishment. His pouty, lascivious mouth mocked the gaping goldfish and, while I wasn’t paying particular attention, he may have pissed himself on the spot.

The first blow, a corker if a tad off target, audibly smashed Tony’s collar bone to buggery but before he could bellow, run, whimper, scream or kiss my arse, the jaw was hanging smashed and streaming and, like a thick old tent peg, Tone was being hammered to the ground with a whack and a crack and a wallop, thump, smash and it’s goodnight from him.

## *XXII*

CONNIE AND Tony Barnet were not only all over the Blue Level bin area of the Lo-Mart car park but also the front page of the following day’s Daily Fiasco.

Boys and girls of the tabloid media were of the opinion that this was a tale of Wrinkled Love Gone Wrong, speculating that this mature couple, alias Connie and Tony, temporarily inflamed by thwarted passions and business concerns, had bludgeoned each other to death by means undisclosed. Drugs were not being ruled out at this stage. The unfeeling, corrupt and incompetent crypto-fascists of the State Government were held largely responsible.

Clearly the Fourth Estate was unaware of Tony Barnet’s tail-gunning proclivities which was a bit slack and rather left the Love Gone Wrong angle on the spike. Unless, of course, the love had gone very weird and very wrong. Was Connie born a woman?

Had Tony Barnett reamed his last Balkan backpacker? What unholy perversions had these two conjured? Were rare and broadly incomprehensible lusts at work here? We could, if you feel comfortable with this, be literally scraping the bottom of the barrel here. I have my own scraper.

Could it be that a harrowing yet heart-warming and award-winning afternoon telly-movie lurked behind the inspirational story of Connie and Tony?

I doubt that. Some would call their association an abomination and those same commentators would be unlikely to rule out drugs at this stage.

I sat looking at this newspaper shite and thinking this bloody rubbish over my nourishing bowl of morning-fresh Wheetie Bastards.

On the table, behind the shitepaper, scrupulously cleaned, lay WonderBar.

WonderBar and I were at an uncomfortable juncture in our relationship.

Brilliant for bludgeoning though The Bar undoubtedly was, it had proved impossible not to be splashed with bits when pounding one's victims. Pounding was essential. Bits were inevitable.

Unnoticed before I reached The Unit, my Thoughtful-Artistic-Man-Who-Reads-Books jacket was found to have dark flecks of stuff all up one sleeve and across the lower torso, left and right. An unwanted souvenir of Connie and Tony, I fear. Together at last, on my apparel and in bits. Such bits are meat and drink to forensic people and tabloid people also.

The jacket needed soaking in cleaning solutions, there was no way I'd ditch a perfectly good jacket for the sake of some rotten forensic dollops.

In the immediate future WonderBar would be consigned to the enigmatic environs below the sink.

I needed to think again for Andy Carter. Something new. A middle path between, shall we say, Skull Smashing at one end of the spectrum and being dissolved over weeks with the unhappy scone protruding from a specially constructed carboy of weak acid at the other. I wanted no bits of Andy Carter to fall on me.

"Think! Think!" I thought repeatedly through half an ep. of *The Black Hand*.

My repeated Think Think thoughts were disrupted by a knock at the door. Most unusual and rarely good. Even Charity Bastards gave our building a wide berth after that Sri Lankan bloke went mental and took hostages from the Liberal Party with an intimidatory pedestal fan.

Fortunately the appliance was of shoddy construction and poor materials and swiftly fell apart. This allowed Walloping and Medical Services to get in quick, maintain order and secure witnesses in the event of things going tits up.

As a consequence of old Gunga Dinn's extravagant protestation, and well-publicised incarceration, people of prudence tended not to knock. I was comfortable with this and considered it one of few things in favour of the aesthetic blight and sink of

iniquity that housed shady individuals and a stream of Iberian Nurses in Number Twelve.

The best thing to do was nothing.

Silence.

The knocker knocked again.

Bastard.

Nothing was still the best thing to do.

Shit. Silence. The knocker knocked again.

Fuck this.

I was off my arse in a flash, almost had the front door from its fixings and very nearly frightened the crap out of The Woman Upstairs.

“Shit. Sorry. Hello,” I bumbled. “I nodded off. Inhuman working hours. Ceaseless toil, you know. You knocked. Can I ummm . . .”

“Oooo,” said The Woman Upstairs as though stung. “Oooo! Oooo! Big surprise there. By Gum! Sorry. Wow. Wasn’t expecting that.”

We both said sorry several times and stood around like idiots.

I’d never actually seen The Woman Upstairs up close. We’d said “hello” a few times and once, near the communal Hills Hoist, had briefly looked at a dead pigeon, but that was as far as it went.

She wasn’t entirely bad, The Woman Upstairs. She was a Northern Pom with a voice that sang of that once great nation’s cold, damp, modern breeding grounds of waste, ignorance, squalor and perturbation of The Monarch’s peace.

Not a bad over all shape. Mid thirties. Big nose. That nose was serious but it was a well-defined nose free from warts and bristles. Short, blonde-ish-sandy sort of hair. Clean jeans, quite clingy. Chirpy red tee shirt with a picture of a martial arts person on it. She really wasn’t bad. Not too small. There was the blotched red and purple brachiated fungoid lump, about the size of a golf ball, sticking out of her jaw just below her left ear but fuck, these things can be seen to, there are facilities, there had to be psychological grounds and beggars can’t be choosers.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “Can I help?”

Automatically, unconsciously, her nervous hand fluttered lumpwards but swiftly fell aside.

“I’m sorry to trouble you,” said The Lump Woman, “but I’m in a bit of a quandary.”

“Really?”

“I live upstairs.”

“I know. Come in. It’s a tip.”

She came. You could have feathered me down with a knock.

“And I was wondering if you could feed me cat this coming weekend.”

Feed her cat? What on earth did she mean? Oh the ambiguity!

“It’s too early for drink and I’m trying to give up smoking while asleep. Can I offer you something not very good?”

She was calming down but looked as one who might list to The Twitchy Side as general default position. “I’m sorry,” she intoned, pulling a cod-solemn face to lighten the tone.

Suddenly she perked up: “Any road up,” she prattled, “it’s like this: I’ve been invited somewhere, you see, in’t country, for’t weekend, this weekend, Bush. I’ve been here six months and seen nowt of Bush. The problem is, I’ve gorra cat. It goes wi’ upstairs Unit. It’s called Rancid and seems happy crapping in’t box on’t balcony. It’s had its knackers off, by all accounts, so it probably can’t be bothered to shift. It’s the feeding. I need someone to feed Rancid and bring sunshine into his limited life. I thought of you because you live downstairs. Could you feed me cat on Friday, Saturday and Sunday? I’ll leave tins and t’milk shouldn’t turn. I’d be ever-so grateful.”

I knew nothing of cats, and know little still, but assumed they were verminous little bludgers in the way of mammals. Angela sucked me in. I pledged to feed the cat for all I was worth and she, profuse with thanks, suggested that I pop up to her place, when convenient, and she would show me where everything was. I twitched not a muscle. She would also introduce me to Rancid. How nice.

I suggested that very evening for the Rancid mind-meld and Mysterious Display of Everything but feared a long-standing business arrangement would keep me unavailable until after twenty two hundred howlers.

She did not mind. It would not take long. She was “summut” of a Night Owl herself. Just knock. We could have a coffee or, if preferred, a cup of tea. I was assured that both had the potential to be nice. Biscuits were not ruled out. Her name was Angela Twitchet, She worked at the Reg Palaver Primary School in the library, poor cow.

Saying nothing of the midget crimson cauliflower tumescing from her head, Angela Twitchet went away.

You never know your luck in the big city.

## *XXIII*

I HAD to dive down to Lo-Mart for some crap. Into whom should I bump on the way home but your friend and his Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet of the New South Wales Wallopers.

“I saw the papers,” I confided.

“Every bastard did,” Derek muttered darkly.

Despite a balmy clime and plentiful supply of suspicious stiffs, Derek was not a happy Detective.

For fun I mentioned that I knew the victims vaguely and Tony Barnet could not have been a crazed lover of Connie because he was a notorious poof.

Derek's plodding interest was piqued by this intelligence and we ended up having coffee in one of those franchise joints that front, distribute and launder lucre for utterly ruthless and fabulously wealthy South American narcotics interests. Derek bought me a Cherry Danish.

He wanted to know everything I knew of Connie and Tony Barnet. Was I sure of Tony's sexual orientation?

"More pricks than a second-hand pincushion," I quipped, immediately regretting a coarse and undisciplined utterance in the presence of a pig.

Derek didn't seem to notice.

"Connie used to work at The Stockade," I confessed, "and, as you know, Tony runs The Last Goose in Flabbit Street. Not a friendly pair. Brooding. Both of them. Brooding individuals. Cold, piercing eyes and tight with it. Not very popular."

I chattered on: "Connie had a tongue on her, that's for sure. Very scathing and personal in her tart remarks. Upset a lot of the younger customers with her gutter talk and crude innuendo.

"Tony flits about and picks up young blokes, sexually transmitted disease and money. He could be pretty bitchy and I do remember a nasty incident where he reduced a mildly spastic woman to tears near the change machine."

"I didn't know of any connection between the deceased but ignorance is hardly surprising. I observe from a distance, Derek. These people move in different circles.

"I did see Tony briefly a few weeks back, nothing special, just for a minute or two, from a distance across the dismal wasteland of The Goose, but haven't come across Connie for, oooo, a year?

"This is beyond my area of competence, Derek, I'm a man of simple tastes and no more a psychologist than I am an inspector of historic buildings or grower of cheese."

By the time I was out the door I had given little but gained much.

The best and brightest amongst the Cops had declared the grisly slaying of Connie and Tony to be a grisly business slaying.

These same Cops were concerned that a pattern was forming and feared the bother of a high profile, blood-soaked slaughter rampage spree horror engendered by hard-core criminal elements bent on infiltrating and controlling this State's liquor distribution industry. Some believed my very own boss Ron Monkhouse, deceased, may have been the first victim of Piss Wars.

"Gosh!" I contributed.

Many respected Cops still fancied Kemel's Dad for Evil Mastermind.

This Piss Wars idea was gold to me. The perfect distraction. I was comfortably home and generously hosed.

Where do they get Cops from? What bloody planet?

The local Piss Industry is solid to the rafters with well-established nasty fuckers born to it and well able to care for their own interests. Who do they think would be nasty

or stupid enough, in a lucrative but limited market, to seriously have a go at that mindless bunch of brutal savages?

They must know these things at Central. Are they *all* bent or stupid or both?! By the beard of sacred bees on Saint Modomnoc! These uniformed buffoons should be publicly humiliated!

Forgive my critical zeal. In truth I do not know if the historical Modomnoc was actually bearded with bees, although I like to think that the old rascal was so bedecked. There can be little doubt of his remarkable affinity for these industrious creatures. We should not forget that when it was time for Modomnoc to come out of the misty land of Wales and repair to Erin's emerald embrace, did not the pining bees follow him boldly thither, to climes where bees had not been known to dwell or even visit, and populate that place with their kind.

I couldn't help myself.

"You know, Derek, I have wondered if, perhaps, a dubious element might have entered the dealings of Mad Bob's Bottle Magic from time to time," I twittered. "I think it's shocking he's dead and out of all proportion but I did find Ron's accounting methods strange. More than once I was dismayed to witness Mr. Monkhouse remove money from my care and the business premises itself without appropriate documentation.

"If only I'd said something earlier, perhaps this could have all been avoided. Is that a cross that I must bear, Derek? Only time will tell."

Derek pursed his lips.

"As to the industry as a whole?" I pondered. "Tough one, Derek, but I guess there's good and bad everywhere. Sometimes, we just have to make the best of it. None of us is perfect, mate, I think you go with me that far."

I smiled: "It's the ordinary consumer that suffers in the end, of course. Every time."

## XXIV

BACK FROM The Pisseria to The Unit before the local mugger struck nine.

The fact is Kemel didn't care if Terry or I closed early. The other fact is Kemel didn't give a crap about legitimate business generally so I was quite content.

I had found great stimulus in criminality.

Back to The Unit before nine. A speedy scrub. Quick joint. Couple of miniatures, Trevor's finest Glen McMootie, three processed cheese slices in Levantine bread, a go with the nit rake, half a joint and a quick gaze into the grimy clouds of the kitchen mirror.

There was a bloke in there, obscured by fly shit and the greasy film exhaled from cooking foodstuffs. I wished I hadn't bothered.

But this was no time for gloomy introspection. I had an appointment, a meeting, an assignation if you will, a date with my neighbour Angela Twitchet and her Lump, a

date with Rancid the Cat and the tantalising Display of Everything promoted by the first named.

The night was young. If my nocturnal overtures were found discordant I could be over the road and into the turps by eleven. Easy.

In the event I could not resist Angela's hospitality, I grabbed half-a-dozen mini-casks. Had not Andy Carter himself noted with approval: "Three generous glasses and no larger than a paperback about space aliens"?

He had, indeed, so remarked. Worthless shithead.

Rancid was a huge bastard. Not just fat but fucking enormous in every direction. Knackers or no, a night on the tiles would have this bugger through the roof. I had no idea this huge imprisoned bastard had been crapping on the balcony above my own and was unsettled to find myself considering the wildly perverted thoughts that must surely rack its revolting solitary brain.

"I think he likes you," Angela observed as the tortoise shell monster waved its massive, contemptuous date at us and wandered off behind a plant.

Even for this Behemoth of Binge, the conspicuous tins of Pusspurr were plentiful for a period of thrice three days not three; emergency dried shit in a bag, a can opener and cat-specific fork lay hard by. I had no difficulty recognising the refrigerator for what it was and was assured that it would hold sound milk throughout Angela's absence.

From many angles, Angela's Lump was completely obscured.

She asked if I would care for tea or coffee and I introduced her to the popular new mini-cask concept.

Cautious describes her reaction and that hand fluttered for The Lump and fell away.

I didn't press the point and went for the coffee. Why bother seducing a good-enough, if beaky, sort with a lurid award-winning lump when Andy Carter could introduce you to a deaf Cossack?

The things I do.

Angela was going on about something: some woman whose name, I think, was Hoofing. Something about a holiday in Dunedin, NZ.

I made noises as required and engaged in the Ancient Art of Stickybeak.

Fuck it was clean. No piles of shit at all really. It all seemed a lot brighter than my sewer and there were fucking plants all over. Living ones. There was a kind of childhood nostalgia thing going with the furnishings but clear evidence of award-winning contemporary Scandinavian ingenuity at low, low prices was scattered widely.

I do recall crappy souvenirs from crappy Third World countries placed about her comparatively crap free environment.

"Unless the weather's really shocking," Angela explained, "I always leave the balcony door open so Rancid can come and go."



If she thought armoured glass was going to stop that fucker coming and going she was, indeed, a neighbour in error.

We sat at a pine kitchen table. I stared out at Angela's balcony, which interested me strangely.

"You've done your balcony very nicely," I observed, getting up for a better squint. "You've obviously got a green lump."

Whoops.

By the time my tiny hand touched the door of The Town Hall Hotel, I had a plan: from a significant height and prudent distance I would drop a substantial trough of succulents on Andy Carter's head and kill him.

Dead, as they say, set.

The Town Hall was quite busy.

Andy Carter never seemed to leave the many mansions of the fucking pub these days and there he was in the Ben Hall Bar with his one-legged Pakistani going on about the fucking buses.

Andy winked conspiratorially, waved me into a seat and surreptitiously signalled silence while Ali Baba whinged on about disadvantaged cripples on the four five nine and a man called Monty Burton.

It turned out that this threadbare unmembered motormouth twat was, in fact, an independent member of the local Council, Councillor Nazir Hussein no less, chairman of the Recreation, Rorts and Bungs Committee.

Fair enough I suppose. You never know when a twat might come in handy and I had no interest in, or concern for, the number of his legs.

Old Hoppy Hussein was certainly full of himself. This was probably the result, at least in part, of the absent limb demanding the essence constituting Nazir Hussein be squished and concentrated in a smaller space. No sane bastard would want to take unappealing remnants away anyway.

Every so often Hoppy whacked the table or floor with his shabby crutch, which wasn't desperately suitable for family viewing.

That was all fine with me. As a man with a mission, I could not give a rat's arse for his crutch or his chatter or for Andy Carter's nutjob networking. I sat back, sipped beer and, while all about were busy losing theirs, wafted back to The Plan.

Angela Twitchet pretended not to hear my Green Lump gaffe but she had; the hand fluttered and she went prune-faced and remote to prove it. With all those fucking plants about you wouldn't think one more root would matter much but hey ho. We both concealed pain, humiliation and resentment and I tried to look sympathetic,

Mentally I gave myself a short, sharp lecture on the perils of loose-lipped fuckwittery and resolved to mend my ways and move on.

Angela also seemed anxious to move on.

Her balcony was the key: the pot plants, the wall and precipitous drop, my seedy slum below, Andy Carter, her looming sojourn in The Great Outdoors, the cunt of a cat, location, location, location; it was all gradually falling into place (ahem!).

There was a substantial trough of succulents and this trough was, one suspects, of concrete and in its heavy, hollow heart lay clods of earth compacted plant matter and all-pervasive moisture. It was, with all its content, a trough of serious weight and it stood on the slender brick wall that kept those upon Angela's balcony safe.

Upon the wall it sat and I could not help but wonder how the lard and bone of Andy Carter would respond to that fucker slicing down from the storey above as, propped and unconscious, he leaned out from my very own balcony. He would be having a sensitive nocturnal moment, perhaps. Leaning out to attract attention. Making some sensitive observation about a roof or a park or galvo or a particularly good alley somewhere.

It would be a rare and satisfying slaughter. It would be an impressive piece of work.

How would the human spine, roughly at right angles to the shitty building, react to this unexpectedly plunging trough, and all its succulents and soil, when dropped three good meters from a neighbour's place immediately above? More important: how would Andy Carter's spine react to such an unexpected trough, to say nothing of its succulents and sodden soil, when dropped from those meters and that location?

The human spine, in general, would not react well. Andy Carter's spine would not react well but what difference would all that pressed flab make?

It was, if you'll pardon the expression, all falling in to place.

Angela Twitchet handed over spare keys to her home to enable feeding of the brute. The Nose was a handicap and The Lump a catastrophe.

Nerves shimmering, Angela said I should pop the keys through her letterbox when Rancid Duty was done on Sunday. She hadn't really taken a shine to me.

As of that moment, however, I held keys to Angela Twitchet's Unit. This was not to be sneezed at. I could blanket said Unit with my attention, discover all her desperate secrets, paw her private property and arrange to drop a big concrete fucker on the second latitudinal sixth, from head to toe, of Andy Carter.

Once Angela, enlumped, had fucked off for a Bush Experience, I had to get Andy incredibly drunk and drape him over my balcony wall one night, Saturday night, the night after tomorrow day, nip upstairs, drop the trough on him and, if possible, chop him in half. The idea being, of course, that the trough accidentally fell off the wall at a most inauspicious time. Accidental death. Poor bastard.

I also had another element for the plan that pleased me greatly, a masterpiece of misdirection and mischief, but more of that anon.

I liked this plan. The potential for a shambles would stagger the conventional mind. Most of the bits would go downstairs but the Fuzz must have some simpleton on

mop and bucket duty to give The Unit a bit of a scrub while I wobbled about with dismay and gnashed the old teeth.

Post crunch, I would be out and down the stairs like lightning; into my very own Unit like a shot, off the kit, into the downy cot seemingly oblivious and soundo when police officers aghast hammer at the door and rouse me to deliver terrible news. A tragic accident has chopped young Andy Carter in half on my extensive inner city balcony. He was not expected to recover.

Good grief! I know nothing of this. I have gainful employment this day and had retired early in pursuit of health, wealth and wisdom.

"I am appalled. My dear friend Andy has been chopped in half. We had such plans! How could such arbitrary horror be visited on frail vertebrate vessels such as we? Has God lost all care for humankind? Have I not in recent days endured the mindless slaughter of my employer Ron by person or persons unknown? Were not Connie and Tony Barnet known to me? Were they not horribly slaughtered yesterday in the Lo-Mart car park or something?"

"Derek, am I jinxed?"

About the words above these words my plan was forming and such was my concentration on this adventure that I was quite unaware Councillor Hoppy had bugged off and Andy was talking on the mobile to his poor cow of a wife in terms of gloop. All could see a most attentive and devoted husband, the prick. Andy was hard at it, trying to make things happen. If only she knew. Andy Carter would pork anything with fur and many things without.

Incidentally, her name was Christine. The Wife. Poor bloody cow. I bumped into the pair of them recently in Lo-Mart. Big girl. Not fat exactly but big boned. She towered over Andy and seemed OK in a bovine sort of way.

The pleasures of the pub were starting to pall.

"Andy," I said, "I've got an early start tomorrow. I'll be nose down bum up in CityZen and wrestling with its crucial design issues."

"Excellent," Andy beamed. "You da man!"

"Andy," I asked, "have you, on behalf of CityZen Magazine, made any progress in your search for office space? As you will be aware, we currently meet somewhat chaotically in the pub. We have no formal office space and this does not engender confidence in our efforts."

"Space?"

"You know, Andy, space. For working and meeting and attending to business. For storing those little things that make office life worthwhile: desks, photocopying machines, twirly chairs, staplers, cool water from a thing, telecommunications equipment, cupboards, a device dispensing cold cans of carbonated drink and provision for hot beverages, a microwife, someone called Wayne, decorative colleague women,

computers, implements, facilities, paper, reference and research material, pens. Space. Something covered would help. Do you have any progress on that, Andy?"

"Trust me," said Andy, "I've been buried in print and distribution negotiations, face to face, manure et manure and hard as nails. For days I've hardly surfaced but to touch base with you and a few other key personnel. We are counting down to momentous events, mate. There is always a piper to pay, always, and the time is nigh to nail him to the mast. It goes with the territory."

He was off and running.

"A lot of good people are logging a lot of late nights lately, mate. I know I am. I'm logging like a bastard.

"Christine's getting dirtier by the day, which suits me fine," he leered, "but, to be serious just for a moment here, I might have some good news for you on the space front at tomorrow's editorial conference. In here, eight thirty. I owe you a beer."

"I'll look forward to it."

Eddie was undulating towards us. I fucked off sharpish.

## XXV

I NEEDED to give Angela's Unit what we felons like to call The Once Over.

It was far from unheard of, of course, for felons with time on their side to give premises, persons, chattels, fixtures or fittings The Twice Over.

It may be that we don't talk about this practice much because it could imply a shoddy or cursory approach to The Once Over necessitating unwanted duplication of effort, a lull in time, a folding of space and lowering of consumer confidence.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Some things, moray eels for example, cry out for extra scrutiny. It's as simple as that. Tiny complex curly things can be barely comprehensible at first glance, even to the trained eye. Detail, if detail be present, simply cannot emerge under circumstances of unseemly haste. Time is needed to grasp subtleties and incorporate them in the unfolding fabric of events and many a felon would thank his or her lucky stars that he or she had provided for The Twice Over in their felonious deeds and machinations.

Many a!

Caution, of course, was the key to getting away with it. Daring was another key, which given the caution business was a bit of a bastard. The affair was riddled with Fine Lines, grey areas, elements of uncertainty, useless flakes.

How I yearned for a time.

I would need to trespass on Angela Twitchet's Unit at the earliest opportunity to plan every last detail of my experiment.

I set the alarm for seven o'clock in the morning, which didn't happen too often, hit the rack and woke on the dot.

I observed from a place of concealment.

She, Angela, was out of the joint and away at five past eight that Friday morn and I was into the protective rubber gloves, up those stairs and in before any normal person, so inclined and using conventional techniques of vocalisation, could say Jack Robinson about two hundred and seven times.

Rancid the Blob was oozing about looking seriously mental and thinking fuck-knows-what.

Fat ponce.

Little did The Cat realise the crucial role it had to play in this important rehearsal and the dramatic shenanigans set for Saturday night.

There was time and to spare for a thorough rummage and it was in the course of rummaging that I happened to open a door on the heap of silver birch laminated modular shit holding up a TV, a variety of rubbish and a big, bright South American pottery frog. One would call it a statue, one imagines. One would also call it deeply fucking ugly, but that's another story.

One man's bad taste is often another's meat and vice versa. The same is true of women from Up North with lumps and noses. Take the case of Angela Twitchet for example: her meat might leave a luscious taste across my tongue; my own might make a Tasmanian Devil spew.

My disapproval of the pottery frog in no way prevented provision of meat for both its manufacturer and any who would sup with such a fellow.

Anyway, I happened to open the cupboard door and, lo, within that harshly manipulated mutant spawn of reconstituted trees lay six things that surprised and taxed me greatly. Six taxing things.

These taxing things were in the cupboard and their number was six.

In that laminated cupboard I saw six white blocks. Each block taxed me and collectively they taxed me more. Each block stood white and individually wrapped in stout and cloudy plastic and two rusty red rubber bands.

As I ventured on The Twice Over I saw that some other finer inner wrapping, such as that filmy crap wrap foodstuff, had been bound about each brick in the pale pile.

Each white block was similarly shaped and similarly shaped and somewhat larger than a jolly old house brick.

Each brick was stacked in a tall pile but one brick across. Six goodly bricks stacked in a tall, thin pile. Six white bricks that were piled up in a fascinating pile in a cupboard.

Six!

These were drugs! Fucking drugs. The Lady with the Lump had fucking great lumps of fucking drugs in her modular shit.

I could offer but one comment.

"Fuck me!"

She was a Pommy librarian, for fuck's sake!

Another triumph for the Australian way of life.

I'm no expert but these drugs were, in all probability, worth a small fortune. I am, it is true, always up for a spliff and I have been known to tarry with the odd E but, as I said, I am no expert.

I diligently avoided cocaine because, clearly and often, it turned vaguely tolerable people into unmitigated wankers. Acid? Give me a break! Heroin? I don't think so. That other fucking stuff, the name of which escapes me, is just a self-administered precipitate of degradation, self-loathing and slow death. Farming it out is one thing but I have no desire whatsoever to sample the merchandise.

I see them on the streets. The Lunchtime of The Dead.

Then came a powerful wave of inspiration: I would take three of these valuable bricks, I resolved, dispose of them illegally and profit criminally.

I knew not how but swore it would be so.

No. I would take four of these precious bricks and escape undetected because two drug bricks remained in the cupboard to firmly freak out and confuse Derek Mehmet and His Mates when they probe Saturday night's tragic death by window box of Andy Carter. Brilliant!

In the ensuing brouhaha I would not provoke a single suspicious thought from the constabulary. With wearisome attention to detail I could gladly relate what little I knew of my neighbour and produce keys as circumstantial evidence of neighbourliness.

Ha-ha!

Calm personified, I found an Eco-Bag, bagged the four-brick booty and lodged it near the door.

Who would have thought? The lumped librarian was not without her charms and I had four of them. I don't think the Angela Twitchet I knew would begrudge a friendly neighbour good fortune even though her own outlook be bleak.

To the balcony and joy: at some time the heavy trough of stuff on the balcony wall had been inadvertently pushed towards the drop. I noted well-weathered scratch marks from this uncorrected push and that would weigh well with the forensic clowns. As a consequence of prior displacement, relatively little effort would be required to tip the trough into Andy's oblivion and tabloid immortality.

Now it was the turn of Rancid the Cat to be something more than a furry sack of shit. I need a dry run, just to see if my cunning wheeze was physically possible.

If my calculations were correct, Rancid the Cat would swiftly become Prime Suspect in the bloody death of Andy Carter.

But, for real scientific evidence of the DNA class, I needed to pick the fat fucker up and press it against the concrete trough and rub off bits of feline DNA. I'd do the actual pressing and rubbing on Saturday night and merely hoist the bloated beast for this rehearsal.

Problem: I wasn't entirely sure I could actually lift the morbidly obese bastard so I needed a serious try out.

Rancid knew something was on. Its Swiss Roll legs went slightly splayed and stiff, its whisker things stood rapier-like, its tail was straight and down and it looked at me with cold contempt.

For forensic, moral and aesthetic purposes, I sought as little physical contact with the cat as possible. To a novice in the business of Cats, it seemed that a firm, gloved grip at the scruff of the neck and a firm, gloved grip at the base of the tail would best allow a respectable distance betwixt man and beast and give firm grip for raising the gigantic bastard.

I still consider this to be a reasonable assumption and strongly suspect that any reasonable creature would concur.

I approached The Cat.

The Cat did not move but stared.

I grasped The Cat by the scruff of the neck and it did not move nor make a sound. This seemed good.

I grasped The Cat by scruff and base of tail and it did not move nor make a sound but looked now with incredulity laced through cold contempt.

I summoned all my strength and record here with pride that I actually raised that gargantuan fucker to the height of the balcony wall. I did this with but two gloved hands and no artificial aids or stimulants. I lifted Rancid right off the deck and as high as that crucial trough.

And then the demon struck.

In a move worthy of some master martial artist, Rancid exploded in my hands, its Swiss Rolls went berserk; it howled, its flab flailed wildly and flew through the air and it bounced on the trough of succulents.

The succulents, trough, clods and all went over and down and Rancid stood poised on the wall like a triumphant Olympian to the tune of a splattering shattering noise.

"Cunt!" I barked and furiously pushed the bastard beast off the wall to a greasy death.

It wailed most piteously.

I looked down after it.

Rancid made a shocking mess a few paces out from the building. There were gallons of the bastard.

My eye shifted.

Before the very door of the structure fuckwits called home, far less lurid than the nearby exhibition of Rancid's internal structures, lay Angela Twitchet.

She and her back-pack, her lump, her nose and naughty brain had been felled and stilled by the falling trough and she was as dead as a fucking doornail.

Bugger! She came back. Must have forgotten her lump cream.  
I did not linger.

## XXVI

NOW I had four substantial bricks of valuable drugs up my fake chimney in company with two hundred grand from Ron Monkhouse. I dressed for sleep and repaired to my couch to await the inevitable knock with impudent glee.

As they say in the classics: whacko the chook!

How unexpected was this?

While I lay a-thinking, for a few minutes the walls of the room seemed strangely rubberised and it appeared that unknown forces beyond elastic walls were probing at the rubber with strange implements.

Queer business.

What were the mysterious devices with which these unknown probers probed? External television aerials perhaps? Sometimes stray panels of pressed steel or some similarly contoured sturdy sheet substance? Kitchen utensils of gigantic size? Valve radios?

Perhaps we shall never know.

Through the rubbery walls I thought I heard muffled moans and sparse gibbers but you never can tell.

It was clear, however, that my situation was awkward. I had accounted for four stiffes that had, in life, been somewhat known to me. As we all know, the average Detective Sergeant detests a coincidence as nature abhors the average Detective Sergeant.

I would have to bump someone off at the earliest opportunity, someone with pissmongering links, however remote, to Ron Monkhouse, Connie and Tony Barnet but absolutely no links what-so-ever to me. This would, as they also say in certain classics, deflect the heat.

And this slaying could, I thought, be a job for the singing steel of WonderBar and it needed to be handled expeditiously but anon.

No sooner had I turned my thoughts to the valuable drugs up my fake chimney than did the key to their destiny come to me.

Trevor was the man for me. Good Old Trev, most distinguished of wholesale piss reps whose bounteous buckshee bottles, mini-casks and salted snacks were, e'en now, deposited in substantial stashes about the cockroach shit and squalor of The Unit.

Wiry and street-wise Trev. Bent as a nine-bob-note Trev. Good Old Trev who had to get his weed from someone.

Trev would be the perfect partner for this enterprise.

I can be generous. Trevor would have a goodly share of profit and we would both rejoice with discretion.



But, as with the proposed heat-resistant slaying, Trevor and The Drugs would have to wait.

A stampede of publicly funded Noisy Bastards could be heard for miles and I had no difficulty picturing flashing lights and temporary street furniture assembled at Ground Duo where the weather looked set to do us all proud.

Sturdy footwear slapped up and down the Spartan stair and cries of: “Yeah, right,” and: “On it, Boss,” and divers uses of “fuck” echoed through unloved spaces and jostled the suspicion of urine and certainty of damp carpet.

Barrier tape would glisten and flutter. Idlers would gather and gawp. A light tent might cover the former woman, her sprinkling of soil and succulents. Three or four regulation issue rain capes might conceal the wreck of Old Rancid. Photographs would be taken for pleasure, profit or professional purposes.

I gave thought to my situation, vis-à-vis Angela Twitchet, the squashing thereof and the consequences, predictable and otherwise, attendant on that.

I was to be an angel of innocence and ignorance for all to see.

Saturday night was out of the question. The accursed Andy Carter would have to wait. Derek Mehmet was a dim bulb but even he had his limits.

Anyway, the crucial trough of succulents was shattered beyond repair as, indeed, was The Cat. It was back to the drawing board.

Noisy Bastards knocked at my door.

I opened said door still in my misleading night attire.

“Hello,” I said brightly, “what’s going on? I work odd hours and sleep like a log.”

I was interviewed briefly by a sad little adolescent weasel Walloper, pale from perusal of the pulped person and her pet but still stuffed with snotty self-importance. I led the youth a merry dance.

The amazing thing was, I opined, that I had only really met Ms. Twitchet yesterday. Only yesterday! She lived upstairs for about six months and seemed a nice enough woman dealing with her issues. Who would have thought such a thing would befall her?

Over the months we’d said “hello” half-a-dozen times. I mentioned the dead pigeon near the Hills Hoist. It seems like only yesterday, and was: she offered me coffee and asked me to feed her cat while she went away for a few days. She went *Bush* but I can’t narrow it down any further. It’s amazing that cat. Have you seen the size of it?

“I didn’t like to say anything at the time,” I confided, “but I thought it was a bit unnatural keeping a strapping beast like that cooped up on an inner city balcony, even a spacious balcony such as residents of this building enjoy. It’s enough to drive you dangerously mental given half a chance.”

I insisted that there was nothing of death about her when I left her residence last night to join a business associate and the widely respected Councillor Nazir Hussein at

The Town Hall Hotel for a convivial yet constructive drink, in moderation, at the end of a long, hard day.

She claimed to be a librarian from the north of England, I recalled. Nice woman but she did have an unavoidable and unsightly lump. She kept herself to herself. Notwithstanding the issue of the nose, I recalled no visitors nor any noise nor nuisance nor disturbing behaviour.

Have you ever heard of a Sri Lankan bloke known locally as Gunga Dinn? Probably before your time but it's a sensitive issue around this neighbourhood with State political ramifications. She was due back on Sunday I think it was. I was to feed The Cat.

Poor Rancid will be inconsolable.

I am deeply distressed to hear that Rancid has fallen to his death in a death plunge cat death plunge double shock horror event. I saw and heard nothing this morning. This news you bring is all a horrible surprise. I was asleep or about my domestic affairs in silence until your reassuring routine call. I would be glad to help the State Coroner in any way I can.

A voice of whiplash discipline from above slashed the air. It was not God.

"Fuck me!" it cried, shrill and most precise, clear from the Unit of the late Angela Twitchet to that of my good self.

There was a flurry of activity. Flurry, flurry, flurry. Weasel Boy looked anxious to leave and join the hubbub bubbling outside.

Unless I missed my guess, the Boys In Blue had stumbled on Angela's remaining bricks of drugs and that unexpected find was complicated and complicating wormwood to them.

## *XXVII*

TREV WAS mustard-keen to meet that evening having, just the day before, made a bold leap for freedom from the unforgiving clutches of his masters in piss distribution before stock control issues and innovative business techniques proved his undoing.

I arranged to meet him at eight in the fashionably squalid Quan Kaye Bar in Flobton High Street. I had no intention of bumping into Andy Carter or any of that fucking shower.

Ideally I needed the Distraction Slaying issue sorted before the afternoon was out. I saw no point in messing around.

With surgical delicacy, in the shower recess nearly naked, I excavated powdered drug with a cheese knife and put it in one of those plastic film container things that you're supposed to put fags out in.

I had to look in at Mad Bob's.

I walked from the domestic scene of death, drudgery and drugs without molestation, bound for the old familiar place of employ.

For reasons of his own Terry had been ripped off his tits for days but had somehow managed to stay upright at the cash register and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere. Complaints had been few and most of those from miserable unpatriotic fuckers devoid of Christian feeling.

Tezz and I had a bit of a chat about New Zealanders and, all things considered, he seemed greasy, stained and ripe but essentially adequate.

I told him I was going for a dump, nipped out the back and strolled the eleven minutes from Mad Bob's to the new Pirate-Pete-Pisserama where that old bank used to be on the Culloden Street corner.

WonderBar went with me in his Eco-Bag.

Like an unhurried consumer I strolled past the garish pseudo-pirate premises and peered in through windows packed with promotional posters and piss products.

What was visible of employees left much to be desired as victims and several to be desired as partly visible employees.

The line has to be drawn. I was not going to whack the spotty jerk with the pirate hat, for Christ's sake, and I had no intention of bludgeoning the moderately decorative sort with the cardboard parrot. I do have some dignity. What had these pitiful minnows done to deserve a deadly bludgeoning?

I strolled round the corner and wrestled with that knotty one concluding that the question meant very little if anything.

I peered in at a shiny window display while pretending to appraise the unbelievably crappy, insanely over-priced, ironic, cutting-edge, sharp, provocative, new, hard-core soft furnishings produced and offered for sale by a bunch of unspeakable tossers within.

Certainly unspotted by paying customers, the sterile establishment's days were numbered in days.

The Angular Tart working within would have no social dealings with trade such as I. Never. Not to one such as I, she wouldn't.

Only with reluctance, and entirely in the way of business, would such a rare, reed-like and rootable creature divulge concepts alleged to lie behind the radical soft furnishings in her care

I tore myself from this poppycock and strode purposefully back towards Pirate Pete's.

It all fell into place. Without so much as a Kiss My Arse. Of a sudden it was on.

Bitter experience with Ron Monkhouse gave immediate understanding of the balding belligerent bloke striding out of Pirate Pete's. It was The Boss. I did not know his name. He did not look as Monkhouse looked in life or death but he was obviously a miserable fucker with a few quid. He completely gave the game away by pausing at

Pirate Pete's portal and turning back to bark: "Get those fucking Underage Specials where the little bastards can see the fuckers. Fuck me! What do I pay you dumb fuckers for?!"

After this classic exhibition of firm and decisive management The Boss slammed the door and plodded away. I was after.

I caught up with this co-called Boss moments later, paces from the busy workaday world, as he fumbled for car keys in the lane behind the ghastly Chinese health hazard in Frith Street.

Its current incarnation was called The Emperor's Garden if memory serves. If it doesn't we might as well stop now.

Taffy Wong was well known in the area and beyond and had been done for more health and hygiene breaches than any man in living memory. The authorities seemed powerless to prevent his filthy trade.

Rumour had it that Taffy's steamed buns wiped out a Vietnamese family of three in Floghurst and almost offed the resident Granny. He only got away himself on a technicality.

Two furious and brutal blows from WonderBar and The Pirate King was noticeably hammered on the head, well dead and heavily down in an errant pool of Taffy Wong's culinary waste and decay. Thwack! Splat! Sploosh!

I hardly felt a thing. I hardly broke stride. I barely looked back. I walked on and away and eight minutes later WonderBar and I were back with Terry Winston at Mad Bob's Bottle Magic and Terry was wholly unaware that we had left the premises at all.

I was, however, having second thoughts about Terry as an alibi witness, should such be required.

In my absence Terry had further declined. His personal hygiene was becoming an issue for the wider community. In my limited experience of Terry Winston, excess at such levels and for such duration was unprecedented. At the current rate he could not last long.

Something potent but obscure was giving Terry the shits but I wasn't sufficiently interested to pursue the matter.

His eyes wobbled in my direction and he grinned more moronically than was customary.

He was losing his grip, weaving about, struggling to make a statement, a denial of involvement with or particular sympathy for a small network of photographers interested in amputees. What the fuck was this all about? He railed against these hobbyists and then rambled and grunted drunkenly at great and approving length on the subject of Japanese women and their facets. He felt prostitution should be on Medicare and claimed an obstinate infection of the zither to prove it.

I asked if his infection was, in fact, of the urethra. He told me to eat shit and was nearly felled by a substantial slug of self-administered pepper vodka.

I suggested Terry try to gather ye Zedbuds while the opportunity presented and somewhat to my surprise he meekly staggered out the back with the remaining third of a big thing of advocaat.

Business was painfully slow, so much so that I suspended my customary practice and actually took notice of the shithole about me.

Someone had brought in a portable telly!

“Fuck me,” I thought, “that’s handy,” and I immediately put this benison on and down to the enlightened managerial practices of Kemel and, to a lesser extent, his Old Dad.

Beguiled, to an extent, by an ABC documentary on Australian native beans, I failed to notice company present until a voice snarled: “Freeze or die, motherfucker!”

It was Kemel.

“Death please,” I requested.

“How’s Terry?” asked Kemel amiably. “He was looking very fucked when I saw him last.”

My tone was thoughtful and paternal: “He’s more fucked now,” I explained, “but then he has been on the turps for days.”

“That’s not all he’s been on,” Kemel muttered darkly.

I gave thanks for the television and commended Kemel to the native bean should he find himself lost and starving in certain domestic wastes.

After a while Kemel and I moved weighty cardboard boxes from Mad Bob’s office to Kemel’s unprepossessing panel van for a change of scene.

## *XXVIII*

TREVOR WAS waiting, pissed off and drooping like a downcast calamari at the Quan Kaye Bar in Flobton High Street. He was conspicuously alone down the dump’s dingy back, drooping furtively at a table for two, picking idly at something, probably scabby, behind his ear.

In the gloom, tiny little coloured lights in the walls kept flashing on and off which would give me the shits in no time.

This was not a happy Trev but one anxious and shifty. It struck me that his clothing was ridiculous: too young for a man of some thirty winters and dated by at least a decade. I’d never noticed that charity shop sheen about Old Trevor before but it had been there, all along, wafting.

Fortunately lighting was dim. The putrid music was too loud. A beer stood with Trevor barely touched. I noticed his fine brown hair was thinning badly. The man looked like crap.

I drank and missed detail while he bleated on about the unfairness of it all, just as he was getting his shit together, and the need to jump before he was crucified in the frying pan as a scapegoat for the line-crossing activities of dark forces. How he railed,

nervously, that the Little Man was but a prawn in the heady sauce of modern life. Bitterly he named several Piss Industry Identities alleging their culpability in a host of lucrative scams that rendered insignificant his own slight oversights and modest indiscretions, if any.

A growing burden of debt was mentioned. Things had been mislaid and other things had not gone to plan. His luck was woeful. As a result of systemic corruption, he claimed, certain of his monies had been misappropriated. They could come for him from several directions and he was thinking of moving to Melbourne or the imposing Wicklow Mountains in the Republic of Ireland.

“Bloody hell, Trev,” I commiserated. “That’s a bleak outlook for a man of your creative enterprise, tireless industry and debt. After all you’ve done for this bloody area!”

Generously I picked up the shout and wandered to the pubescent encrusted bar to let Old Trevor stew. It had been a busy day but, all in all, I felt distinctly chipper.

Tomorrow, I mused, we had our eagerly anticipated editorial meeting for CityZen at The Town Hall Hotel. Beyond casual chat, I had done a sturdy fuck-all to advance the cause of CiyZen so that looming fiasco promised a laugh or more.

That night at The Stockade, pregnant with possibilities, when I tripped over Oscar Lung outside and we said “fuck” a lot; that night with an actual drunken hack to hand, it crossed my mind that I might pick up a few tips about editing that might lift me beyond cynical speculation, bullshit and scurrilous debris accumulated after years of reluctantly rubbing shoulders with the venomous hack bastards off and on.

That education was not to be, of course, because that night I was preoccupied with my resolution to murder Andy Carter and Oscar, state of the art in the Arts of Being Pissed, couldn’t teach shit anyway.

Tomorrow, Saturday, theoretically, I had a twelve-hour stint at Mad Bob’s before this editorial meeting. Perhaps I would enjoy an interesting visit from Kemel. There was a chance Terry Winston could dodge a richly deserved coma and figure in the day’s dealings.

Close early tomorrow and on to The Town Hall, there to drink and bullshit and resume my frustrated quest to pursue Andy and slay him thoroughly. I did fancy that bloody Dawn but that looked none too spry. At some point I needed a serviceable mat for the crapper at The Unit.

I brought beers from the Quan Kaye Bar and sat.

“Trev,” I started, “I think, in many ways, we understand each other.”

“We do mate, we do,” he responded warmly, perhaps sensing a quid in the offing.

“You’ve always done the right thing by me, Trev, and I appreciate that. One good turn deserves a another good turn, or turnabouts, and there’s a chance I might be able to help you some way out of the shit.”

“You’re on.”

I pointed out that the conversation we were about to have would not take place. He couldn't agree more. I stressed that we had to trust one another. He saw this as natural and essential.

Certain proscribed substances had come into my possession, I explained. If he, Trevor, could sell this material I would be prepared to split the proceeds thirty-seventy.

"Forty-sixty."

I acquiesced.

Trevor shot shifty glances all about. "There is one thing I need to know," he hissed earnestly, "before I full-on commit to this enterprise."

"Enquire within," I warbled.

"These substances, you didn't nick them from that Kemel mate of yours, did you?"

Great was my astonishment.

Trevor pressed on nervously: "I don't want grief from them fucking Turks. They are hard bastards at the best of times and they don't like me much as it is. Will you promise you didn't lift this mysterious material from our Turkish brothers and I will not have them up my ring?"

I was glad to give all assurances I could without hesitation or reserve. I told him to relax, my substances had no known connection with my Ottoman associates, and he was not to fret for the fate of his quoit. All the while my mind was awirl with possibilities.

My interest in Trevor as an individual, never high, waned.

Kemel, on the other hand, became even more interesting. With an implied business interest in drugs there was every chance that he, and probably his Old Dad, were significant players of some kind. That was interesting. I found that easy to accept. Excellent allies. Players of significance and, conceivably, powerful international drug overlords. They'd certainly put the fear of Turks up Trevor with little trouble.

I formed the first inkling of a ruse to use Kemel in my dreams of great wealth and the indulgence of my peers, if any.

But still I had potential use of this man before me.

"So what are we selling?" Trevor enquired.

"This."

Surreptitiously I passed Trev the fag film thing and, beneath the cover of the table's rim, he prised off the plastic top and had a pretty damned professional peer inside.

Trev slumped visibly and gave a light, weary snort but he hauled out a threadbare smile and eased it on. He dipped a finger in the powder and covertly touched it to his tongue.

"Well, well," said Trev, grateful yet somehow disappointed. Why was this tatty bugger disappointed? Apart from the bleeding obvious shortcomings, what was his

problem? The answer dawned in a flash and five eights. From his Negative Nelly tone he clearly assumed this small sample of drug to be all of drug I had to sell.

Your narrator chose not to disabuse him of error. Matters of much pith and moment have turned on far less. India, from its earliest history, is a case in point.

Let him take the sample of drug and sell it as best he could but had he, perhaps, more information to be winnowed by subtle questioning?

“What would that hypothetical stuff be worth, Trevor?” I asked. “Hypothetically speaking.”

Trevor pursed his stringy lips and squinted eyes like Rancid The Cat’s living arse seen double.

“I could get you five, six hundred bucks for that, no trouble,” Trevor calculated with surprising ease. “Two forty for me, three sixty for you. “I have two eager clients in mind who’d probably go us both a freebie root as well.”

“Indeed?”

“You wouldn’t want to look too close on the root option but, in my opinion, the price is right.”

Without allowance for Trevor’s underestimation of the going rate for this stuff, Three Figure Talk was good news indeed.

Outstanding talk!

A mariachi band exploded in my head and therein I gave exultant cries and capered like a joyful bear as pyrotechnics rained rainbow fire on foaming champagne spouts and profligate bunting. Tankards foamed abundant, wine flowed and, privy only to me, there were smouldering, uninhibited and devoted Mexican women, well flounced, who could dance most sensually.

If that piddling part-pot of powder was worth five hundred smackers or more then, out in the workaday world, my four fat bricks up the fake chimney would fetch tens of thousands of smackers or more of easy-peasey, easy money once unleashed from their domestic hidey-hole. Piles.

One hundred thousand might not be out of the question. One hundred and eight thousand could not be ruled out. More, forsooth! I would have rich and powerful friends and keep my head down.

You, as they say, fucking beauty.

As suggested earlier, I was losing confidence in Trevor and tuned out for a while. I was thinking about schoolgirls when something infected my reverie. He wanted money. I tuned back in.

Trevor borrowed fifty bucks for exes in advance and stood his shout.

The ungrateful sod whinged on awhile and eventually went to make calls and sell the drugs. I said I would be satisfied with three hundred and sixty dollars and he was welcome to a bonus root if one could be arranged discrete from satisfactory cash settlement.



Trevor said he would be back in a flash with the cash and I, not particularly giving a shit anymore, said it could wait until tomorrow.

## XXIX

TERRY WINSTON woke in the bog at Mad Bob's, the very bog that saw the living last of the unlamented Ron Monkhouse.

If you call it waking, he woke foetal on the faecal floor. Unable to stir beyond random tics and spasms, he woke afflicted with moaning palsy alternating with moaning semi-consciousness. He was moaning and seeping from the latter to the former as I prepared to open for Saturday morning trade.

I gave comrade Winston verbal abuse to make him more ashamed and then made him a cup of tea. Perhaps the fever had broken but the road to recovery demanded a toll.

Scattered between the moans, I heard him gasp, "fuck" as if life depended on it.

I left him to it, opened the shop and actually mongered some piss to the general public.

Kemel came in about twelve with thoughtful pies. Little was said as we ate the pies and watched something televisual about the colourful past, challenging present and rosy future of Australasian cheeses.

You might recall that the previous evening, in the presence of Trev, I formed the first inkling of a ruse to use Kemel in my Wealth and Indulgence dreams. Drugs, as is often the case in these unhappy days, were the key.

This plan was taking shape, adapting, honing, refining, responding, and I was poised to put that constantly evolving, consistently fiendish plan into action at the earliest hippopotamus. This plan would be simple and effective.

Post pie and documentary, Kemel and I went to check on Terry who was still on the deck but crawling about spastically saying "fuck" a lot more. The smell was appalling so we lobbed in paper towels and disinfectant and left him to it.

Back at the shop counter I made my first subtle move in the evolving campaign. I needed to be well in with Kemel and his mates.

"Kemel," I said by way of bonding-type conversation, "do you ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

"I fucking do," he insisted, "because I fucking am. My Old Man's watched like a fucking two-bob tart. They watch my brother, our mates and associates, and the only reason they don't watch me more than they do is coz I give the dopey fuckers the slip when necessary. Cheeky bastards!"

I went on: "Why would anyone want to watch me?"

Kemel was paying attention. "That's what I'm saying: why would anyone want to watch an ugly old fucker like you?"

"My point exactly."

Kemel seized the bait: “So what makes you think you’re being watched, dickhead?”

“There’s a weird customer . . .”

“They’re all fucking weird.”

“And I think someone’s fucking with the phone. I can’t shake the poxy feeling that mystery bastards are watching me. It’s hard to explain and it’s a feeling I could do without. Do you think it’s early-onset dementia?”

“Probably,” said Kemel mildly but with a look hungry to know what this potential shite might portend.

I left it there. A manufactured mystery to entangle us both.

Kemel gave me an extensive list of stock to convey to his panel van, registered several valuable transactions at the till and unburdened his pockets of two substantial slabs of hundred dollar notes.

“Business is booming,” I noted cordially, with my trolley greatly laden.

“Fucking oath,” said Kemel with a shark-like grin.

Later I considered nipping out for half an hour and, using cash and the name Derek Mehmet, purchasing a cheap portable telephone. It would be called something like an Aelph C.D.R. and it would be a device that could have its use replenished with so-called credit purchased widely and anonymously. I imagined that The Pustule peddling the thing would burden me with much documentary shit but it could, I conceded, be useful to learn of this distasteful technology. I would let no person know of this imaginary Aelph C.D.R. and keep it entirely for my private advantage.

I pictured myself a shrewd secret agent, an assassin, sliding effortlessly through all levels of society on missions involving utmost personal peril. There would be hitting, of course, and an every-widening array of technical accessories to homicide. I would be a master of the mobile telephone and use it with speed, accuracy, creativity and flair. How well I would take them in and how thoroughly I could do them in as required.

While I purged society of its ills, Dawn would wait in town or at the imaginary Mudgee property, she would worry for my safety of course and grow thoughtful but she would maintain a mature, active life and close contact with our intriguing circle of friends. At my return our days would burn for days.

Back with the booze, I was quite taken aback when Trevor wandered in furtively and gave me four hundred and thirty bucks including the fifty he bludged last night.

“Good doing business,” said Trevor. “Always happy to oblige.”

I smiled coolly but said nothing, hoping he’d just piss off.

“I got that freebie root,” he volunteered half ashamed, half exultant, shifty, possibly lying and unconvincingly at that.

“Good for you.”

“Yeah.”

Knowing his antipathy for my employer, I told him I was expecting Kemel any minute and he shot through.

Shortly thereafter, pursuing my fiendish plan, I pressed the buttons for Kemel and got through to his answering thing.

My message dripped sarcasm. I declared his wind-up amusing but cautioned against the frivolous use of Mad Bob's telephone for muttering purposes. I suggested that another visit from his weird, wordless mate pretending to be a customer would see that person take his unhappy leave with an ornamental bottle of sambuca lodged contrary to the laws of most self-respecting gods, the overwhelming majority of men and others.

That would give Kemel something to think about.

The whole bog area was quite revolting by the end of the afternoon.

From a prudent distance I passed more cleaning equipment and products into those insalubrious parts and explained that I would be fucked if I would clean up his filth after all the pain, expense and fucking embarrassment he'd caused recently. In fact Terry's bender had not caused much trouble in the great scheme of things but the tender oaf could be as putty in my hands if he felt bad enough and convinced he owed me big time.

Mad Bob's Bottle Magic closed earlier than advertised. Terry stayed overnight. I pictured him sleeping fitfully on cold tiles and cleaning up a bit.

Next stop: The Town Hall Hotel.

## XXX

GOD WHAT a fucking sight!

One reason I wanted Andy Carter dead was the way he made one feel late, tardy as it were. Even when, often when, one was neither late nor tardy he made one feel tardy. He played it all to his audience to make one seem, perhaps, a little uncaring, a little less caring than some.

Fat pompous wanker.

In this, and in so many things, the manipulative and opportunistic Carter seemed flawlessly transparent to me. Others swallowed it all.

That night he wore a pork-packed, camouflage patterned bomber jacket, budget jeans for the fuller figure and looked a slobbering twat.

And there was more. And there they were. A true chamber of horrors.

The busy scene at The Town Hall Hotel was as horrible as any hellfire illumination or savage lampoon and it was all standing looking at me and it had drink taken.

It was worse than that other night at The Town Hall Hotel when I'd been introduced to these ghastly mutants as Founding Editor of CityZen and I'd spouted a lot of crap. Far worse.

I had no one to blame but myself.

I'd seen them lurking, met most in dribs and drabs, with Andy more often than not, and we had spoken of nothing memorable since I had been sucked into the unfolding and/or collapsing fiasco of CityZen magazine. Dribs and drabs I had seen but never had there been such a full and harrowing assembly of these lost and hopeless souls, never had they massed on one accursed spot with Carter loving every excruciating minute.

He was up to something. He had low acts in mind. In that messy place that night he was up to something.

There was that pasty fucking nitwit Reinhardt Goolie looking like Anorexic Zorro in a puffy white shirt, criminally tight trousers, riding boots and a fucking paisley bandana by Christ! He posed seated at one of three or four adjacent tables nominally colonised by Andy's CityZen Army.

Seated with that posturing jerk, and possibly interrupted in some inane drivel, was the peculiar little Arts Wanker Ahmed who was jerking around in his own disordered way.

Ahmed was very old and, underneath it all, rather like a collection of interlocking pickled walnut kebabs; he was frequently incoherent, ponged of boiled fish and twitched like a bastard. He still wore the tiny green corduroy suit as to the manner born and it was shaping up as a fixture.

Dawn was also there at that table but dignified and discrete. Socially, or in any other way, she did not seem to engage with Goolie or Mr. Walnut. She maintained a distance but looked up from gently melancholy thoughts, I thought, to look at me standing there like a goose.

I caught something of a smile.

Barely perceptible on the visible spectrum, the limp grey eminence of sport and false teeth, Bruce Hinge, haunted the realm of gawpers, as did Nash. Oddly enough, I hardly noticed her gums these days. What was it with these oral types?

Eddie stood like a leaking silo of rancid animal fats. A hazard to the community on many levels, this appalling waste of space leered a silent, matey laugh at me and raised his beer aloft on quivering curtains of arm flesh.

Oh God. Imagine that. Eddie in that situation . . . or any situation! Imagine. Imagine Eddie under *any* circumstances. Eddie: utterly revolting, twenty-four seven revolting, a relentlessly fat and revolting life to imagine.

My throat was visited by thought of vomit.

I was introduced to CityZen's cock-sure parasite of print Marco Flint and didn't take to that snide slimeball at all. This smart-arsed fucker certainly fancied himself,

knew everything and thought he looked like Percy fucking Shelley. When Andy Carter was dead and dusted there could easily be a minor place in my legend for this turd.

Where did Andy find these fuckers?!

Grotesques ogled me from the outskirts. Far too many were anorexics or People of Size. They may have been CityZen suckers or minions from obscure minority groups that Andy couldn't be arsed to introduce. They may have been simple, aimless fuckwits distracted by an unexpected encounter with this larger herd of fellow bewildebeeste.

CityZen's Electronic Media correspondent was to be selected by Carter and self. I couldn't give a crap that this had not been the case but was taken aback to find our anointed correspondent to be an obnoxiously enthusiastic prepubescent, chubby, blathering boy-child nerd designed by Chuck Jones.

His name was Dwayne Pond.

I'm surprised they let him in the pub.

Perhaps he had hormonal issues because it turned out that Dwayne, cruel joke, was actually twenty-three and had a laminated card to prove it. He also had a glib facility for obscure broadcasting statistics but he seemed to know fuck-all about most things. I sensed there might be money in the family.

Andy tipped me a big Humour Me On This One wink and my sense of money grew stronger.

"So many blokes," I sighed sadly to myself.

There was, however, a little fat sheila who was something to do with subscriptions but I missed the detail. There was a duo of all-purpose poof reporters – Alan and Wesley was it? – and a sleazy thirty-five year old hippy-like bloke with a camera. Sleazo, it turned out, was actually called Damian and was the son of someone big in something. Damian, I decided was not to be trusted further than he could be thrown by sardines.

Several of my ghoulish team asked about the tragic death of my neighbour Angela Twitchet. I grew bored by the topic.

In vain I sought my scary old chum Roseanne Chang expecting such a large and unconvincing transvestite to be somehow more conspicuous.

Having bugger all else to say, and weary of grinning like an imbecile, I asked Andy about the absence of Chief Reporter Chang.

Andy's piss-pink face clouded and his niggardly, vermicular lips writhed in unhappy recollection. As Andy spoke I knew anew why he must die.

He drew me aside.

"Detail later," Andy Carter whispered, "but let me just say quickly for now, my friend, that recent experience with that person, now mercifully absent, has been an education. A full and frank education. A painful education. I hardly know where to start telling you what an education that person has been but I believe there will come a time

when I can speak openly and frankly about the experience. The bottom line I think, here, is that ultimately society is to blame.

“I might add,” he added, “without wishing to sway opinion or limit constructive input, that Roseanne Chang, if that is his real name, has come perilously close to crippling this entire project with suspected substance abuse and unhelpful delusions. There have been control issues and the dangerous obduracy of her conviction that she enjoys a wide variety of unpredictable and extremely peculiar super powers. X-ray feet, springs to mind.

“I don’t mind telling you,” he continued, “that Roseanne Chang has come close to crippling me socially, personally and professionally.

“I couldn’t take the risk. Not that risk. I simply couldn’t take it, mate. No way. I must stand by an executive decision made with the best of intentions. In all conscience, Bro, I could not have done otherwise.

“How were we to know that we had a deadly time-bomb ticking relentlessly in our pharmaceutically engineered bosom?”

“I don’t know.”

“In the best interests of all concerned, those of Roseanne herself, however solitary, blind and bizarre, and the interests of the *real* unsung super heroes of CityZen. For those real and respected hero people we had to part company. To my way of thinking here was no viable alternative but I make no secret of the fact that it was not an experience I wish to repeat nor one I am likely to forget. I must be strong for all concerned.”

Fucking twerp.

Apparently a newly appointed Chief Reporter would be along later.

Then Eddie blobbed up and offered me drink. No sooner had I beamed acceptance than did fortune pluck me from uncomfortable hoverings and social disarray.

That very acceptable Greek sort behind the bar suddenly presented me with the establishment’s wireless telephone.

“And the winner is . . .” chuckled the odious Marco Flint.

“It’s for you,” sang the Siren of the Schooner, “hurry up. Davo gets shitty.”

All thirsty eyes, alive with new respect, realigned to me.

It was Kemel.

“Don’t you ever leave that fucking pub?”

“Not unless I can help it.”

Formalities done, Kemel moved swiftly to the substance of his call.

“That message you left. This phone crap and weirdo shit is *not* down to me so I’m beginning to suspect someone *is* fucking us around. As if we didn’t have enough crap to contend with!”

“You are not wrong,” I boomed like a bold buccaneer of Bohemia for all neighbouring idlers to hear and marvel at, “Something must be done. I cannot speak too freely now. I’m in the pub at a meeting.

“Some low-life has slipped a note into my jacket pocket,” I confided clearly, “I found it unexpectedly when I adjourned for a dump and wasn’t best pleased to tell the truth.”

“What kinda fucking note?”

The fans were lapping this up.

“One prepared earlier,” I truthed, “and slipped into my pocket when I wasn’t looking,” I lied. “It states simply that we can do business. Black and white. We can do business. We three are locked in an infernal triangle and this is very unsettling to a humble citizen such as myself, mate. Very.”

“My fucking oath it’s weird,” Kemel agreed. “I’m giving it thought even as I fuck off.”

“I’ll leave it with you, mate,” I announced, silently congratulating myself for backing a useful winner such as Kemel

He was gone, mystified by my tales of stalking. My standing with the freaks had grown in leaps and barely distinguishable bounds.

Scribbled on the faces before me was simple admiration for a decisive, mysterious, authoritative Persuader. A Local Celebrity.

For some, perhaps, this force was hitherto unsuspected. Some may not have known that a mover and shaker moved and shook in their midst.

Dawn breathed an almost erotic level of self-control.

They were hanging out to know what the powerful, decisive, intriguing telephone call was about but Fat Eddie returned with beverages and a plate of party pies. Andy was really pushing the boat out here but his Important Conference increasingly resembled yet another Themed Piss-up.

How firmly I grasped then that crock-meister Andy Carter knew even less about this bloody magazine nonsense than I did and I knew nothing.

Despite hunger I eschewed the proffered pies fearing contamination with Eddie’s DNA fat which scientists have yet to disprove could provide incontrovertible evidence of extraterrestrial origins.

I just didn’t want to put anything in my mouth that might, even accidentally, have been smeared on Eddie or any of his by-products.

At this stage it might be unwise to completely rule out the possibility that Eddie enjoyed extra-terrestrial origins and was, in fact, a huge shape-shifting fungus shedding spores, will he, nil he, as he went.

Frankly I don’t think that’s so unreasonable.

The healing balm of beer itself, I thought, would protect me well from spore potential. When that refreshment was delivered by Eddie there was a tolerably sanitary

glass and reasonably clean tray intervening so I got stuck in to the fluids. In all fairness, I did have some catching up to do.

I'd sink the beer, I proposed in thought, get more, score pies untouched by Eddie in every way, assuage hunger, work the room a bit and hit on Dawn from a position of charm and authority. I would invite her to The Unit to discuss magazines and ply her with pizza and piss and pork her profoundly and often and much to our mutual satisfaction.

The evening lay before me like a map. Possibly of Tasmania.

I'd got as far as hurriedly washing down lumps of pie at the bar and quietly celebrating the happy conjunction of my spare or rangy frame and the constitution of a top-notch ox when a hand clasped me by the shoulder. I flew pie and piss all over the fucking place and, for the watching morons, there was an amusing amount of fuss and discomfort.

The Clasper, a powerful, swarthy, slow-moving scion of ancient Ottoman lines, was all over the place apologising and wiping mess with paper napkins from the bar.

"Sorry mate. Aw fuck," he bumbled. "Didn't mean to . . . Fuck I'm sorry. That was so fucking unintentional. You might like to have a go at that bit yourself love but I'm incredibly sorry and a total prick. Sorry."

He was clean and wore a silvery grey suit, running shoes and a black tee-shirt. I know not why.

Eventually the shambles settled and The Clasper and I were left to a notional privacy. To any flapping ear my newfound associate introduced himself as Mo.

"Kemel sent me," he said. There was no sound reason to doubt it.

He was a big bloke and no brain scientist. I drew him closer to the bar and we hunched, leaning together to give a semblance of security to a discourse implied in the so-called Clasp Incident.

I thought the entire event greatly burnished my mystique with the lost souls before me.

"Look, ahh, Mo," I smiled, my vulpine cunning masked by a manly smile of patent good-will, "we've never met before and there is a lot of what we scientists call Weird Shit flying about the environment for the time of year."

I could have been speaking Urdu.

"How do I know Kemel sent you?"

It took ages for this utterance to get through and produce a response. I could have staged a political coup during the conversational abyss.

"He sent you this phone," Slow Mo remembered. "Kemel sent you this."

Mo produced the implement mentioned and, when proffered, I courteously pocketed the same sinister Tool of Satan, albeit reluctantly.

"He said you're a cunt for not having one anyway," Mo confided. "This was spare. He put his number in himself, and mine, so you wouldn't cock it up. We get Weird Shit



all the time. Keep yourself available and call if anything Dubious occurs. We're very concerned about Dubious occurring."

Mo thought hard. Dynasties rose and fell as I waited for the next installment.

"If you don't believe me about me being from Kemel, give him a call, he's my cousin, very sociable, you talk to him and I talk to him and the other way round, and he'll talk to you and possibly me again and so on."

That wasn't particularly appealing.

"Fair enough," I weakened. "This is a great deal more peculiar than I would wish but we'll assume you are fair dinkum. I'm sorry about the top level security alert Mo but recent developments have been giving me the shits."

"Thanks, mate," said Mo with sincerity. "I appreciate that and want to leave you with that phone. Use it wisely. You may not recognise me in days to come but I will be close and keeping an eye on shit and poking my konk in. We'll sort this fucking bullshit. Act normal. If our paths cross accidentally, our paths have never crossed. We'll laugh about this in a few week's time."

It was just as well Andy wasn't to be bumped off tonight because now I had a portable telephone *and* a bodyguard. Who'd have thought?

Mo relieved me of the cryptic note I prepared earlier and I half expected him to melt into the landscape. In reality he just strolled to the other side of the bar and sat watching the People's Pick Awards on telly.

I decided to skip the room working and have a go directly at Dawn.

Beyond the pleasures of bitter laughter there had been very little in this CityZen shemozzle for me. I could even be out a few bucks. There was much to recommend Dawn. These days the age difference was nothing. To the best of my knowledge I have no communicable diseases.

The lovely Dawn was no longer entangled with Ahmed and Fuckface and I scanned the chattering throng for her exquisite emanations to no avail.

Bugger.

Our new Chief Reporter arrived and it was Oscar Lung and he was extensively hammered. Bloody brilliant.

## **XXXI**

ELEVEN OF them came cackling and staggering back to The Unit: led by fucking Andy, of course, attended by the almost equally fucking Fat Eddie.

To represent the fair sex we were reduced to Nash and Justine, the little, fat subscription sheila, and to represent repulsive old bastards there was Oscar Lung, incoherent but, against all odds, ambulant.

I'll explain that bollock crunching peculiarity of the mad social whirl when and if I can be bothered.

Alan and Wesley each skulled The One and skedaddled, clearly appalled by the free form, flyblown shithole their esteemed editor called here.

What could such buffoons know?

Nine guests remained. At a glance: eighty-four per cent irredeemable.

Damian Sleazo lurked, fiddling with his fucking camera, drinking like a fish and looking superior. Goolie beamed in, with phrases set to sneer, as did the infant Dwayne Pond and the prat Bruce Hinge.

Don't ask me how these social things happen. There's no denying I had been working in increasingly mysterious ways but it did seem to pay off. I had drugs and money up the chimney and could fuck around as I chose.

I'd asked Mo, who had been blithely sticking out like a dog's balls, if he wanted to come up but while appreciating the offer, he was dutifully watching for dubious activity requiring his attention and I was to keep my eyes open. He was never more than a phone call away.

Beyond vague and fatuous generalisations, we conducted no business of significance during the so-called Editorial Conference. No mention was made of a more formal working environment. There seemed to be no actual finance for the project, no obvious editorial attitude, tone or aim and Andy was conspicuously hazy on advertising revenue, real or imagined. Even I knew this was necessary.

Andy couldn't bullshit his suckers forever. Or could he? Did such suckers, in fact, crave, seek and facilitate dissemination of the very exploitative bullshit that did make them suck?

Perhaps some shared flaw drew all these needy wankers to an undeclared role-playing fantasy of inner-city street magazine production.

Perhaps they enjoyed fucking around as a fantasy more than real bollocks? Perhaps they were all on Psycho Support and I had stumbled into a bizarre cult of pretended publishing claimed by some to fill a genuine social need.

The CityZenry, with one notable exception, were losers and their once risible ways tedious.

Given opinions expressed above, it might seem curious to encourage them back, student-like, to The Unit. I have no doubt abundant free piss weighed heavily with them. These bohemians manqué were nothing if not virtuoso bludgers, but my own motivation went more to in-depth study of my victim, attempts to read the circling shitehawks and, if possible, get something Gothic going with the ample and available Nash.

And what the bejusus was I to make of that repulsive old sot Oscar Lung?

Tirelessly the obnoxious creature had traduced Andy Carter before my very ears and opened these and other organs to the shit sloshing around and within the seemingly popular character actor and doggedly aspiring entrepreneur. And here the duplicitous bastard was, putting his puffy, blotched hand up for Carter's latest train

wreck. I knew Oscar was old, fucked and not to be trusted but this was a horse of a very different colour.

The fact is that, regardless of race, horse or starting price, there should be some kind of help line for such as Oscar. In the current economic climate, however, I think we all know our chances of that simple dream becoming reality. If requested, lethal advice could be given. You know it makes sense.

I had to resign myself to the fact that I would never really know what transpired in Oscar's bent and boozy bonce and much the same could be said of the prick Andy Carter.

Damn it! Much the same *will* be said of Andy Carter: I would never really know what transpires in Andy's bent and boozy bonce and much the same could be said of the prick Andy Carter.

Pathetically desperate for attention, Oscar sat, drooling slightly in saggy solitary splendour, unattractive, old, unpopular, ridiculous and too pissed to notice. A suitable case for absence.

Damian, leering casually, snapped bitterly unflattering portraits of the old fool. Oscar barely registered the cracks of interest having given himself over to all manner of decay.

A horrible folk CD was playing on my apparatus. It was not my horrible folk CD so where the folk did it come from? Is it now acceptable in polite society to bring one's own horrible folk CD to functions lest a dearth of horrible folk CD exist?

I took on a mighty draught of beer.

I had abundant horrible folk CD, had anyone cared to ask, and felt unfairly slighted for a want of hospitality and the implied inadequacy of my horrible folk CD collection.

My money was on it being Damian Sleazo's horrible folk CD that played so horribly. I let the matter take its place in the queue.

Those two worthless fuckers, Damian and the princeling of arrested development Dwayne, were hunched on the floor gibbering back and forth and making noises of explosions. Eddie was rolling joints at the coffee table as he had that night before on The Balcony.

The risk of Fat Eddie contamination was very real.

Should the need arise, I had my own proscribed substances and kept well clear of alien fungal pollution.

A six-pack of Satan's Piss and I left the depressing mess of The Twilight Zone for the caustic, cosmopolitan cut and thrust of The Balcony.

Andy was on the balcony, of course, and hailed me as I emerged. The relatively spacious balcony was, as ever, the hub of any social occasion here at number twenty three.

“Mr. Editor,” he boomed drunkenly as I emerged, “while we’re on the subject you should write something in-depth, provocative and award-winning about this Twitchet woman business here. Award-winning stuff. It’s amazing. It’s the most incredible melange, Rex, incredible. Drugs, domestic pets gone bad, probes, foreign mystery women, violent, untimely and meaningless death, lumps, still waters, fur, serious drugs, gardening, fate, task forces, all prominent. There’s a lot of human interest.”

“Melange?” trilled Reinhardt Goolie like a greedy schoolgirl unleashed on tarts and custards.

My face revealed nothing of my contempt.

Andy boomed on: “What are the chances? What are the chances, eh? A morbidly obese domestic cat knocks a window box on the head of its owner who, despite at least one unsightly facial lump, has previously enjoyed some success as a naughty international drugs courier. Statistically the chances must be miniscule. You wouldn’t read about it.”

Would you not?

Andy Carter pointed unsteadily to the awful ground two floors below.

“Is that where the cat splat from the flat?” he snorted oafishly.

“Somewhere there,” I responded and pointedly turned from Arsewipe Andy to focus my full, intimate attention on Nash. I spoke very nicely.

“At last, oh priceless jewel of self discovery, I’ve been trying to talk to you all evening. Yearning would not be putting it too strongly.”

I sat boldly, like a cowboy, backwards astride a classic bentwood pub chair. It is possible that I was somewhat influenced by beverages.

“Nash,” I said, “you may not know this but there is more to me than the irresistible charmer you see before you now. As a sensitive, caring and aware charmer, subject to the several temptations to which flesh is heir, I also need to touch base from time to time with the true, pure passion and commitment that first drew us all to this perplexed and perplexing Petrie dish of social change. A true believer. You still believe, Nash. You’re a rock. There have not been, nor are there, plans to build a house on you, nor will there be on my watch, but a rock you are and rock-like rock you remain. Live long and prosper, Nash. Rock on. How’s everything in your neck of the goose?”

I realised that Nash had heard none of this quaint badinage for avid listening on a tiny portable telephone.

Her eyes spat fire at my background noise. I apologised and withdrew.

Andy caught me on the hoof looking for an ashthing. He pointed more or less at my pack of Satan Piss and cried aloud: “Give us one of those you sneaky bugger! I’ve a thirst you could fry an egg on.”

As I wove towards him I knew I could so easily snap and give his pate such a sudden pounding as would leave it dead.

How, I wondered, would my hand-fucked Team react to that?

I smiled, even as I wove.

Andy clasped me about the shoulder with manly affection and drew me to the balcony wall. I found such uncalled for intimacies quite revolting but I endured for the sake of the broader scheme.

Andy looked down and out at backyard buggier-all and growled enigmatically: "One day, my friend, all this could be yours."

"I beg your pardon, Andy?" I squeaked, trying to modify the constraint of Andy's fat arm and torso. I am more tall than is average and Carter akin to a hybrid of dwarf and portable mini-fridge. It was not a comfortable stance.

"Mate," rumbled Andy roughly. "Mate."

"Mate," I croaked over the drop, "could you watch the neck. There's a long-standing issue and, in the current climate, I can't afford to be without it."

Andy, confused, released me from the yoke of his arm.

Getting back on message he rumbled on: "All this could be yours, mate. This and more. I can't say too much but the next few days will be crucial in determining the future and the new, exciting alternatives ahead for our CityZen community.

"I know how you, more than most, yearn and strain to be off and run with the mighty presses. Trust me on this, Rex. These are exciting times, if you did but know it.

"I have the highest respect for you personally and professionally. Your contribution has not been, nor will it be, forgotten, Rex. You deserve to sup with the long spoon of success and I will make every possible chance to thrive possible. Trust me. Fortune favours the eyes of fortunate men. Things are happening even as we speak. Big things. I've got ideas that could see us both prosper and I want you in my tent pissing out."

Anyone who says "trust me" twice in the same spurt of drivel is clearly a cunt but I played lingo to his Bottom and applauded his camping and waste disposal intentions.

Before I could improvise escape, my eye was caught by something down and out in the feverless Saturday night street.

Lawks a mercy!

I could see a speedy sports car of some kudos, red of hue but strangely blue in the hard streetlight and disconcerting shadow.

I could see standing, leaning, apparently talking at the driver's window, a young man. Kemel, no less.

My guess was that the driver was Mo.

"Hello?" I thought. "Fuck Andy and his egregious twaddle. What gives in the gloom?"

I leaned out.

Andy was wounded by my sudden inattention. He did not see what I could see. He did not look. He was a clown.

Egad!

Some unrecognisable lurking person lurked below. Down on concrete and dirt, amid remnants of police shit from yesterday's unpleasantness and every-other-fucking-day's crap, near the road, behind that shitty bush, classic flasher territory, I saw a shadowed lurker lurk. He lurked roughly mid-way between self and Kemel and directed all his shadowed lurking at the latter.

This sinister lurker was employing a mobile telephone with, quite possibly, a sophisticated Lurk Function. The lurker was, for the most part, listening but occasionally and briefly muttering as he lurked.

"Shit," I muttered.

This seemed most unsatisfactory.

## *XXXII*

THINGS, I regret to say, went mildly tits up for a while.

Andy, the neurotic mountebank, started going on about Angela Twitchet again but I potted off purposefully in search of the man-mountain cretin Eddie.

I clumsily telephoned a brief cautionary report to Kemel in the street outside as I left the party-going rubbish to take care of its self.

By the time Eddie and I got downstairs, Kemel and Mo were shouting at Detective Derek Mehmet, hurling unsavoury allegations and pushing him indignantly, one to the other and against the shitty bush. The hapless Filth was incapable of responding helpfully. Insistent shouts and disorienting shoves rarely abate indignation.

The boisterous activity ceased as Eddie and I appeared. The sight of Eddie oozing up out of the night stoned would make Satan shit himself and most activity cease but I had to think quickly.

"Men, men, men," I cried, grinning and waving my arms like a mental patient.

"What grave misunderstanding is this? Kemel, Mo, my good fiends; quite understandably under these extraordinary circumstances of community concern, you have mistaken my other good friend, Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet, for a shady and possibly perverted character lurking in that shitty bush with intent to commit an arrestable offence.

"Detective Sergeant Mehmet, mate, these young gentlemen are no hoons and wankers meet for your detection skills but my friends, colleagues and social visitors. You law enforcement guys must be under a lot of stress. You hoe a tricky furrow."

Kemel spread his arms wide. "A policemen?" he gasped. "We had no idea, did we Mo?"

"Nah," said Mo. "None at all."

Clearly embarrassed, Derek eyed Kemel through narrowed lids: "The gentleman and I have met," he said.

"Lying dog!" Kemel roared to the night but more for effect than anything. After a pause he added affably: "No. You're right. We have met. I do apologise officer. I trust we

can put this unfortunate incident behind us. We thought you were a sickening, un-Australian pervert bastard as seen on TV.”

Well-flustered, Derek walked off a few paces to regain composure.

Sirens wailed through the streets.

It could be inconvenient, I realised, if Derek thought ill of me but *how* inconvenient? Only time would tell. Time would tell and, in time, myself, Derek perhaps and a reliable witness or electronic recording thing, if any, could speak volumes on the convenience issue. Space could tell. Given the will, given the physical and intellectual equipment, space could say all that could be said on the subject but for perfectly natural and obvious reasons, no more.

“Sorry,” I hissed to Kemel, “False alarm. I thought he was this fucking piss business stalker bastard stalking you and Mo.”

By way of distraction and general augmentation of this fiction I pointed up to The Balcony where I could see Andy Carter cultivating his audience.

“You done good,” Kemel hissed back. “I thought he was the stalker bastard as well. What’s his fucking game?”

Derek, it turned out, had bad news.

In the course of routine Kemel surveillance, in pursuit of perceived duty, Derek learned that police and ambulance had been called to premises known as Mad Bob’s Bottle Magic. One fatality had been recorded and tentatively identified as a Mr. Charles Chaplinski, a member of a gentlemen’s club called Vixens.

“What the fuck?!” yelled Kemel in pain and bewilderment. “See youse blokes later.”

Kemel and purse-lipped Mo were into the snazzy car and off leaving disheveled Derek and I alone in a public place. Eddie didn’t count.

“Oh,” said Derek, and he looked about the base of the shitty bush for the telecommunications device dropped in the recent lurking contretemps.

Eddie just stood there. I don’t think he had much of a clue really. At one point he did say something that sounded rather like “corncrake” but did not pursue the challenge of coherence and meaning.

“It’s a good job Eddie and I came along when we did,” I ventured chirpily.

This all played well to my Cosy-Up-To-Kemel drug sales strategy but caution was needed not to generate excess heat and artificially depress the market. I was concerned that this left-field incident at Mad Bob’s would be taken seriously and provoke general and personal scrutiny that could prove fucking onerous and bloody restrictive.

Given nature’s ceaseless bounty of incomprehensible crap, and my own significant and successful endeavours to muddy the merde, I felt it might be prudent in the immediate future to back-pedal on my mysterious business stalker shite. This planning is positively fiendish!

How much gaudy distraction can a bloke take? Fair go. Enough is enough. Thus far and no further. A line has been drawn. As we learn from the sages of yore: it's a long road that has no crapper.

"I don't suppose you'd like to join the party?" I gestured again at The Balcony. "It's a bit of a cultural group I belong to. There's a wide cross-section. Funny bunch. We're hoping to launch a magazine."

Regardless of cross-sectional width, there was no way Derek was going to join us on the slippery social slope to indiscriminate sodomy, godless mockery and arty-farty shenaniga.

We both looked up towards The Balcony.

As usual Andy Carter, the fucking idiot, was showing off, half sitting, half-squatting on my balcony wall and his voice became raised and clear in piping drunken silliness.

"This bloody cat," shrill Andy pontificated, "must have been a huge, big, bloody ugly cat bastard thing to shift a whole big concrete thing. Cactus bastards. Cactuses. Cacti. No tiny, teeny cat could arrange to have have a complete thing of flaming cacti shifted. They certainly . . . Those cacti . . . Crash. Cactus Cat. This monster flipping cat must have been a huge flipping cat. Think of its excrement!"

And then he waved his stupid arms and slipped.

My thoughts were in a turmoil of surprise and joy.

Andy Carter waved his flabby fins and slipped!

But somehow, for all the weight of well-compacted lard, Andy clung on, gasping in terror, clasping The Balcony wall. He held on with an arm and a foot and the rest of him dangled dramatically over the drop and his need and peril were conspicuous and clear.

Lordy! How he did whine! "Ooo, ooo, ooo," he went in girly falsetto wails. Never the less none of those useless wankers up there with him did a thing to help. Typical.

I, at least, cried: "Fuck me!" convincingly and hastened for the main door in pointless pantomime of rushing to the rescue of me old mate Andy.

Though rigorously trained at taxpayer expense for decisive inaction in or about an emergency, Derek Mehmet was up the stairs before I hit the building and, as I entered, Andy Carter clinging above, howled most piteously.

What with my cosmetic hastening, wearisome stairs, air of looming shitfight, concern for recreational drugs on the premises and dislike of the clinging clod in question, I thought nothing of Fat Eddie until I heard the noise.

Andy's piercing, swiftly truncated scream stopped me in my tracks on the awful stair. There was sound like the amplified music of approximately one standard hipbath of chunky vomit poured swiftly from a metre above a timber trestle table. After the slightest pause a puke-sodden handtowel would fall out with a resounding splat.



I turned and stepped down the slab-cold stair. I pushed open the door and immediately outside, on the very spot where Angela Twitchet had cashed in both her chips and mushy peas, on that very spot, Andy Carter had fallen right into Fat Eddie and it was a fucking mess and a half.

Whoa!

Fuck me, what a mess.

Ewe!

I would not have thought that Andy Carter, for all his solid fatness, falling a mere two stories on Fat Eddie would have caused such a mess but one lives and one learns. It really was unpleasantly arranged. Not something one sees every night of the week. Very mangled. Confused. A major work from Baron Frankenstein during his Off Meds period.

I believe the words "Fuck me," escaped my disapproving lips.

What a turn-up for the trousers!

I looked up to see the anguished gob of Derek Mehmet goggling down from The Balcony, his stupid arm grasping as if to pluck the pulverised pillock from his jolly old doom.

An ace alibi pour moi, I thought. Bloody handy.

Unless I missed my guess, loathsome Andy Carter was well fucked, and Fat Eddie had come apart at the seams.

And, cumquat may, they couldn't pin that unsightly mess on me. I had impeccable witnesses.

What luck. How the stars did bathe me in good fortune

## ***XXXIII***

THINGS WERE still going tits up but at least Nash and the fat sheila had the sense to hide The Drugs.

Not that Plodder Derek was up to much effective detecting having lapsed into a kind of fretful petulance at the dining table.

I gave him one of Trevor's Old Kilty miniatures and, from time to time, patted him on the shoulder and said stuff along "everything humanly possible" lines and dabbled in "credit to The Force" territory.

Derek wasn't so sure. He looked deeply pissed off.

Addled nincompoops sat about shunning The Balcony; pale, barely speaking, frightened, stupid, nursing drinks, waiting for reinforcements. How silly and overstated their clothes looked. More silly and overstated than usual.

It was a monumental shambles and testing of the nerves, given the illicit stuff up the fake chimney, but it was also rather exhilarating.

Obnoxious Damian, having snapped extensively downstairs, slithered about The Unit snapping everything. Periodically he hid in the crapper to make or take calls almost certainly of a greedy journalistic bastard character.

Various shit descended on Mad Bob's. What probably happened was as follows.

The eminently clubbable Mr. Chaplinski was not only dead but also a paper-thin alias of that equally dead tit end Trevor, a person known to Police.

Simple drunken imbecility can rarely be ruled out but I suspect that Trevor, weakened by self-abuse and that of others, imagined I was keeping more valuable drugs at Mad Bob's and, maddened by greed, decided to turn the place over. Perhaps he just wanted to pinch and profit from the piss he once pedaled. Who knows?

What is clear, however, is that the shit-brained clown broke into Mad Bob's under cover of early a.m. and was having a ferret around when young Terry Winston staggered out of the bog area half-naked and bugged in mind and body. Sensing a clandestine companion of felonious intent and a chance to repair his tarnished reputation, young Terry gave Trevor an incredible thumping with the baseball bat purchased to replace the very one in police custody that utterly rooted little Ronnie Monkhouse and all his hair.

How's that for coincidence?

The Cops, going nowhere with a burdensome workload and bad Press, were delighted to have an exemplary new suspect for the perplexing, resource hungry, media monopolising murders of Ron Monkhouse, Connie, Tony Barnet and, that very afternoon in a local back alley, broad daylight, a bloke called Monty Burton. Trevor made it a round five and The Rozzers gave Terry a thorough hammering to celebrate the triumph of righteousness.

An unwavering Walloper-sponsored finger of suspicion concerning all piss-related crime poked straight at Terry – a finger reinforced when Terry's girlfriend Tanya was found neatly jointed, individually wrapped and stacked in the capacious fridge of their domestic hovel.

You could have knocked me down with a feather had you so wished.

It didn't take long, however, before even the thickest of The Filth saw glaring holes in their Terry For Serial Killer scenario. Glaring.

There were no two ways about it: Porn addict pissmonger, Terry certainly karked Trevor and Tanya but there were far too many obvious and demonstrable facts attesting to his innocence in the grog-related matters of Monkhouse et al. Far too.

Stitching him up was out of the question.

Eventually Terry copped fourteen years anyway and the tabloids had a field day. For a few days the multicultural porn collection became fodder for wide and heated debate. He was in Long Bay when last I heard and at least we knew why he'd been so off his nut in those final days: not the discovery of Ron's bloody corpse in the bog but the covert butchery of bloody Tanya.

Clearly jointing and freezing one's de facto can do queer things to a chap. I resolved to keep this in mind.

Terry claimed in court that Tanya had lost sympathy for his multicultural porn activities, mocked him and threatened exposure on a television current affairs programme. Top cap it all a thin Mongolian woman had broken his new camera.

Kemel didn't like this at all. He called it a sideshow freak show and unnatural alienation of inalienable rights, adding that it was injurious to his interests to have so much fucking Filth about.

Was there any chance, Kemel asked later, if Trevor was behind the Mysterious Business Note Fucker currently giving us such anal anguish?

As you may recall I had determined to back pedal on the Mysterious Business Note Fucker because it was all getting too fucking silly.

"Not a chance," I advised shrewdly and artfully. "Trev was a fucking idiot but not of that kind. The bloke hanging about was quite different. Trevor functioned, if at all, modestly and unimaginatively.

"Why," I demanded fiercely of some Australian Reds, "are we suddenly the focus of so much untreated effluent?"

Kemel pondered these words.

"Dad will go fucking nuts when he hears about this," the son predicted.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves and few things are more fraught.

Back to The Unit, synchronised with ourselves, The Neighbourhood was going to the pack.

Cops came in dangerous and unsightly numbers and soon their questions became a bore.

Extraordinary news came through: Andy Carter had survived his distasteful plunge into Eddie. Massively fucked he had been rushed to Prince Phillip's where he was unlikely to last.

Fat Eddie, of course, was completely dead and as comfortable as could be expected.

Derek was taken off by cop colleagues. Oscar Lung departed on a stretcher having been paramedically deemed unconscious, I was interviewed lightly by a uniformed bozo from Murwillumbah, dawn came up, Dawn didn't.

Gradually CityZens were thrown out.

In time the cops pissed off and I was temporarily released into the custody of untroubled sleep, thank fuck.

## ***XXXIV***

BUSY, BUSY, busy. Soon media bastards hammered the door. Unexpectedly, I thoroughly enjoyed myself taking the piss and talking to them all at length, regardless of the degree or level of my personal contempt.

Terry Winston's butchered bint had yet to be discovered, that news hit the streets a few days later when I was away with adventures of my own, but slaving ghouls of the gutter press knew much of yestere'en's contretemps 'twixt Terry and Trev to say nothing of Andy Carter, Fat Eddie, Hairy Ron and Angela Twitchet.

I think these myrmidons of the gutter media regarded me as "colour" in their sordid tales of death and depravity. Dumb fuckers.

I claimed, albeit with a certain élan, to know no more than they. Perhaps less. What little I saw or heard was under active police investigation, I had yet to be formally interviewed and the issue ill-behaved ignorant or premature comment.

We moved to the most recent gory fiasco at The Unit Block Of Doom.

This appalling tragedy had deeply shocked us all, I explained. Andy Carter, well-known as a child actor, had matured into a tender husband and father who was an amusing, charismatic, dynamic, widely respected, dare I say "visionary" cultural figure dogged by malicious and unsubstantiated rumour, financial and other misfortune.

As Andy's colleague and new-found friend, I could only hope a miracle would pull him through his reportedly appalling injuries. I would visit him in Intensive Care at the earliest opportunity and hoped for that miracle.

Eddie, of course, was a terrible loss and, without so much as a smirk, I characterised him as "a special gentle giant who would be greatly missed".

I was but a devastated host, still coming to terms with the wholly unconnected and untimely death of my neighbour Angela, grave allegations leveled at her since the unfortunate snuffing and the brutal staying of my friend and employer Ron Monkhouse.

I was a remote witness to last night's horror plunge in company with the undoubted hero of the hour Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet whose unsuccessful gold-medal mercy dash came close to meaning something as Andy's life hung briefly in the imbalance.

I was thoroughly probed, filmed and photographed by the time The Cops arrived to whisk me off for a jolly old statement.

Once again I was shoved in the suicidally depressing shithole of Interview Room Two and another uniformed woman, butt ugly on this occasion, gave me even nastier coffee than had previously been my lot.

I was interviewed by the grey, forty-something spawn of ferret and eel; an uncomfortably long, uniformed miserable fucker introduced as Inspector Roger Hull. He asked obvious questions in a voice that could flatten beer.

My answers seemed to get a feeble tick in all the right boxes.

Laugh-a-decade Roger didn't seem particularly interested in yours truly and completely lost interest when he realised I had no intention of slagging off him, my hero Derek Mehmet or any of his fine colleagues. As I bumbled into my Filth Fan Club groupie routine the stringy twat almost fell asleep. I must admit it is extremely boring, and rightly so.

Then it was wardward for the occasionally healing halls of Prince Phillip Hospital. As a treat I travelled by taxi.

They wouldn't actually let me in the room with Andy because I wasn't somebody else but, under the circumstances, I was allowed a squiz at the wreckage through a wall of glass.

Whoa, fuck!

Andy, my friends, was a mess and a half. He looked like decrepit paella. Shocking, I tells ya. Absolutely atrocious.

For a start he wasn't wearing much, which was exceedingly gross of itself, and he had tubes and shit snaking from every natural orifice and more than a few unnatural ones besides.

Devices grouped about him were emitting wavy lines.

Fortunately skivvies had wiped off most of the gloop but, beyond wiping and particularly unpleasant, was the way his legs, stumpy wee bastards at the best of times, had contrived to diminish in length and become most baggy.

An arm displayed an unusual zigzag form while awaiting treatment for breaks in at least two places. A stout supportive collar had been affixed to Andy's neck, which had every right to be broken, and he had sustained a nasty knock to the skull. I fancied I saw broken bone in the hole but this may have been the heady brew of glistening gore and wishful thinking.

Internal injuries would have to be extensive. Have to. A hearty ragout of organs on a generous lard mash.

"And that," I thought to myself with a warm inner glow, "is Andy Carter well fucked."

Enter Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet, grey and subdued. He actually gave me a solemn manly hug and said: "Good on ya, mate," to no obvious purpose. We stood staring through the glass at the wreckage. It was all very quiet and potentially meaningful for two or three minutes.

Alluring nurses busied in and firmly pissed us off while they prepared to tinker unseen with tangled tripes, mop up a bit and restore Andy's concertina legs to their former stumpy glory. Fuck knows what had happened to the pelvis and its appurtenances.

Together Derek and I walked slowly down the evil-smelling hospital corridors possibly pretending to be in a film about the French Foreign Legion.

It was about time I contacted the lovely Dawn to commiserate with her at this difficult time, to share a Guinness, possibly to grow uninhibited, to consider a future bereft of Andy Carter.

Action would be taken on that one.

Later, as the last of The Cops slunk from the tawdry scene of crime at Mad Bob's, Kemel greeted me with a curt: "Where the fuck have you been?"

Mo had summoned me on the mobile blower and allowed my escape from Dismal Derek to Mad Bob's, closed and barred to the public. Some brutes drifted outside gazing like ghouls on The House Of Death. My media savvy allowed me to spot a photographer and his bag brooding near the bins.

Mo hovered within, restless and disposed to chew something living.

Kemel greeted me with a curt: "Where the fuck have you been?"

He did look stressed.

"You wouldn't read about it," I lied, "I've hardly slept a wank."

This seemed good enough and I was happy to see how smoothly I seemed to have slipped into Kemel's shady circle, even in times of tension.

Such fun.

My synopsis of recent events was, for the most part, received with thoughtful silence.

"Just because you're fucking mad, doesn't mean you're fucking stupid," Kemel observed and, on the whole, I tend to agree.

Despite labeling me a weird bastard, Kemel was interested in my news but particularly the hospital encounter with Derek the Detective. He bade me elucidate. Knowledge of bent and mental police officers was ever of value to ambitious young criminals.

Derek and I went for coffee. Derek insisted on paying. The price I paid was sitting through interminable shite about the suspicious company I kept.

I thanked him for his concern and pledged to take care. It was increasingly clear that some sort of spiritual crisis was the go.

The fuckwit was very upset about not reaching Andy on The Balcony before his back flip with plop. What the fuck he thought he could have done had he reached the barge-arsed oaf earlier I do not know.

Derek wasn't in the cart with his copper colleagues at all, in fact none gave a fuck about one fat bastard more or less, but, already at a low ebb, Derek felt personally responsible for Andy's Appalling Accident.

There would have to be an inquest.

Unhappy Derek was puzzled and frustrated by the crime all about him.

"He's not the only cunt," Kemel chipped in.

Derek felt that he could trust me.

"Did he?" piqued Kemel queried.

He felt we were on a similar wavelength.

"Did he?" an eyebrow rose.

Freely I gave Derek my new mobile telephone number, as a friend. I urged him to contact me if inclined and said I would think very hard about what he had said and seek a clearer understanding of my environment with renewed resolve. I purported to crave nothing more than full co-operation with New South Wales' Finest.

The Earnest Buffoon saw me as a good egg, an eccentric, harmless, arty battler and unfortunate victim of bizarre and tragic circumstances.

Over a second cup of coffee, to say nothing of a chicken salad roll *pour moi*, Derek asked to go off the record and at my acquiescence plied me with questions about you personally, Kemel, and this business and he pledged the absolute confidentiality of his source, if any.

He insisted that the most slender shard of information could lance so many social boils. This, unfortunately, made me think of the late Fat Eddie. I explained that I had no shards, however slender, and I did not know what to think. He told me that I should think very carefully nonetheless and contact him at these numbers at any time.

Rewards, without publicity, were not unheard of.

He would always be happy to chew the fat. This also reminded me of Eddie.

In short, I explained dramatically to Kemel and Mo entranced, Sergeant Mehmet solicited me to grass you up, rat you out, dob you in, blab, fink, sing like a canary, peach and generally imitate the action of The Stoolie.

Kemel swore ferociously.

This impressive vocal demonstration mingled with an inconvenient ringing of the business telephone. Kemel snatched the implement up and said: "What?!" and I, from a good two metres, heard some aggressive old bastard bellowing his balls off in Turkish or reasonable facsimile thereof.

Kemel listened with remarkable equanimity saying: "Yup," "Yup," and "Fine," as seemed appropriate. The caustic caller ceased communication abruptly and Kemel restored the receiver to its place.

"My Dad is fucking spewing," was all he chose to divulge before firing up a number by Fortified Wines and falling to a brooding silence.

"What we need," said Mo with conspicuous expenditure of resources, "is to find out what the fuck is going on."

Kemel and I agreed. Mo and I joined our employer on the floor for counsel and cannabis amid walls of sweet Nanna piss. There we decided things.

Decision The First: last night's unsightly mess with Andy and Eddie was a major fucking nuisance but no more. The death of Angela Twitchet, hard by, only exacerbated the nuisance but didn't mean shit.

Decision The Second: the antisocial fucker responsible for cracking Piss Industry Identities on the nut was a major worry and, given current knowledge, completely inexplicable. We were all, in our own small ways, Piss Industry Identities and had no desire for a deadly whacking from a fruitcake or determined business associate.

The who, why, where and deworrying of this menace had to be a priority and none but a flagrant pussy would expect The Swine in Blue to root out closure with these obscure conundrums. Steps would have to be taken.

Gravely Kemel announced that he would take these complex matters up with his father and his advisors at a meeting scheduled for later that day.

Privately I thought I might have a go at a clergyman next. I've never liked them.

I have wondered if a sensitive young life, such as my own, could be blighted by the complete failure of ecclesiastical perverts to make disgusting advances. The filthy lot are at it like dogs, by all accounts, and no child likes to feel excluded.

Decision The Third: whatever the fuck actually passed between poor old Terry Winston and that maggot Trevor will probably never be known. It was regrettable, costly and fuck all to do with us.

End of story.

Decision The Fourth: I conceded that Derek Mehmet might be a bit off his chump but doubted that the mystery note about doing business and the telephonic peculiarities and that gimpy customer freak were of his invention.

Mo conjectured that our Mystery Prick might be none other than The Antisocial Walloper, I said the thought had crossed my mind. Kemel grunted.

"Only time will tell," I said, not believing this to be, of necessity, the case at all. I had every reason to believe the Mystery Prick to be a figment of my own imagination and The Antisocial Walloper none other than the author of the Mystery Prick, viz Me.

This delightfully morbid nonsense was interrupted by a call on my real mobile telephone.

"It tells me here on this little screen," I explained, "that my caller is Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet. I wonder what he wants?"

Kemel and Mo raised eyes to the skies at my technological fumbblings but I made a successful connection for all that.

Derek, it turned out, was brooding back at the hospital when, lo and behold, Mrs. Andy Carter, Christine, had tottered in with an impressionable child, a mother-in-law called Dot and a brother called Vincent. I had met her before. Christine Carter. Not fat exactly but big boned and bovine.

Christine hoped she could see me. Only the other night, she claimed, Andy had called me the creative powerhouse of CityZen. He thought we made a great team. The fat turd considered me his closest friend. How sad is that?

Derek wanted me to meet the grieving family and the small school of bottom-feeding journalistic prawns prawning their dismal prawn steps.

Clearly doubting that I could be the creative powerhouse of anything, Kemel wanted, in Christ's name, to know what CityZen was and I said it was a long, irrelevant and stupid story with which I would bore him later.

"Fair enough," said Kemel, "keep your ears open and an eye on that dickhead Derek. Feed him confusing crap and see if you can score us some decent fucking P.R. while you're at it. We're looking a right bunch of galahs.



"You've been all over the telly looking an incredible prick already. Christ you go on. Make the most of it."

As I left, Mo was prudently silent. Kemel engaged in a full-scale whinge: "Fucking cops, fucking media, fucking economic downturn and mad head bashing bastards and piss artist artists!" he railed. "They must think I came over in the last fucking sampan!"

## XXXV

HOW BUSY, busy, busy life had become. Hastening hither and yon. Into this. Out of that. Wading through the other. How I considered the big picture in these fresh dynamic days and how I poured over detail. How unlike the lassitude of yore.

Before I could hasten to the hospital with mild encouragement for Mrs. Carter in her embryonic viduity, I had another task. I had secret business and it was afoot. Secret business afoot. Secret afoot business. Afoot there was business to attend to secretly.

Using my imaginary portable Aelph C.D.R. telephone with deft manipulation, I telephoned myself on the other, more real telephone given me at Kemel's behest.

Outside Mad Bob's, for all to see, I apparently received a brief telephone call on a portable device and spoke a few phrases concerning commercial crab breeding but none about could perceive the call to be from none other but my silent secret self. Ha ha!

They had possibly been sucked in.

The bogus call ceased and, visible to all but those blind, absent and pointed in the wrong direction, I strode off to find another jolly taxi for another gripping trip to the action-packed public hospital. There had to be something in all this tasteless activity for me somewhere.

For security, I tossed the imaginary telephone into a convenient waste bin and thought no more of it. That'll fool the fuckers at Forensics.

Detective Sergeant Derek and I met, as so many had done before, at Prince Phillip's entrance. Derek was worked up about crime and death related issues. Prince Phillip's entrance had seen it all before. Bloody royalty!

Say what you like about the public health service but it does employ a lot of uniformed nurses to flow about on various healing missions. A surprising number of these nurses are not bad. Rumour also has it that another number of these nurses are often up for a casual poke.

Where did Rumour get that from? What fool would engender such scurrilous obloquy? Whence came his sordid information?

Doctors.

Men doctors.

Bastards!

These are the men who sully the reputation of the very tarts that keep them in casual pokes. It's a fucking disgrace if you ask me.

Posture shot to buggery, Derek loped up like Quasimodo, tugged at my elbow and drew me to stand near hideous, vaguely ecclesiastical Sixties stained glass. I let this impertinence pass as he started gibbering softly. With sudden Heightened Nurse Activity, I had to concentrate. However potentially useful, D. was becoming a major bore. I had to concentrate to avoid insertion of spanners in the mechanism of our relationship.

The dopey cop explained that Andy's semi-widow Christine, and her brother Vincent, were anxious to meet for coffee before the reception.

"What reception be that?" I said harshly, rather like a picaroon.

Virtually an impromptu one, according to Derek, an entirely unexpected reception in the hospital car park with unexpected media coverage. Last night's blood bath was big news and the putrid parasites of the Press sensed the nourishment of pain, misery and Medicare totty.

At this reception Christine and to a lesser extent her toad-in-law, kid and brother Vince would receive a delegation of community members appalled by Andy's misfortune and pledged to offer non-denominational prayer and the possibility of practical assistance at this difficult time via an appeal on commercial television, as if I gave a rat's arse one way or the other.

He gave me a mighty pip but there was little else to do at this delicate stage but go along with Derek and meet the grieving wife. Off we trudged to that same scabby coffee joint where I scored the chicken salad sanger.

Along the way Derek muttered nervously that things were distorted and out of hand. I assumed, correctly, that I had best take it easy, see what developed, jump to no hasty conclusion and play it all by ear; an easy, all-seeing, playful, hasteless ear.

At the coffee dump and the earliest opportunity I issued a crock of condolences and hope sprang infernal. There was general droning. We shuffled awkwardly, sat awkwardly and awkwardly did we pretend to appraise the hideous interior décor. Derek lumbered off for refreshment and I surveyed the shattered bits of Carter family across the gulf of laminate.

Would you believe it?! Fuck me if Christine's brother Vince wasn't some species of vicar. He had vicar gear on. The lot. Vince the Vicar. And there was I, earlier in the piece, giving serious consideration to the fatal thumping of a priest or clergyman at the earliest inst.

Was this the hand of fate or something else entirely?

Saint Vincent, it transpired, was a complete and utter loon. A strapping lad, this Jerk for Jesus, solidly occupying his mid-twenties, quite good looking you'd think, a bit pent up and pasty but teeth, limbs, hair, every advantage, yet Vincent was also a social torment, a painfully earnest, humble, humourless, eager, naïve, hopeful ninny and probably some class of pansy in denial.

For a fleeting moment I almost lost my near-legendary composure and snorted with mischievous glee. I held my levity for the sake of propriety.

Christine, thank fuck, had ditched the kid but Dot, The Mother-In-Law, was much in evidence.

Ugly stick?!

Stap me vitals, that woman was ugly and to my disgusted eye looked a relative stranger to soap and water. There was prima facie evidence of gravy near her right underarm bequeathing a certain edgy frisson to the scene. She could easily have been gaga in a decrepit, smouldering, spiteful kind of way.

Ug-er-lee.

Andy Carter's ghastly, balding, amphibious Mum was about seventy and as foul a specimen of humanity as I've seen since Fat Eddie was extant.

She wore a criminally thin, disgustingly small floral dress and beneath its diaphanous gauze one could see tsunamis of flesh all over the place.

Her head and neck and upper areas all seemed to melt into each other like a dead-ugly elephant seal. Wrinkles, like the fjords of Scandinavia crossed with W. H. Auden, had just gone for it and missed nothing. She had nasty little greasy clumps of badly dyed black hair dotted about her liver-spotted skull and she did unspeakable things with her false teeth.

I saw quite enough not concealed by the table, her dead zeppelin arms and appalling bust for example, to know that I had seen quite enough. Just thinking about it made one go cold. I could tell she was pissed off and she looked at me as one beholding tubercular sputum.

Vincent looked glazed with a sad little fuckwit grin.

A genuine weirdo, I suspect, Vincent suspected that if he looked glazed and fuckwitted enough he might become glazed and fuckwitted enough to suspect nothing.

With a voice like some nocturnal avian, Vincent was in strife with a coherent communiqué on recent events and, light on excuses for the shit storm, deemed prayer the present answer.

Christine looked buggered but was holding up well. I'd give it one. She looked at me calmly across the table. Vincent grinned like a Cheshire twat. Old Mrs. Slug looked as if she were about to spew. Derek had fucked off. I couldn't think of a thing to say.

Sturdy Christine came to my rescue.

"It doesn't look good for Andy," the semi-widow announced. "I must be honest: it looks grave, Rex. Very grave."

I wasn't concerned. She and The Kid would probably find themselves a nice salesman soon, electronic goods, catering supplies, stationery, cleaning materials, a world of possibilities.

An amount of shit was spouted about hope for the best, miracles happening and complete confidence in the acclaimed mega-quacks wearing the stethoscopes around here.

This was no time to canvass the possibility of a life-affirming root.

Then the big news started.

It turned out that, before his rapid descent, Andy had wanted to make me a formal partner, fully kosher and legally binding, in his fledgling company CityZen Discorporated. He'd had partnership papers drawn up as a surprise.

Trusting fool, Clarabelle gushed partisan news of Andy's prehumous generosity blind to a history of ceaseless conniving from her deadish husband. The sorry slut saw these obvious pecuniary prestidigitations as both characteristically generous and sound business sense.

Andy saw me as CityZen's number one asset. A real find. Mr. Big. Lightning Boy. Right man, right time. Andy Carter was convinced my unique take was vital to the success of CityZen magazine.

I have no idea what was meant by "my unique take". Only he knew or possibly not. He was setting me up. Andy tried to make me the Fall Guy to the last. He certainly tried to make me Fall Guy to the antepenultimate and, averaging things out, probably tried to make me Fall Guy to the penultimate.

Fat cunt!

If there were to be any appreciable peculation around here I would be the one to engage in it and profit therefrom!

Reason revolted at the gall of Andy Carter in life and the point of the prick now.

Without a word of consultation this squished bastard wants to make me legally responsible at some point for some mob he can sign cheques for?

Get fucked.

Who knew what onerous obligations crouched in the fine print? Who knew what knuckle-dragging apes had already been fucked over by Andy and, even now, were looking for someone to kick the shit out of?

Who knew?

Answer me that you cock-sucking ponce!

I couldn't be doing with that! I had drugs for sale and exciting career horizons opening in the rapidly expanding world of crime. Never had life been as full and rich as since I became a brutal serial killer. I did not have time, nor inclination, to dick about with the cultural freaks.

Imminent death issues aside, Andy Carter had simply wanted to fuck off and leave me to clear up his mess and cop the blame.

The fuck he would and the fuck I would!

I knew my awful frown and silent mouthed obscenity would be read as the workings of more tender emotion.

And then it all came out and it was, as they say, better out than in.

Bluebelle had no aptitude for business and none to pursue the allegedly golden opportunity of CityZen Discorporated. Vincent was a fucking priest for fuck's sake and the kid a mere kid. The old lady didn't get a mention but grunted disapprovingly anyway.

Daisy explained that we had to face the very real possibility that Andy might never work professionally again as we understand the term. For Andy and others the healing road could be long, rocky and pointless.

I strangled frivolous laughter to submission.

Clara's eyes swam with tearful supplication. Would I, in memory of Dear Andy, take the company in hand and run with the ball? Would I, on a sound legal footing, step into the breach, fight the good fight, carry on regardless? I would have a completely free hand.

These people were obviously mad.

Were they some class of Christian nincompoop, for fuck's sake?

I wrenched myself from thoughts of what might result from a hand truly free only to be lumbered with more Trixie crap: would I captain the exploration to see if a reality could be made of Andy's dream? Would I take a fifty one per cent share of the company and total charge of CityZen?

One day, perhaps, she and Little Andy and thousands more would reap a golden cultural harvest from Andy's seeds. A revolting thought.

Perhaps, one day, she and Little Andy would cop some gelt. I paraphrase.

Would I take up the challenge? Would I maintain the rage? Was there hope? Did I have it in me? Must cynicism rule? Would I water the seeds? Would I? Could I? Would I?

To conclude, loyal and simple Buttercup played her ace: it was what Andy would want.

What Andy would want? That was most amusing. How droll to suggest I should subjugate my life in any way or degree to the purported whim of that flat prat? Fie and be bugged!

This was no way to spend the fucking Sabbath!

For bleeding heart, muesli-munching, tree-hugging reasons of her own Christine wanted to low glad tidings of cultural continuity to a bunch of supportive sots and media rubbish gathering on the hospital car park.

The return of Quasimodo gave me time to think. If he said sorry once he must have said it fifty fucking times but as Derek dished out drinks I decided what I would do and why.

With excruciating solemnity we went and had a squiz at the bits. At least they'd covered him up a lot more.

I cruised through the reception, fielded The Press peanuts like a pro, came out looking like prime Henry The Fucking Fifth crossed with Barry Humphries. Not easy.

I recognised a few witless faces in the delegation including that tiresome council clown Nazir Hussein no less, chairman of the Recreation, Rorts and Bungs.

“Well done, my friend,” he cried, grinning and wildly waving his horrible crutch, “we need splendid cultured young fellows just such as yourself to bring new, much-needed blood to our community and council chambers!”

I did like the sound of that.

## XXXVI

I DRAGGED myself home in the early aches of Monday morn, pissed, exhausted, awash with deadly animal fats but determined to catch up with essential sleep and a few pages of this True Confessions Gold.

A man needs a hobby.

Scribble, scribble.

My residence was still greatly besmirched by the previous night’s debris but I could not give a rat’s arse.

I experienced a torch-lit thought as I huddled confessing ‘neath a counterpane that would crumble to flakes on contact with fresh air.

If Andy lingered fucked but persistently emitting wavy lines I would be left with unfinished business. Not strictly speaking on my hands, but impossible to ignore, this business would have to be finished lest it become an unfinished white elephant. This was in no person’s interest and potentially, through disease, mess, leakage, smell and other indicators, unnecessarily injurious to the common weal, to say nothing of my own more important weal.

Perhaps his veggie brain, devious but never exactly top of the range, might lurch back to sentience. This could happen next Thursday, possibly during lunch. Stranger things have lurched during lunch.

In time he could, for example, gain purposeful control of a nostril, either one would do, or an ear. This might happen five years hence. For all I know the peculiar bastard may have been familiar with Morse Code and would strike up a meaningful relationship with one or more alert and stimulating nurses thereabouts. If Morse itself proved a stumbling block, boffin nerds could arrange an electrical appliance to transmogrify tiny nostril tics or ear undulations into strangely singing mechanical speech as used by that wretched scientist bloke.

With geeky egg-heads on side, and tottering back from the brink of annihilation, Andy might well conspire to wrest control of an invigorated CityZen from me and I would be forced to bid him cease and constrained to act decisively if he should tic or undulate me “nay”.

I had agreed to guide the CityZen project because it made me look awesome, I did have many spare quid up the fake chimney, few hobbies and so many of The Hacks pretended to give a shit.

The fact remained: I could not accommodate a white elephant, finished or not, in my room.

It might become necessary to blow Andy up.

By clandestine means I would acquire a classic hand grenade. Military Green for preference. I believe such things are freely available on an Internet.

During a comradely visit to Andy's persistent wreckage, under cover of feigned emotion, I would gently pull the pin and slide the primed grenade between Insensible Andy's bugged back and the sensible hospital linen and firm young mattress. Well-weighted flab would fold over the device and the little handle thing would not spring out.

Days could pass. I would be well away before the muffled thud and scattered splat of fat bastard. Few would gladly try to shift that wretched lump and the explosive thing could sit there for days poking the prick in the back, albeit unbeknownst. I'd plant my bomb early, before the Quacks and Hacks, delegations, friends, Filth and family members conveniently trampled all criminal meaning from the scene.

I fell asleep in mid-thought and dreamed of Andy, wearing only a smouldering fez, threaded and decently trussed, head down, turning and blistering on a big kebab skewer. A mighty tomato bulging from his mouth made cries of torment sound like a possum choking on a chicken nugget.

Suddenly dream Andy exploded even more messily than one might expect.

Anyway back to my irresistible rise.

On my late Sunday afternoon return to Mad Bob's, after the triumphant car park reception, only Mo was found within. We ceased trading, locked up and decamped in a bloody great four-wheel drive to a moderately sickening kebab joint called The Flaming Fez in Wallyville.

We went straight upstairs without a word to the forelock-tugging peasant kebab bloke bobbing about below.

Kemel greeted us at the stairhead with a welcoming pickaxe handle.

"Alert but not alarmed," he grinned, "you could have been fucking terrorists."

Up the stairs there was a surprisingly acceptable bar with none of the universal Ali Baba crap found downstairs. A small black platform for performances of some kind stood at one end and there was room for, perhaps, forty or fifty comfortable customers.

But this night, of customers there was none and we three criminal comrades sat on stools at the bar enjoying a well earned drink and eating shit brought from the botulism incubator at the foot of the stairs.

During my industrious absence that afternoon, I learned, both Kemel and Mo had been by no means idle.

Meetings with Kemel's Dad and others gleaned some information but little action. The situation was described as "tense".

Various deaths and incompetent Pigs had brought profitable businesses to a virtual halt. Tempers were fraying.

I had become a slightly macabre celebrity – the cool, cultured commentator at the eye of death’s hurricane. Fucking excellent!

In this Kemel was delighted to discover something he thought both hilarious and pregnant with potential business potential.

In all other respects The Media had been a colossal pain. Kemel’s family and friends could scarce respond to knockings and ringings, even in a domestic environment, without concern that some irritating, uninvited bastard would do or say something unwanted in their presence or hearing. These are people who value their privacy and guard it ferociously.

The Pigs continued to test the limits of Kemel’s civility and he had spoken sternly to his Dad’s solicitor and others.

As suspected, the Cops were clueless in remotest Shit Creek searching for the elusive Hammer of the Piss Pushers and any convenient dirt they could dredge. In fact, the investigative fiasco went from bad to worse with religious types and teetotal twats getting in on the act and shitbag politicians dragging the head from the trough for pontification and point scoring.

It transpired that Monty Burton – that seemed like an age ago but was only bloody Friday! – was a powerful and unpopular figure in the world of piss and his walloping had really confused the already confused Cops, Crims, observers and uninformed commentators alike.

I learned that two large and determined Chinese blokes had been hired by a prominent pissmonger called Something Chinese to poke around a bit.

“Good on him and them,” I contributed with a smile, wondering how I could get Vincent alone for a whacking. That would see shit hit. A church would be great and, I imagine, usually deserted. Councillor Nazir Hussein crossed my mind but, painful though he was, I just couldn’t be bothered. Not enough points perhaps.

Unsurprisingly nothing was seen of my fictitious and weird business stalker nor had his fictitious but disconcerting telephone antics been repeated.

“We shall never know the bloody thinking, if any, behind these bizarre incidents,” I slurred to Kemel in the wee small. “Fuck it. Forget it. Move on.”

As the focus of this imaginary threat I picked up brownie points for a bold declaration.

“We’ve got to work through this wholesale slaughter shit,” Kemel decided, “Terry and Trevor and the fucking multitude at your place Rex. We’ve got to take it on the chin on a shit happens basis and work through it.” As a slightly shamefaced afterthought he added: “My Dad wants to meet you. We’re seeing him tomorrow. Noon. Mo’ll pick you up at eleven.”

Kemel fell silent.

“Any advice,” I asked, “about dealing with your Old Dad?”

“Don’t mention Armenia,” said Kemel grimly.



“Fuck!” I expostulated.

The subject turned to drinking and sexual intercourse.

Two joints, a bowl of seasoned legume paste and five beers later Kemel was having trouble understanding my story about the gift of CityZen magazine. Mo had given up trying and was generating contemporary Jamaican music from behind the bar.

“So . . . what?” my employer gestured wildly, “you now own this non-existent street sheet? A magazine that, if it actually existed, would be dished out for nothing but might make money for the astute associate and could incur significant privileges in private and professional spheres?”

“Something like that.”

“And they just hand it over without so much as a broken rib?”

“Also something like that. It must be my great personal charm.”

Kemel snorted with derision. “You fill the nearest and dearest so full of goon he falls insensible off the fucking balcony, he’s cactus up Prince Phillip and the widows and orphans hand over the combo to the safe. This makes no fucking sense at all.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” I interpolated.

“These relatives just handed it over? No strings. Total freebie. “You think these people are wankers, you constantly take the piss and they legally gave you this thing that, in the right hands, might actually be worth quite a lot?”

“More or less.”

“I’m flabbergasted. These people are fucking idiots. You’ve got more luck than my Uncle Stan.”

I kicked in: “There is paperwork but don’t forget the thing is a scam and fucking worthless. But what with Andy set to snuff it I thought the least I could do was to investigate the possibility that his untimely plunge denied him actual cash, genuine goods or valuable services that deserve security and prudent handling. I’ll keep you informed. I might value your advice on matters of business and there’s a woman I want to have sexual intercourse with.”

“I should have fucking guessed,” Kemel brayed bawdily but, behind a foggy veneer of piss and weed, the mind churned like a concrete pump.

For a change of scene we went to a back street pub I’d never heard of. People of both sexes recognised me vaguely from the television news but none felt sufficiently bold to approach.

An unknown drunkard at the urinal did say: “Good one ya, mate!” and grin like a spastic maniac but this may have been sheer coincidence.

That Sabbath night Mo spoke briefly to some eminently shaggable women but Kemel didn’t seem bothered and was generally withdrawn. His greatly wired cousins Ric and Nobby came in briefly, bought a round and were very effervescent before they pissed off into the night in search of adventure.

Later Kemel and Mo went to a pills, piss and pulchritude place in Flogging Street but, in a rare eruption of self-discipline, I cried off and dragged myself home for True Confessions, sleep, dreams and convenient flashbacks.

## XXXVII

IT WOULD be fair to say, I think, that Kemel's Dad lived in what many would consider to be and style A Fucking Mansion.

Abutting the beach at the disgustingly expensive Fondant Bay, the vast Victorian pile, with breath-taking views, huge award-winning pool, colourful, comfortable, dappled grounds and associated shit was everything a major flash cunt needed and more.

Mo chauffeured me through imposing, electrical gates and up the drive – because it had a drive, for Christ's sake! We scrunched to a halt at a front door they would certainly have used in films given half a chance.

Kemel was mooching about on nearby gravel dragging on an anxious spliff and there was a huge, completely hairless Maori bloke bursting out of a shiny suit and standing about obviously. This gentleman was introduced to me as Arthur. Of Arthur it was said that he could open a beer bottle, crown cap or twist top, with just about any part of his body, a skill which encouraged immoderate consumption of beer and a deal of puerile and repetitive ribaldry.

My Employer led Mo, Arthur and myself through the spacious, spotless house which was stacked with high-end merchandise well deserving of a Once, Twice or even Thrice over.

Kemel's Dad was doing all right.

We paused en route.

"What with one dead thing and another, Dad's got the shits a bit today," said Kemel conspiratorially. "These fucking cops and their obsession with allegations, to say nothing of the frenzied media pack, have seriously impeded our activities. The Old Man knows most of what's going on already and you probably won't have to say much because one of Dad's rules is that he says more than anyone else and can shout if he wants to. It's been a family tradition ever since he thought it up.

"Don't let him rattle you. If he smells fear you're history. As a general rule: agree. Just play it by ear and don't be a fucking smart-arse."

"And don't mention Armenia," I confirmed.

"Don't you fucking dare!"

Kemel led us through one side of the house to the lavishly appointed, squillion dollar pool overlooking The Harbour. There was a lot of attractive rock about and ferns. Soft, seductive Turkish music oozed from hidden things.

Kemel's Dad was not difficult to spot. He was a big bloke with hair like Beethoven and he wore a burgundy silk dressing gown thing that The Pope or Al Capone or half a dozen pimps I could name would have loved.

He was as dignified as buggery and looking well fit to manipulate a multi-national criminal network or twain.

What the fuck: the six pimps who would have loved the dressing gown included, but were not necessarily limited to, Morris "Spazzer" Papandreou, Colin Pearson, Boris "Cocker" Rickmann, Charlie Ravenscroft, Kurt "Whacko" van der Loupe and Rathead McMahon.

Kem's Old Dad had set himself up near the impressive poolside bar on a kind of throne, a long, marble, cushion-covered couch thing that could, with a cohort of ruthless mercenaries and extensive air support, have been souvenired from the Taj Mahal.

I was quietly relieved to note that The Patriarch was a good twenty years older than I, though probably healthier if a lot bulkier.

I didn't much care for the idea that Kemel might consider me a father figure. The possibility had nagged.

Technically, of course, I could have been Kemel's Dad. All it would have taken would have been a fruitful fling with an obliging Turkish woman, a stunning sort by all accounts, twenty-odd years ago.

Half a chance would have been a fine thing. I'd remember that a bloody sight better than yesterday or even later.

The simple fact is, I didn't like the father figure idea and discovering that Kemel's Dad was well old enough, if nowhere near fucked up enough, to be my own Dad made it all somehow easier to bear.

As the four of us approached, Kemel's Dad ignored us completely and spoke with calm authority to two craven wretches bearing all the hallmarks of the Thirty-Something Accountant.

The four of us hovered toolishly just beyond the Immediate Audience Area or I.A.A.

There was a scrawny old Aussie bloke in shorts and tee-shirt behind the bar who, though well past his use-by date, clearly retained a role as some class of gofer cum minder cum barman cum companion cum dance instructor for all I knew. The old lad eyed us without warmth.

Kemel's Dad spoke like someone with a knighthood who was good at accents playing Kemel's Dad in a critically acclaimed film.

"They are without discipline themselves," the Leading Man opined to The Accountants with great hauteur, "and are incapable of instilling it in others. Chaos and conflict is inevitable on such a path. Make this matter go away gentlemen and at no cost to myself. Let me never know of it again."

The writhing Accountants looked set to piss themselves. Kemel's Dad just averted his gaze and it dawned on the loser Accountants that the audience was over. Like dopey chooks, they bobbed and staggered out of my story.

The Old Lad turned to us.

"Please sit down," said Our Host and we sat in director's chairs ranged about.

Kemel's Dad looked long and hard at me to the extent that I began to feel awkward and affronted. Rude git.

Eventually he got going: "The uncertainties of youth," he said, "are so swiftly joined by those of decrepitude." He shook his head slowly.

I thought it best not to respond and grinned like an idiot.

"I have seen you in the television," he announced, "yet my son tells me you are clever, have interesting ideas and can be trusted. I hold no opinion against you. We shall see.

"Rid me of verminous police and drunken, junkie media and I will be greatly pleased. Clever, trustworthy men with ideas must stand forth. You two will discuss business and avoid the dead people I hear so much about."

He looked to our massive Maori associate: "A word in your ear Arthur."

I smiled. Dad did nothing. It was all getting peculiar and I didn't know what the fuck to do.

The Old Bloke looked out on the hazy, sparkling Harbour and smiled with a satisfaction that only senility, drugs or a shit-load of money can bring.

Kemel shuffled awkwardly in his chair and I realised that we were expected to rack off. Charming.

That was it: a fleeting dekko at the real estate, slag off the accountants, platitudinous bullshit, abuse of bastards and carry on regardless. Beyond that nothing, zip, nada, five eighths of fuck all, zero, zilch, nil, nought, sweet Fanny Adams, bupkiss, blank, bugger all, absence. Not even a fucking sherry!

Complete waste of time. Tiresome old prick.

I exchanged a number of what-the-fuck facial expressions for Kemel's let's-bugger-off-quick variety. Arthur stayed. The rest of us shot through.

It all seemed pointless and silly but I did get the impression that somehow I had passed The Test – whatever The Test happened to be.

"Don't say a fucking word," said Kemel grimly as we hurried through the house.

## ***XXXVIII***

GRINDING BACK to Mad Bob's through shit-thick traffic, little Mr. Compliance, viz Me, said nothing, Mo said a superficially similar nothing and Kemel's grim, rhetorical mumble was characterised by phrases of the tight-arsed-psycho-bastard-geriatric-ratbag-son-of-a-bitch genre.

This allowed your narrator an opportunity for urgent thought and planning.

One: I needed Administrative Assistant Nash and her gums to assemble the CityZen freaks, cough up a phone number for the lovely Dawn or, failing that, submit personally, without strings, to the churning lusts of her new leader, namely meself, at least until I found something better.

If nothing else I needed to know if there was a quid in the CityZen scam for Yours Truly or merely a mob of Andy Carter's rapacious creditors poised to swarm up my tasteful trouser leg.

Two: I needed to bump someone off. One seemingly linked to my other clandestine clobbering activities in the alcohol racket, to draw The Filth from me and my interests and Kemel and his interests. Some prominent person from a peak industry group, a licensing magistrate might suffice or a celebrity piss-head, vigneron, brewer or distiller. Any of these could make first-rate corpses.

Three: the drugs needed a good home. Actually, I didn't give a rodent's rectum about the quality of the home, I just wanted the gelt.

Four: I needed to put Andy Carter out of my misery.

No hand grenades. I recognised the folly of that fun-filled fantasy. Simple and direct. How hard could it be knocking off a nitwit in his state of health? Experience taught that the key to killing, indiscriminate or otherwise, was simplicity. I could, for example, plunge a bradawl into Andy's brain.

Many would consider the extirpation of Andy an act of charity, not only towards what was left of him but to others less obviously rooted. For my own part I would declare such an act a blessed release because the business had grown to be a serious discomfort of the date.

Gradually the peristaltic traffic flow lulled this passenger from the aforementioned varieties of urgent thought and planning to a state of trance-like somnolence, semi-sleep or demi-sleep.

The bloody portable telephone dragged me to a form of consciousness. It was Christine Carter. She had assembled relevant papers and wished for nothing more, save hubby's restoration to health, than to hand over these documents for my kind consideration.

Could I meet her at Andy's bedside an hour hence to receive these papers for review?

I checked with Kemel. His eyes twinkled with avarice.

I could.

Mrs. Carter informed me that the coroner had appraised Fat Eddie's bits and released them all. An environmental catastrophe had been organised for Friday when the slumgullion remnants would be cremated.

With all that blubber they'd probably still sizzle the following Tuesday.

Christine thought it apposite for these CityZen documents to be signed on the dotted line at the dead slob's wake following the initial conflagration.

“That’s a lovely idea, Christine,” I said basso, “I’m sure Andy would approve.”

Both Mo and Kemel glared at me with incredulity and the former, thus distracted, almost copped twenty gold stars for taking out a revolting schoolboy striving to cross the road.

Kemel screamed abuse on behalf of us all.

Funny thing, I’d forgotten Dead Ed but I had three days with documents to determine if CityZen was a potential crock of gold or an actual crock of shit. Should the latter prove the case, as was most likely, I would grizzle that my psycho-geriatric pater in Bathurst was about to tumble from the twig and needed me at his side for the duration. How could I possibly face the challenge of CityZen under such heart-rending circumstances?

With a single bound he was free.

Nice one.

After the recent tabloid carnage, Mad Bob’s Bottle Magic was once again open to the general public and it was clear that our unsavoury bloodbath had done wonders for business. The poxy place was packed with punters. Slack-jawed trailer-trash dotted surrounding territory as they gawped at the gaudy premises and speculated.

Kemel had installed a cocky little bastard called Adnan and a toothsome jailbait offsider called Sarila to run the joint in the absence of Terry, secure and psycho in the slammer, and Self, slithering up the greasy pole of our unfair city’s underworld.

Kemel gave Sarila a solid perv concealed behind a pep-talk, I hit the till and Mo and Adnan moved heavy boxes (mysterious) from under a blanket in the back of the bloody great four wheel drive and stashed them in the office.

Mission accomplished, Mo and Adnan were dispatched to the trading areas to gouge ghouls and I was summoned to the inner sanctum with a peremptory “Oi.”

Kemel sat at what had been Ron Monkhouse’s shitty desk and fiddled with a promotional corkscrew.

“This bullshit magazine thing,” Kemel started cautiously, “I could have some interest in that.”

“But it’s a scam,” I cautioned.

“Exactly,” said Kemel with enough enthusiasm to settle the matter.

I digested this. He was a smart lad, young Kemel, and a tribute to his adopted land. “Good point,” I mused. He really did have a point.

“We work well together,” Kemel added. “You might be a peculiar prick but you’re no fucking idiot and a magazine would get us into places and in touch with people who, in the normal run of things, wouldn’t.

“Give me a ball-park figure to get this crap off the ground legit.”

“Fuck knows. Thousands if it were strictly kosher. Money can just walk out the fucking door.”

“And it can fucking well walk back in,” Kemel insisted. “It wouldn’t be remotely kosher if I had my way, but all this other shit going down has seriously stuffed my cash flow. Pity we’ve got no fucking money to spare. If we *did* the fucker we could see serious pelf.”

“Ah-ha,” methought, “methinks the sweet knock of opportunity pervades this shithole’s stale, unwholesome air.”

Meanwhile Kemel banged on: “Go see this dopey moll anyway and grab the legal papers. If you’re up for it I’ll have some of Dad’s blokes look them over. You won’t have to lift a finger and we’ll get these fuckwit mates of yours to work for nothing.”

And lo: the sound of music anointed mine lugholes.

“Give it some thought. Mo and I are pissing off to The Flaming Fez, join us when you’ve finished with the retards if you like.”

“I will on both counts,” I said and all the while my mighty brain was going nineteen to the dozen.

Kemel, observant bastard he, soon picked up that I wasn’t leaving the room in hot pursuit of the widow apparent Christine Carter, aka Dopey Moll.

“What’s up?” he asked.

I told him about the four kilograms of cocaine at my disposal.

He gurned and spluttered like an emphysemic grampus.

## XXXIX

FUCK KNOWS when I crawled into the reeking pit. It was a profoundly pissy night at The Flaming Fez that did for me.

First up, however, I had to collect the legal crap.

Yet again Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet haunted the entrance to Prince Phillip Hospital and I think I can say without successful contradiction that the sorry prick looked shocking; grey, stooped, puffy, anxious, ancient and with bags ‘neath the eyes like rotting gherkins. The general effect, amid all the hospital’s Gothic revival rubbish, was of an animated gargoyle staggering about on his last gasp.

Had the twat taken up residence?

He shuffled to me and grasped an elbow.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” he gasped but I had no intention of thanking any such concept.

“How’s the detective racket?” I probed lightly, no longer able to maintain quite the level of obsequious piffle that once marked our so-called relationship.

Derek looked as if he would burst into tears. It was patently obvious that the cops were up Shit Creek and Derek’s craft was missing a pedal.

“Don’t ask,” he sighed, obviously about to launch into some kind of depressing monologue as if I actually gave a shit.

“Fair enough,” I got in fast before he squeezed out any more old shite.

To add to Derek's air of decline, he had acquired a large, limp, loser raincoat of muddy hue as worn by the traditional flasher. The weather was unusually clement for the season and Derek looked a complete nonce.

My money was on the defective detective being seriously medicated.

Off we chugged at snail pace with me feeling like some mug forced to take a semi-gaga wrinkle for an airing. He mumbled on about Andy and Eddie, Christine and Poor Little Andy Junior and the substance of his talk went in one and straight out t'other.

I tossed in the occasional monosyllable for the sake of appearances but my mind was on my final fuck-me-dead moments with Kemel earlier.

At first he didn't believe I had more than four kilograms of uncut money. He did spluttering and said: "Yeah right," "But, but," and "Fuck me," a lot

I insisted I did indeed have the substance to the extent claimed and with withering sarcasm he claimed to have a gerbil lodged in his rectum, the implication being that this was similar in likelihood to my own allegation.

I told him not to be silly. He looked at me. I looked at him.

I told him of my felonious reconnaissance of Angela Twitchet's Unit and the surprise discovery therein. I mentioned how I had shrewdly left approximately two kilograms of the substance in place to give The Cops something to misappropriate. I said nothing of the unfortunate episode with Rancid the Cat and chalked that creature's demise, and that of Angela Twitchet, up to good luck on my part.

"You went to feed the fucking cat and found . . ."

"The only reason I mention this," I explained calmly, "is because I thought you might know an outlet for the sale of these goods. If so, I would be happy to split all proceeds fifty-fifty. As you said, we work well together."

"Four kilos," said Kemel.

"Four," I confirmed.

"And you want me to find a buyer," he iterated.

"Indeed I do."

"Four kilos."

"A little more."

"Uncut."

"Completely."

"Fuck me!"

"I'll pass if you don't mind."

"My fucking oath I know an outlet," said he. "I know several."

"Excellent."

Kemel eyed me through narrowed Levantine lids: "How do you know I won't rip you off and fuck you over? People have died horribly for less."



“I don’t know with certainty that you will avoid both,” I replied amiably, “and I’m sure people have died horribly for considerably less but it would be pointless and dumb.”

That sank in.

“Fifty-fifty?”

“Fifty-fifty.”

“That, my friend, is a dead set deal, but if you are taking the piss . . .” he left the threat incomplete.

“Your urine is secure,” I insisted, “but now I must take my leave. Catch you later at The Flaming Fez.”

“Fuck me sideways,” said Kemel in tones of incredulity.

So there I was at The House of Pain with dismal Derek Mehmet. The miserable fucker still had my elbow in his grasp as we shuffled towards that all too familiar coffee place with him maundering on about rampant crime and the uncertainty of modern life in a godless society.

Wanker.

The business with Christine Carter was mercifully brief.

Zombified with grief, stress and prescription drugs, she sat in the ghastly coffee shop with a cardboard box about yea square on the table and a malignant dwarf at her side.

But no.

This grotesque homunculus was Andy Carter Junior. Perhaps ten years of age and o’erflowing with unattended mucus. This eye-affronting, transistorised version of his ailing sire was cursed with all the short, fat-packed pinkness of the paternal line and a face assembled by a blind comedian. The boy’s stillness, silence, glazed gob and untended snot gave every indication of a full load of medication but, even without medication, a community less steeped in sentiment would have had the fucker in a sack years back.

I said nothing to this distasteful youth but directed sympathetic clucks at its Mum. I tried not to stare. This was one seriously ugly kid.

Yet again Derek was keen to shout refreshments and, as the only one present not prescribed to the tits, I gave him the go ahead and gladly saw the back of the fumbling fool for a few minutes.

Lingering no longer than the time to get and consume a hopelessly enfeebled cappuccino and an aged sausage roll, I managed to prize some information from Christine who, I might add, had broken out in boils and did not look in the least comely.

Her personal headline news was the suggestion from hospital staff that they turn Andy off and let the crushed and crumpled bastard do the decent thing. Apparently there was quite a queue for the machines that kept him heaving. Christine wasn’t keen so perhaps, like her retard brother, she was some weird kind of Christian after all.

I had other motives for wanting the clot to cling to life and clearly I needed to move quickly if I was to claim what was left of Andy's scalp for my own.

Now there was a thought. I could dry it out in the microwife and keep it up the fake chimney as a memento.

I was interested to learn that Derek the Dickhead had been shoved on sick leave and given counselling to help cope with some sort of nut do brought on by all the weird and wonderful snuffing going on. He was spending his time trying to expiate an addlepatated sense of guilt by waiting hand and hoof on the Carter clan and obsessing about the unsolved Piss Industry Murders.

At last the box of CityZen papers was handed over with a lot of maudlin drivel thrown in. I shot through quick smart claiming pressing magazine business and, cunningly, an urgent telephonic conference with my Old Dad's doctors about his recent marked decline.

Christine and Derek groaned sympathetic noises but the ugly kid just sat there like an indigestible self-saucing pudding.

Ho for The Flaming Fez!

Off we lurched, my box of bumf, drivel in my ears, taxi, driver, clothes, personal effects and I, into the rapidly coagulating traffic of late afternoon.

As we lurch I rifle through the papers and a right load of crap most of it is: barely decipherable notes in Andy's semi-literate scrawl, brochures advertising the services of printing and kindred industry sharks, the thick, professional thing intended to make me a partner in CityZen Discorporated, a mound of business cards and, prize of prizes, a fabulous cardboard file of personal information covering all the supposed contributors to CityZen, including me, performing arts ponce Reinhardt Goolie, Ahmet the sinister arts midget, the appalling sport and prosthesis authority Bruce Hinge, the moderately tuppable Nash and, ta-ran-ta-rah! – my deeply spiritual and outstandingly bonkworthy health and wellbeing correspondent Dawn.

I skimmed the Dawn pages: name, address, telephone numbers, an extensive curriculum vitae, hobbies, next of kin, even a tax file number - a hornucopia of fascinating detail.

How good was that?

I removed said Dawn pages from the cardboard file, folded them carefully and inserted the precious paper wad in my wallet.

For several minutes my box, bumf, ears, drivel, taxi, driver, clothes, effects and I progressed not at all but a smile of satisfaction spread across my chops and satisfaction warmed me to the marrow.

It was now early evening and, perhaps as a result of warmth, my throat was as dry as a vulture's crutch.

Still warmed, I greeted the apprehensive little guy at The Flaming Fez with a cheery Ave. He muttered unctuously and bobbed about a bit but the line of his beady

eye drew me to a table where none other than Arthur, impressively besuited, was to be found mangling a kebab and keeping an eye out for uninvited visitors.

“G’day Arthur,” said I and Arthur, with animal, vegetable and mineral sprouting from his enormous gob, just pointed towards the stairs and said: “Dey wayfoop derfkin stirs, shumcuns zavalderluk,” which didn’t sound much like Maori to me.

“Good on you,” I ventured with a smile and, without more ado, my box and I went tripping up the wooden hill to that surprisingly acceptable bar on the first floor.

Within seconds of arrival, Kemel had relieved me of the box and, grinning from ear to there, passed it to some ratty clerical type with a name like Cockup.

Cockup pissed off sharpish with my box.

There were, perhaps, ten people about the room and some of them were women. At least one of these people who were women might have been on the wrong side of thirty. As it transpired she could have been on the wrong side of ninety for all the fucking good it did me.

Kemel drew me to one side.

“That arrangement we discussed this arvo,” said Kemel quietly. “That wasn’t one of you dumb-arse jokes was it?”

“Not in the least,” I insisted.

“And we are talking about four kilos?”

“A little more by my calculations.”

“Good man,” Kemel beamed. “What you drinking?”

“Too much,” I answered.

Fuck knows when I crawled into the reeking pit.

## *XL*

THROUGHOUT THE night, from whatever time I staggered in, there were strange things crawling in The Unit. From the instant my head lay in the scattered dark or the crushed down, there were shadowy things crawling, wafting and contaminating my territory.

I know something of this.

These things were tiny things and larger things, different things, different darks not made for mortal eyes, different shapes with some amoebic and some geometric and some covered in fine filaments of hair and some all damp and glistening. Some, I fear, trail vapour, some were long like worms and some were not. Some had firm internal stuff bulging into skin and some had barely any substance at all but floated like mist through the place.

From the time I crawled in to the time the crust of sleep cracked and raw, grey day seeped into my eyes, these entities, curious, cautious yet indifferent to my wellbeing, were crawling through the dark and dawn on cloth, chairs, cabinets, scraps, printed matter, papers, paintwork, crap and concrete and they shimmered darkly on the

lingering debris of Saturday's deadly fiasco, crawled into every corner, caressed and rolled over every class of shit until I crawled painfully to the limp embrace of Tuesday.

Without respite a soft, regular tapping on the door irked me to more conventional senses. Tap tap pause tap pause tap pause tap tap pause tap tap tap pause tap . . .

I reeled around a bit and dragged on some strides.

It was Detective Sergeant Derek Mehmet tapping ceaselessly at my chamber door and I wished it were not. He'd put on weight! Fluid retention.

Never-the-less I invited the fucker in and stashed him in The Twilight Zone. He rejected beer. I bumbled about seeking pain-numbing medication, craving a soothing joint, trying to get tea to happen and ignoring whatever old bollocks it was that he was grinding on about.

He seemed as oblivious to the filthy state of the place as I was indifferent to it and sat slumped in that god-awful flasher raincoat staring at the junction of a wall and the ceiling.

From the corner of an eye I saw a last creeping shadow sink into my heavily soiled sofa. I had a strong suspicion that its most recent largely human occupant had been Oscar Lung, which would account for the stains and general fucking mess.

"Why don't you doff the raincoat Derek?" I suggested.

He did this slowly, with deliberation and without comment and he ranged the garment on the back of his chair. My chair actually. Christ I was over this maggot! Beneath the offending apparel he wore his Detective Sergeant Suit, perhaps unaware that I knew he'd been given the arse from active duty for being screwed in the scone.

With these thoughts churning my own unhappy pate I realised that this was precisely what Derek had been going on about – his suspension from inactive duty. Quite frankly, I wouldn't send the oaf out for twenty Winfield even with an exculpatory chit from our revered monarch's Master in Lunacy.

I produced tea and sat with him at the all-purpose table. He trusted me, craved my confidence and counsel, felt that together we could crack the cases that nudged him slightly round the bend and depressed the tits from him.

Derek was obsessed with the Piss Industry Murders and kept asking dumb questions that I had answered, or not, a thousand times before.

After about ten eternal minutes of this tripe I was ready to go in search of WonderBar and give shithead a fatal flogging on the spot but, luckily for him, I couldn't remember where the bloody thing was.

My eyes wandered the domestic dump seeking a suitable substitute when the portable telephone had a conniption fit and spewed vile noise into my trouser.

It was Kemel and he spoke in low, serious tones.

"It's me. Are you alone?"

I spoke back in high, frivolous tones.

"Not at all," I trilled. "I'm having a chat and cuppa with my mate Derek."

“Not that dipshit detective?”

“The very same.”

Derek stared blankly at the table, the very model of a modern major dipshit.

“Can you get rid of it?”

“Love to.”

“Good. I’ve got a buyer for that product we discussed. How long before you can bring it round to The Office?”

“Forty five minutes?”

“Brilliant,” he chuckled, clearly delighted by my efficiency and resolve. “Do that.”  
Kemel disconnected his device.

I pissed Derek off, shat, showered, shaved, buzzed on vaguely respectable gear, fished naughty produce from the fake chimney, bunged it in a Lo-Mart bag, fucked off sharpish and made it to Mad Bob’s with five minutes to spare.

This was all going very well.

## *XLI*

ABOUT TWO hours later an unusually taciturn Kemel, Mo and I were parked near the rainbow rear entrance of Mrs. Tiggiwinkle’s Tiny Tot Day Care in the wankqué manqué upwardly mobile ghetto of Nongerville.

Nice day but, as they say in the classics.

I had my trusty Lo-Mart bag of precious drugs perched on my knees.

The silence needed breaking.

“Kemel,” I ventured, “why are we parked near the rear entrance of Mrs. Tiggiwinkle’s Tiny Tot Day Care in the wankqué manqué upwardly mobile ghetto of Nongerville?”

Kemel checked his watch and glanced about for eavesdroppers but seemed relieved to discuss our curious location.

“Because Mrs. Tiggiwinkle is the secret identity of local councillor and prominent business identity Doreen Ngo,” he started to explain. “Doreen is not only as tough as goat knees but one of the most successful suppliers of illegal shit this side of the harbour.

“Tiny Tot itself makes almost as much money as the dope. Among other things Doreen’s got a former Polish sex slave called Doris as manager supplying half the district’s mothers and a fair number of fathers with one service or another. Blackmail doesn’t do the bottom line any harm.

“Any trouble, Doris fucks off and Doreen know nothing. It’s bloody brilliant really. Wish I’d thought of it.”

“Gosh.”

Kemel checked his watch again.

“Let’s go.”

I saw Mrs. Ngo but briefly. This glimpse was more than enough. The hideous shrivelled old fungus was about a hundred and four in the shade and a virtual dwarf. She wore preposterous stiletto heels and an ill-fitting, repulsive green jump suit thing that would have affronted sensibilities on someone half her age. Her mercifully limited uncovered areas, I hesitate to call it flesh, looked like ricotta that had died slowly drying in the sun. The nightmarish vision was topped with a gloss black Beetle wig that appeared to be of plaster. Her makeup could have been applied with a live and fractious echidna.

You wouldn't want to meet Mrs. Ngo on a dark night, or at any other fucking time come to that. There was, I suppose, a grim inevitability to her life of crime given the paucity of legitimate employment opportunities for the missing link 'twixt the human race and a three-foot mound of earwax.

At her shoulder stood a besuited mountain of Chinese muscle with a cool briefcase. This behemoth effortlessly exuded enough hostility to drive a minor civil war.

Mrs. Ngo's physical long, medium and shortcomings did not prevent her looking at your correspondent like something loosed from the innards of a distempered dingo across a priceless Persian carpet.

With marginally less disfavour she eyed Kemel and croaked: "Come," in a voice as smooth as textured concrete.

Then Mrs. Ngo, Kemel, Mo, Muscle and the Lo-Mart bag disappeared into Mrs. Tiggiwinkle's kindy kitchen. The door closed and I was left in a blinding, baking play area to be stared at by a bunch of over privileged rug rats.

Little bastards.

It was a good ten minutes before my colleagues and the Lo-Mart bag reappeared and I, having relapsed into a profoundly shitty phase of last night's indulgence, was much pissed off having been subject to savage, disrespectful, frequently obscene and wholly uncalled for chiacking from the stunted scumbags.

Doreen Ngo was not seen again. Just as fucking well really.

Kemel headed straight for the rear exit with a head as grim as an Easter Island statue. Mo followed. I fell in behind.

Once beyond the premises, midway to the car, Kemel stopped.

"Doreen Ngo is a tight arsed bitch and wouldn't spring a cent over six hundred and fifty large for the bloody lot," my employer opined. "She totally refused to give me the tasty briefcase her Gorilla carried the cash in and my Dad wants ten per cent. Any problems?"

"None," said I with glee barely contained.

Kemel continued: "Six hundred and fifty large, by my reckoning, is two hundred and ninety two thousand five hundred for you, two hundred and ninety two thousand five hundred for me and sixty five grand for the Old Man. It's all in the Lo-Mart bag and it's a pleasure doing business."

My senior associate may enjoy the wit of a wombat but he did know how to get his hooks into six hundred and fifty thousand of Australia's finest clams. More to the point, he knew how to get *my* hooks into two hundred and ninety two thousand five hundred of those clams. Apart from the briefcase element there was nothing in the least woeful about these announcements.

"You fucking beauty!" I announced as we walked back to the motor with lightness of step, joy in the heart and a mind at peace.

"What a fucking team," Kemel chortled. "The fucking Odd Couple."

Back at Mad Bob's things had calmed and the ghouls had largely evaporated.

Kemel, in excellent spirits, sent Sarila for celebratory coffee and jam doughnuts and assured me there would be more substantial celebration that night. If all went to plan we would remember little. He urged me to bugger off for a brief but refreshing exhalation of zeds, a siesta if you will, or risk grave consequences of over-indulgence.

I concurred.

He pledged to sort out the cash and Mo would drop it off when he collected me from The Unit at eight that night.

"Try not to look like a bag of shit tied with string," Kemel counseled cheerily and handed me a doughnut. "Invite that magazine bint you fancy if you like."

Ah Dawn. The lovely Dawn, all-important health and wellbeing correspondent of unborn CityZen Magazine, she specifically charged with thinking outside the spiritual square, whatever the fuck that meant.

Circumstance had compelled me to thrust all thought and action involving The Lovely Dawn to the back burner of a hectic life of disorganised crime but her details nestled, neatly folded, next my heart.

Steps needed to be taken.

Something had to be done.

While I was mulling this matter, unsettling thoughts stole over me, my deep-fried confectionery and long black, as they do.

One cannot, it is said, judge a book by its cover. How was I to know what was going on underneath Dawn's clothes?

I readily confess to a certain putty-like susceptibility when it comes to the unfair sex.

Perhaps I was deluding myself, subject to some strange sort-specific psychosis, and the creature I felt convinced to be exquisite was, in fact, as ugly as a hatful. Stranger things have happened. Who knows?

Given the miracles performed by the modern make-up artist, to say nothing of those adepts of nano and computer technology, how could I be sure that something awful did not lurk beneath that comely exterior?

How?

The truth my friend, for now my friend and co-conspirator must you surely be, is that I could not be sure that something awful did not lurk beneath.

However much of a worthless gobshite you might happen to be, it is distressing to consider, in this day and age, that there are times when only unseemly fumbblings will do!

Distressing!

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that I could deftly fill Dawn with enough piss to get her to a private place, perhaps the stationery store of a substantial business enterprise. Perhaps I could engineer this woman into a horizontal position. Let us say that as she lay stonkered in the stationery store I was to be found pulling off her uncooperative trousers – she favoured tight, dark trousers, which became her well – and as each hand pulled a trouser leg I became aware of another garment beneath. Not undergarments as such but, let us say, another, smaller pair of hidden trousers. Let us say that, having pulled off the outer trouser, I pulled off the inner secret trouser and found another, smaller, secret trouser therein and then another. I would start to be greatly alarmed. My pulse would pound. My teeth would grind. My eyes would bug with bewilderment and I would cast my haunted gaze about and start at any sound. Persp would prick my brow and other parts.

Would I dare peer beneath the habit of her torso? Would I find layer on layer on layer on layer and, finally something carrion-like and foul beyond description?

Would I?

Enough of this. Back to my chilling speculation and those tighter trousers as advertised.

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that I pulled away those tighter trousers, as advertised, and found more trousers and then more. Thinner and thinner she would get as trouser after trouser peeled away. Thinner and still thinner and still more trouser yet to peel. Where would this nightmare end?

I'll tell you where it would end. It would end with a hideous human carcass, trouserless and pissed on the floor of some stainless corporation's stationery store. It would look like a skinned cat. Would it writhe and moan?

Freed of support from trousers, and sapped of will by excess alcohol, would false flesh fall off in techno-lumps? Would Dawn, still partly patched with bogus beauty, open her eyes and look up at me? Would this flayed abomination have needs? Would I spew?

Would I?

There was every chance.

This was not a consummation devoutly to be wished. This ghastly possibility needed serious thought.

The stoutest stomach would find such a situation unsettling and I had no intention of rushing in where ghastly fuckwits feared to prance.



No way, Hose!

This was no time for lust-fuelled folly.

Jam dripped from my doughnut and ran down my wrist. I remembered that I had left WonderBar in this very place of business with the crap in the cleaning cupboard.

## *XLII*

NOT ENTIRELY chipper on the way to The Unit and this deficit was clearly the result of too much piss, too little sleep, too much bobbing, an extravagance of weaving, deep cogitation, shallow cops, vile chastity, celebration, coffee, crime, caprice, contempt, curiosity, clandestine activity, concupiscence, cannabis, conniving, incredible good fortune, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Too little sleep and too much everything else.

Except women.

Too little sleep, too few women and too much everything else.

The thought of a swift joint and two or three hours of restorative slumber was most appealing.

Kemel retained my Lo-Mart Eco bag because it was full of money illegally obtained and gave off alluring vibrations but I had a brown paper bag from Mad Bob's wrapped around WonderBar which, despite the prevailing dearth of chipper, I had tucked under my arm like a military swagger stick.

I trudged through the familiar Archie "Bonko" Graves Reserve, not on the top path looking down as I had that blinding morning when I saw that thing like a bladder. No. I was down in the dale of that public space, still not entirely chipper, when that bladder incident struck the mind as a turning point in my history and fortunes.

Things seemed to improve from that day forth.

Funny really.

Perhaps it was just simply that I had grown weary of being constantly led around by the arse.

At an educated guess I would anticipate rapid flattening of any initial acceptance of, even stifled enthusiasm for, constant leading by the arse.

One's sensory organs are not equal to the need. Pain, consternation and embittered vanities are the lot of he, or she, yea even the brute beasts of the field, given to constant leading by the arse.

To be completely candid, I don't like to think about it.

This day, however, I was a different man. I was down in the reserve itself making my way along life's gravel path.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

Trudge, trudge, trudge.

And as I drew near that eyesore bandstand where all the perverts go, and not for the first time, I experienced an interesting thought. This was not, of course, an

interesting thought about perverts, necessarily, or, indeed, bandstands but an interesting thought, one of many in a long and sporadically eventful life, that just happened to be had, on this occasion, in the vicinity of the appalling bandstand to which perverts inclined.

I do not know why perverts favoured the bandstand more than, say, the little cluster of huts near the tennis courts but they did. Thankfully I do not know or care if they practiced their perversion on or near the bandstand but they were certainly vile perverts and seemed drawn to this municipal monstrosity as flies to a midden.

Authorities seemed powerless to resist a powerful pervert presence. Perhaps these Authorities were in league with the perverts. Nothing would surprise me. Who knows?

The fact remained that by the time I emerged from the precincts of Mr. Graves's commemorative reserve my interesting thought had matured to an impressive plan of action with but a few elements to be confirmed.

On the spur of the moment I decided that this impressive plan would be known simply as Plan A. It was a radical plan. A radical change of direction for me and others and of a magnitude of fiendishness hitherto unconsidered.

Details of this impressive plan will not be made available until a time deemed appropriate by the management.

Plan A it would be then.

## *XLIII*

A POOTLY upholstered cesspit at the best of times, The Unit looked more squalid than ever on my return: dingy, dirty, strewn with shite and altogether unfit for porcine occupation.

An unknown prick, or pricks, had shoved several little hand scrawled notes under the front door. I ignored these impertinences on principal but my attention was immediately caught by the hitherto unnoticed Flasher Raincoat that deolali Detective Sergeant Derek had left draped over the chair he occupied during his wearisome visit earlier that day.

Cunning lad; after but a moment of consideration I was pleased to believe this garment could assist in the fleshing out of the impressive Plan A, briefly alluded to above.

Heh-heh-heh.

Somewhere in the domestic wreckage, organic matter had sufficiently raced past its Discard With Tongs date that I was quite prepared to find someone or something dead in the debris.

That would put the wife amongst the incandescent gasses, I thought and my eyes twinkled with fiendish contemplation.

Hasty investigation, held simultaneously with the desire to locate a functioning alarm clock, failed to find a corpse but someone, probably Oscar Lung, had thrown up in a waste paper basket and someone else, probably that ersatz hippy photographer prick Damian Sleazo, had stored much of a doner kebab behind a cushion.

In the interests of health and safety I moved the puke to the balcony and tossed the kebab in the wake of Rancid the Cat.

A furious foreign tongue launched a torrent of obscenity from the depths without.

A functioning alarm clock was found, for reasons unknown, in the microwife along with soiled items of underwear and a plastic box of mature food probably of Asian extraction.

Availing myself of the clever horological apparatus in my portable telephone, I set the alarm clock for six that evening, thus allowing two wakeful hours to ready myself for the night's celebrations.

I flushed the miniature Chinese garden and some nightmarish socks on their way to wreak environmental havoc on our acclaimed coastal areas and poured myself a restorative cup of Satan's Piss.

Craphouse conditions notwithstanding, I felt a gratifying increase in personal chipper supplies and, over a well wrought joint, concluded that, despite a distressing hour or twain of decline, my pecker was elevated.

Should I contact the lovely Dawn?

Later.

I fell to the virtuous couch (fuck it!) and was out like a light.

At six on the dot that evening the alarm clock went ballistic and refused to be silent even having been hurled from my place of shattered repose to leave a significant ding on the bedroom wall.

Fuck The Landlord. There was no fucking way I was getting my bastard bond back anyway. Why not seek value for money?

A vigorous application of WonderBar to the timepiece brought peace and I was up and about.

Good old WonderBar.

I cast an eye over those little bloody notes shoved under The Unit door earlier. There were seven in all and each came from the pen of grovelling media trash wishing to gather pearls from my lips re. recent violent deaths and, in one case, looming cultural bilge under the CityZen banner. Each scribbler and television spokesjerk implored me to telephone at the earliest opportunity and implied that it would be much to my advantage so to do.

These grubby wankers, I thought, could get profoundly fucked and consider themselves fortunate if I could spare time for their knavery tomorrow.

By the time eight-o'clock rolled around, and with it the chillingly prompt Mo, I was as stoned as an Iranian adulteress but looking distinctly stylish in a cream linen suit, a scant thirty bucks from St. Vincent's, that I saved for special occasions.

Mo handed over the trusty Lo-Mart bag and I had no reason to doubt the bubble wrap therein contained no more and no less than two hundred and ninety two thousand five hundred splendid Australian dollars and all of them were mine.

I popped the cheering bundle in the microwife for safety and off we jolly well fucked.

Our evening started with refreshment at The Flaming Fez where Mo ceased to be a humble chauffeur and joined Kemel and I as well-heeled lads on the town and up for anything.

The enormous Arthur took over as transport and security manager.

What a lark! This was the life!

## *XLIV*

IT IS bootless, gentle reader, to enter into grisly detail of that Wednesday morn. Suffice it to say that I woke, bootless and exposed to the world, sprawled behind the shitty, flasher-style bush that sheltered Derek Mehmet before he went mental, and allowed him to lurk, like a bastard unseen, in the execution of his duty and spy on Kemel and Mo fucking about in the street.

I could have been greatly compromised by this al fresco kip so close to the Building Of Residence, or B.O.R.

Dogs could have pissed on me!

Clearly, for reasons of frail flesh and celebratory excess, I had been unable to make it to the unit block front door. My sleep had been deep and dreamless. The thrilling shade of my Scandinavian Succubus did not visit me or even call through dream emptiness.

Fuck knows where the boots went. It must have been a good night.

It was but a modest stagger to the shelter of my residence (handy for shitty bushes, shops, public transport, pissing dogs, pubs and sudden, violent, unexpected death) and thence the place of not particularly sweet repose.

The filthy shithole was unchanged.

Well, what the fuck would you expect?

Through the almost welcome insulation of a monumental hangover I dozed and drifted through semi-sleep with relative indifference to hammerings at the door, insistent voices and work-a-day clatterings without, a few janglings of the resident telephone and an oily residue of responsibility for undefined Things To Do.

Despite this semi-conscious state, I was gently aware that, for self-preservation and advancement, I need only respond to Kemel or his myrmidons on the mobile

telephone. His name would show on the little screen, which was handy. The rest could get thoroughly fucked.

At some horrible point or other I wheezed alarmingly, jerked about a bit and muttered coal-black gibberish, rolled off the bed and staggered around the shit heap moaning, coughing up jellied lumps and smoking like a fucking maniac; banging into crap with attendant dull pain, chucking down the last super-charged paracetamol and mugs of disgusting coffee-like shit.

A brief encounter with the microwife prompted me to remove my delightful two hundred and ninety two thousand five hundred dollars from her care and secrete them up the fake chimney.

That perked me up a bit. I slumped at the table.

The portable telephone went off a few times while I was in the crapper. Disgusting coffee-like shit and a couple of fags followed.

It was fuck-knows-o-clock and I'd just hit the point where a restorative joint seemed a fair thing. I'd even started fumbling about the tabletop debris for some bastard papers when that poxy portable phone sounded again and, brain damaged oaf that I was, I answered it.

Fucking Derek Mehmet.

Under the circumstances there was only one thing worse than fucking Derek Mehmet and that was actually *fucking* Derek Mehmet. I could hear the dumb cunt gabbling away but could make no sense of it. Perhaps he wanted his flasher raincoat back. Tough shit.

"You're breaking up Derek," I managed and, with the utmost concentration, I pushed the little red telephone button business and Derek was silenced and quiet in my thoughts.

It took about half an hour to put together a vaguely respectable number and I sat on the balcony to consume same thinking about the dainty way the smoke curled and eddied and absolutely fuck all else.

Then came banging. Thump, thump, bloody thump. Inconsiderate pond scum, clearly ignorant of the fate of those Liberal fools facing a frenzied Sri Lankan and pedestal fan, was thumping on my door.

I kept my trap shut but this impertinent and excited cacophony of portal percussion did not cease.

Then came the voice.

"Rex! Rex!" it cried. "Open up Rex. You won't believe this! It's a miracle!"

I did believe it. It was not a miracle. It was that worthless clot Derek Mehmet.

Had I not felt so fucking woeful, had Derek and his flasher raincoat no significant part to play in Plan A, had I not temporarily misplaced WonderBar and had I not, but recently, strewn the surroundings with suspicious stiffs, had these things not been so I

would have thumped that fucker to a bloody pulp on the spot and bollocks to the consequences.

I determined to play it cool and, cucumber-like, stuffed the flasher coat and spliff materials in the faithful microwife, staggered to the door and flung it wide.

“Mate!” I cried, coughing slightly with the effort. I clung to the architrave for valuable support and noted great change in the Detective since last we met.

Derek, shaved and shorn, firm of bearing, less puffy, smart in a medium grey, light-weight suit, nice navy cardigan, clean white business shirt, black socks and moccasins the hue of porridge, eyed my debilitated self with a combination of chuckleheaded compassion and dozy dismay. It was extraordinary really. He had a weird, well scrubbed, glazed, cheerfully brain-damaged look. Was it new medication? New lack of medication? Perhaps Jesus wanted him for a sunbeam. That was it. He looked like he’d joined the victims of the Mormon pandemic.

I got in quick. “Excuse my tardiness responding to your summons, mate, but I feel shocking.”

Wheeze, wheeze.

“You look don’t look your best,” said Derek apprehensively. “These have been trying times. We have all been tested and found wanting.”

“Must have been something I ate,” I ventured, “and all the stress of recent events.”

“Only natural,” he remarked.

I led the twat in and sat him down as before.

I was already regretting this. Room and contents had taken on a rubbery quality, the lighting was being done by computer and suddenly I was alive to a prodigious palate of putrid pongs that permeated the place.

Derek had a fixed, fuckwit smile and looked like one about to launch a prayer meeting. In a way he was.

A good chuck might have helped.

“Listen to me, Rex,” Derek spoke like Moses by Cecil B. de Mille out of Charlton Heston.

Who the fuck was I to interrupt?

Derek’s tone grew more intimate. “A thing has happened this day that will live in my ongoing memory, and be celebrated in it, for the length and breadth of my memory. It is a miracle. A miracle, Rex. The miracle we all hardly dared hope to imagine possible in our wildest dreams.”

I didn’t much like the sound of this.

“I’ve been trying to get hold of you for an eternity.”

“Steady on,” I cautioned, trying not to giggle. I can be quite ill-disciplined at times.

He went on: “I hardly dared hope and, hopeless, could hardly remember hope. No more.

“It must have started when you were last at Prince Phillip’s Hospital, when you were on the very premises! Progress. The constant climb. Slowly the miracle has unfurled.”

“Has it?”

“Rex, just as you last departed the hospital premises, Andy Carter tasted the foothills of a miraculous recovery. Doctors are baffled, Rex. Baffled. Turning him off is no longer an issue. Experts canvass the imminent lifting of the medically induced coma. The pelvis will never function as nature intended but there is hope that Andy might recover several significant areas of physical function and might not be a vegetable. Several!’

“I hoped against hope. It is a miracle of our times. Mrs. Carter is elated of course. For one who dared not hope, there was now no turning back.

“As soon as it was clear this miraculous miracle was more than mere wishful thinking, I made every effort to bring you glad tidings. Frequently. But you could not be found. Time and again those vital vital signs grew stronger. Things got better faster than anyone could hope. That’s what I call a miracle.”

My eyes stung with water and I was starting to snort with contemptuous laughter. Bloody inappropriate, I know, but what could a bloke do?

Derek the Drongo interpreted this suppressed hilarity as an effusion of finer emotion.

“I’ve been going out a lot,” I sniffled. “All hours. Walking the streets in search of . . . “ I was about to say “hope and meaning” but sudden hilarity made me catch my breath and snot snort from my nose. I dabbed at the mucus with a letter from the council and eventually managed a lame: “Walking helps me think.”

“Against all odds” Dickhead rattled on, “Andy is partially back with us with a fighting chance and a vengeance. Something more than just hopeless miracles. Back with a future.”

Fuck me, he went on.

“Back, Rex. Back from the brink. There’s a way to go. A mighty long way. There’s rough country ahead. I hope no one knows that better than I. These are but wrinkles near the foothills of hope but now we have hope here, Rex. Hope. And it is real. It is wrinkled. It is now. It is here.”

He went on being silly. As you know, I would be pleased for Andy to recover from his horrendous accident. Somehow it gave me leave to slaughter the fucker with all appropriate planning, attention to detail, judgement, pleasure and satisfaction.

Derek was still going. “You must not overtax your resources but if your own health allows, Rex, and only you can judge, could you rush to the bedside of hope? I have a vehicle primed and will have you there in minutes. You are a part of this miracle Rex. I know you will do what is right.”

“You’ve made my day, Derek,” was all I could manage between sobs of stifled mirth.

Not for the first time Kemel’s moveable telephone came to the rescue. It was Kemel.

“I am utterly fucked,” said he with sincerity.

“Me too,” said I. “Devastated.”

“You sound fucking awful,” said Kemel. “Get some sleep and I’ll call you later.”

“Thanks. Same to you.”

I disconnected the device. I had to take charge of this situation and fuck Derek off.

## *XLV*

IT WAS true about the recovery.

## *XLVI*

THE SCENE at the Miracle Bedside was one sufficient to make a tapeworm puke.

I blamed much of the fucking nonsense on Christine Carter’s crackpot brother Vincent who, you might recall, was some species of vicar or priest and actually wore the gear. In his Supercilious Moron for Jesus capacity, he was jerking the assembled turkeys into a fun-free frenzy.

If they were so fucking happy, why did they keep moaning in that dreary, light on detail way?

I resolved to do Vincent over at the earliest opportunity and fucked off ASAP pleading physical and emotional exhaustion. Given other circs I might have lurked and had a laugh but my star was in the ascendant. I was a man going places.

Back to The Unit as it turned out.

The boils had been covered up a bit but Christine still looked shocking. There was no doubt, however, that Andy, fucked though he remained, was looking a fuck’s sight better than when last we had the displeasure. He had more fabrics covering him up for a start.

Much of Andy’s bruising had abated and someone had glued a big fleshy patch over the worst of the head damage. All the shit had been washed off. Shaven bald, out like a light and breathing through some hose, he was now bolted in a species of metal framework with strings and weights and ratchets and pulleys. A slightly better pallor, he appeared to be plugged into fewer gadgets and the wavy lines were more relaxed and comfortable.

One of his feet still pointed the wrong way.

As a balm to the spirit I walked back through the darkneses of the Archie “Bonko” Graves Reserve and suddenly found myself kicking the crap out of a derelict



found sleeping under a suitable bush. He didn't say much in the way of supplication or remonstrance but punctuated a moaned continuo with sharp grunts each time I sank the trainer.

I had been forced into this vile footwear by boot loss experienced during last night's frivolities.

For reasons that will probably remain forever unknown, I confined my Derro Booting Commentary to the word: "Mutant," muttered over and over in a harsh, low, thuggish sort of voice.

This spontaneous derelict walloping was something of a departure for yours truly. I strode satisfied from the scene but resolved to be more circumspect should the need arise again.

I treated myself to sweet and sour dog balls and a rice-based fry-up – it's amazing how they do it for the money - and carried it back to The Unit where it steamed weakly in its transparent troughs waiting for me to roll its marijuana accompaniment.

Fork in one hand, joint in t'other, Satan Piss handy, I set to close perusal of those pages removed earlier from Andy Carter's cardboard File of Filth on the citizens of CityZen. You might recall that these pages concerned my health and wellbeing correspondent Dawn.

Her name was Dawn Guddmansdottir and she had been born thirty one years earlier just outside Uppsala in Sweden where I imagine the regional population could be pushing a goodly half-million these days.

I could take or leave Guddmansdottir but I rather liked the smutty, Music Hall ring of Uppsala.

With the exception of Ingmar Bergman, Sweden itself, for all its geological age and stability, held nothing but pleasing and liberal associations for me culled primarily from the popular media.

Dawn lived with a cat at 109 Mons Street, Newtville.

Hardly any distance at all and an area renowned for licensed premises, back alleys and dubious minorities. All good. "With a cat" implied without humans. Mons Street implied Newtville. Hardly any distance at all.

Dawn had two telephone numbers as, indeed, did I.

At the age of ten. Dawn's father Stig, a creature of the diplomatic service, was transferred to Berlin and the family left the draughty nooks of Uppsala for five years among the edgy Teutons of that inestimable metropolis.

The Berlin experience, Dawn believed, instilled in her a love of travel that persisted to the time of her writing.

There were three close-typed pages of this stuff. A mine of information that I but skimmed in my desire to get to the Hobbies section.

Goteborg University. Stockholm Royal Dramatic Theatre. Admin assistant and deputy publicist. India. Bloody yoga. South East Asia. Stockholm. Some kind of

scribbling. London. Magazines. California. Alternative therapies, fringe health crap. Ireland. Brief marriage. London. Hoopla: Uppsala! Tuscany. Australia. You can take the Swede out of Sweden but the same cannot be said for those Welsh. There would be endless confusion at such arbitrary use of language.

The hobbies were disappointing really: blobs of culture, health issues and fucking environmental bullshit, but, deep down, I was confident these semi-public admissions but brushed the surface. Mercifully the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden was not mentioned.

Her next of kin was Mrs. Hilder Gladstrupp, Mother, who resided in bloody Cardiff of all places.

Obviously The Mother had ditched Stig one way or another and hooked up with some leech called Gladstrupp and a life in bloody Cardiff of all places. Unless, of course, there was more to this than met the page.

I didn't much care for this Gladstrupp fellow, poking Dawn's Old Mum.

I have known The Welsh and find them no more, no less ghastly than any other mob. It is history and environment that made them small.

"As bugged as a Welshman," was a common expression in parts of Yorkshire and many – and many of its number – view Welshness as a handicap but they can be darkly persuasive and deeply duplicitous.

Amongst those who could give a flying fuck, the unpopular popular image of The Welsh combines, amongst other things, an intense desire for drink, rat-like cunning and a brooding madness. In my experience this image is far from inaccurate but I have seen several Welsh grow noisy and eccentrically obtrusive when thwarted.

This conniving Gladstrupp interloper - I like to think of him as Taffy – could well identify as Welsh, for had he not drawn Dawn's Old Mum off to fucking Cardiff, for Christ's sake?!

Whom, but a Welshman, would consider that normal behaviour?

It is for others to decide if undue influence was brought to bear on the respected, free-thinking Mrs. Guddmansdottir of Uppsala to shun Sweden and its stimulating Swedes for Wales and its wild and woolly Welsh.

To those who say that a Welsh, for all its petulant feral qualities, must engage in a continuous, often damaging, dialogue with the concept of Mindless Obedience, I say this: "Think about it. The mines are all but dead and with them qualities valued by several. I am told that few things are more horrible than a full-on *eisteddfod* actually happening in Wales. Have you *seen* a bard recently? Those persons have no fucking idea."

This Cardiff business didn't sit well with me.

I resolved to make inquiry on the Welsh Issue of my friend, colleague and underling Ms Dawn Guddmansdottir at the earliest opportunity.

Dawn's tax file number revealed nothing but digits to this lay observer.

I shoveled the last of the Chinese crap, folded the Dawn pages with care and insinuated them up the fake chimney with my other precious stuff.

Kemel didn't call.

I move minor landmarks in the domestic shitscape and, tiring rapidly, watch episodes of "Cracker" McCracken in *Invaders From Planet X*. Somewhere in the early passages of Episode Three I crash before the flickering, gabbling screen.

## *XLVII*

DIDN'T FEEL too shocking on Thursday morning. This was just as well for I expected a full and eventful day. By the power of Mental Discipline I actually woke at nine a.m. so the day was off to an exceptional start.

Out of fucking Wheetie shit and the milk looks like pureed tripe. No bastard clean plates, no sanitary bowls, saucers, fucking wide-throated jugs, tureens, platters, trenchers, chalices and shit were available for my use.

Bollocks to this. I had to snap out of it and get acting fiendishly.

You would have forgotten about Fat Eddie's funeral of course.

Unless the corpse clotted *post mortem*, the remains of the revolting oaf were getting in a final earthly wobble before going up in greasy smoke the very next day.

If all went to plan it was up the crematorium at about one thirty for the bake-off and social niceties and down The Town Hall for three p.m., lashings of piss, hand-held food, emotional fireworks and, what with all the turmoil, a few dazed women getting unexpectedly rogered.

Fat Eddie's funeral was tomorrow, Friday, Plan A Day, and today being Thursday it behoved me to busy myself. Nevertheless, for such a huge, ugly and intrusive fucker in life, death found Fat Eddie to be agreeably forgettable and his revolting memory faded fast. Death cut him down to size and beyond.

It is, my friend, perfectly natural that you should forget Fat Eddie's funeral. Fat Eddie had become a seriously forgettable fucker.

But I could not forget Fat Eddie's funeral for, around it, revolved my plan previously designated Plan A and known as such.

Plan A was not some flash-in-the-pan plan but detailed and boldly crafted mayhem that required a certain amount of reconnaissance and preparation. I had arranged with Kemel for two days off the Crime Roster to prepare for and experience The Big Event. He was cool with that.

Nothing had been said at the bedside circus but I assumed Christine Carter still planned to sign over the mastery of CityZen Discorporated to your man, here, meself, during the piss up.

It would add a piquant touch, indeed, to Plan A.

Andy may have experienced a measure of Miracle Recovery but he was well fucked for the foreseeable future and, despite optimistic utterances, the veggie option

was still on the table. It was only a matter of time before I did the fucker myself anyway. As far as I was concerned, the moment Andy Carter achieved a fair level of consciousness, and I didn't want to be too rigid about definitions here, his days were well numbered. I'll have him sooner rather than later.

I showered and could not find clean clothes. Fucking laundry.

Some garments showed less offence than others so I put together a tasteful ensemble of jeans and a sort of shirt Hamlet might have worn. On second thoughts: it made me look like a knobhead so I found an Hawaiian-style shirt depicting vivid foliage of sufficient energy to conceal a multitude of stains, unless you got close and knew what to look for.

I also found a nifty pair of boots that I'd completely forgotten I had.

My heart leapt up to behold these smooth, stylishly retro items, not only for themselves but because yesterday's trainers had become seriously besmirched with forensically valuable gloop that came out of that Derelict in the Archie "Bonko" Graves Reserve.

Didn't see *that* coming.

The trainers copped a scrub with Draino and fifteen minutes in the microwife. This, I judged, might seriously discourage any DNA festering away in the warp and weft. In fact the active footwear came out of the process seriously fucked, all knobbly and shrivelled. They also stank to high heaven.

I cut them in pieces with a bread knife and boiled the remnants, with sundry household products, in a saucepan. I thought that the right thing to do.

I needed to be at Mad Bob's Bottle Magic.

First stop: Mario's. The All-day Big Breakfast and flesh-eating espresso, I think.

Having temporarily assuaged the needs of the Grease and Caffeine food groups, it was full speed for Mad Bob's, pausing only to pick up one of those nineteen-ninety-five smoky plastic storage trunks with lid from Ronnie Grimm's Happy Lucky Discount Bonanza Emporium. You'd get a good few litres in one of those.

Kemel was lolling about at Mad Bob's, perving idly behind the cash register. The little bastard Adnan was dawdling near Budget Whites looking sullen and the youthful pervee offside Sarila was rendered no less toothsome as she stacked fags in a rack exuding an aura of pent-up issues.

The atmosphere wasn't great but Kemel perked up as I entered.

"G'day Fuckface," he announced. "Why aren't you at this fat bastard's fucking funeral? What's the box for?"

I hailed him "Wanker" and explained that I was, e'en now, preparing for the fat bastard's funeral tomorrow, the box was for putting stuff in and I wanted two cases of cheap vodka on staff discount to kick in and gain kudos from the piss up to follow.

"Take a couple of cases of that Nigerian rubbish," Kemel advised generously. "A mark of respect from all at Mad Bob's. Forget the money but don't make a habit."

I displayed suitable gratitude. This was a generous gesture.

“I’m glad you came in today,” Kemel observed eyeing me with eyeing eyes. “Dad’s legal hoons tell me that your magazine seems kosher but won’t turn a zac ‘til pussy comes in aerosol cans. Is that mad moll still handing it over, no strings?”

I said that, as far as I was concerned, the deed would be done within twenty four hours. There were papers and everything.

“What your cultural magazine needs,” Kemel opined, “is a radical purge of idiots and a serious injection of criminality. I’ve been thinking about it.”

“That could open many interesting avenues of profitable endeavour,” I responded cautiously. “Can I borrow the van?”

## *XLVIII*

FOR THE benefit of the wonderful and enthralling climax intended for this memoir, for which no expense will be spared, I shall not go into the detail of the further reconnaissance and preparation undertaken that day in furtherance of my excellent scheme known as Plan A.

Suffice it to say that R&P was considerable and no sooner had I apparently delivered Kemel’s twenty four bottle donation of Vongo to the capacious cellars of The Town Hall Hotel, along with useful items covertly couriered in a convenient Lo-Mart Bag, than was I distracted by fucking Derek Mehmet hanging about the bar, drinking shandy in moderation and eating a fucking pie, no less.

What a taxing day this was turning out to be.

“I’m glad we bumped into one another, Rex,” said Derek in a wholesome, manly voice that made my flesh creep. “Our news gets better all the time. It is good news and we should spread it like butter.”

“Better?” I trilled.

“The Miracle just keeps growing.”

“Really?”

“Andy is defying all the odds.”

“All of them?”

“Rex, I know you are a vital cog in Eddie’s obsequies tomorrow. You are stretched to the limit in time and endurance. No man could have done more to inspire awe. But this is a time of wonders and if you could, at some point, spare another precious moment for The Miracle Bedside you will behold a wonder of our time.”

“Will I?”

“Seeing is believing. Hope is born anew.”

“Is it?”

“I truly believe so.”

This conversation was tits up from the start. I had to get away.

“Derek,” I said, “mate; I’m flat to the boards with Fat Eddie and I’m troubled by environmental considerations. I only hope the lads at The Crem know what they’re up against. Some things must be accomplished at the proper time. To every thing there is a season. My thoughts are constantly with Andy but at this tense time I cannot indulge personal whim even to be with that remarkable man at this particular time for every purpose.”

Derek looked as if I’d kicked his puppy.

“Derek . . . Bro . . .” I improvised. “The instant my funerary duties are done, and I do need to get some dry cleaning sorted, I pledge a rush to Andy’s side with joyous determination little short of a miracle itself. None will bar my passage. These miracles we hear so much about have done wonders for my wellbeing. Energy levels through the roof.”

Derek looked impressed. He leaned next my ear and whispered like a grass.

“We are at a crossroads, my friend,” the medically unfit for duty Detective susurrated. Susurrous bastard! “These are times of hope that can turn a bloke’s life right around.”

“Did the quacks pick up on that leg pointing the wrong way” I asked, “I thought that looked quite disconcerting and needed attention. Andy will have enough issues to confront without whacky leg business.”

I don’t know how I didn’t piss myself with laughter.

“The leg, “ Derek whispered on, “has been attended to. Psychologically having the leg on the right way round will help enormously in the struggle to come. But this is much more than mere leg action. Much, much more.”

I almost lost it there.

“You must see this for yourself, Rex. My vigil is but rarely broken for fear of missing some major miracle milestone. They come at such a pace as to astound the mind of man. You may never see anything like this again!”

The bloke was well fucking frazzled but I applied a swift: “The sooner I get out of here, the sooner I can be with you all in person. Watch over him Derek, for me, and I shall be with him in spirit until I can join him in the flesh.”

Derek didn’t seem to find anything odd about that but he did screw up his thick face with heartfelt screwing. We stood. A sturdy handshake, a tentative outline of a comradely hug, and I was gone.

Well out of there.

A right fucking day this was turning out to be. I was just about to start driving the van back to Mad Bob’s when The Master rang in person.

“Where’s that fucking van?” asked Kemel.

“Slump Street, Master,” I reported. “I was just about to drive the thing back.”

“Fuck me,” quoth Kemel, “are you expecting royalty at this barbie? There’s been national economies less complicated than this!”

I did not deny it.

“Anyway, get your finger out,” Kemel suggested. “I need that van for some . . . produce. It’s needed in Parramatta half-an-hour ago.”

“Ten-four Wing-co,” I chirruped like Biggles or Kingsford-Smith or that little legless fucker in that noisy film. “Chocks away, we’re heading home! Warm up a waitress for me, Wing-co.

“Home in time for tea! Blighty, here we come!”

“What the fuck are you gibbering about?”

“Over and out.”

“I’m working with dead-set fucking nutters,” he announced by way of *au revoir*.

Kemel was looking better. There was a big, empty petulant space where that bastard Adnan should have been and the increasingly feline Sarila was slinking about the merchandise pretending to be doing overtime.

Briskly Kemel despatched Sarila and her pout and impertinence down to Mario’s for coffee and such.

He got down to business straightway. He was very happy with our clandestine business transacted scant days since and felt that, if I was up for it, CityZen could comfortably front a host of profitable and more-or-less illegal activities left unconsidered by the current management.”

“Just a foot inside some of them inner city clubs,” Kemel confided, “and the management go straight to piss.”

I had not noticed this but did not dispute the opinion.

He went on: “Can you get me one of those little cards with ‘Press’ printed on it?”

“Nothing simpler,” I beamed.

“Radical purge,” Kemel mused, “and Mad Bob’s your uncle.”

Despite feeling a tad bugged by my exertions, I agreed to join him, and others, later at The Flaming Fez if I wasn’t too fucked.

Back to The Unit for a joint and a few restorative cups of Vongo from the modest lake of that fierce beverage sloshing about in the plastic storage trunk from Ronnie Grimm’s Happy Lucky Discount Bonanza Emporium.

I’d never had a vat of Nigerian vodka on the kitchen working surface before, or the vodka of any other nation come to that. Cumbersome, I agree, but a genuine comfort and hope for the future.

Every home should have one.

I was starving by this time and, pausing only to toss a couple of depleted petrol cans in a nearby skip, went down the road for a kebab. It was pretty foul.

Time was short, yet the undulations of life went on like the babbling bloody brook. Time was short and timing crucial. Much in life is more complicated than it need be.

My return to The Unit was impeded by the presence of a lurking pig.

Inspector Roger Hull, the grey, forty-something, unholy spawn of predatory ferret and twisted eel, was dangling about unannounced near my shadowy but perfectly legal front door.

In Interview Room Two, you might recall, this grey steak of piss once had the temerity to barely interview me after Andy came a gutser off the balcony and plunged, with fatal consequences, into the pool of Fat Eddie.

Had these uniformed clowns nothing better to do?

The interview had been slapdash at best and Roger was a boring fucker, but he was one fucker I was loath to offend. A ranking copper could, as our American cousins aver, put evil on my ass – which is their way of saying arse and not a situation the prudent citizen would allow to develop. We all know what happened to Fat Eddie when evil was applied to his bottom.

“Glad I caught you,” he bleated with a sneaky, lanky bastard smile.

I ushered him in and sat him down. “Excuse the mess,” I ventured. “Somehow I haven’t had the heart – nor the front-end-loader.”

I chuckled. Roger didn’t.

“What can I do for you, Roger,” I sucked furiously, “any help I can offer your boys is a pleasure and privilege. These are taxing times for our community with anarchy leaking all over the place.”

Roger Hull was on a desperate fishing expedition but caught nothing.

Could sober reflection shed light on the baffling Piss Industry Murders? Any suspicious strangers dotting the landscape? Had I observed criminality amongst Kemel and his associates? Any thoughts about Terry Winston? Any thoughts about Trevor? Did I know about the shocking girlfriend business? Had there been any unusual reaction to the death of foreign national Angela Twitchet? Was there a chance Fat Eddie’s funeral would get out of hand? Would he, Roger Hull, be welcome at services tomorrow as a sympathetic representative of area command? Had I seen anything of Derek?”

This sad fuck feared the funeral getting out of hand?

“Ho, ho, ho ho ho,” I thought but I answered succinctly saying, in essence: none, no more than usual, bugger all, not a sausage, nary a one, I did and was shocked, none that I was aware of, most unlikely, entirely welcome and at the gathering to follow at The Town Hall Hotel.

“Bring some mates,” I urged, rejoicing in the bewilderment and ignorance afflicting this miserable streak and his drongo colleagues.

What a bloody shower.

Promising to relay any scrap of fresh information, however small, directly to his brain, bunging his poxy Cop Card in my wallet and reassuring him how gladly I, and others, would welcome him at tomorrow’s shindig, I eventually pissed him off and caught a taxi to the hospital.



Before I got to the bloody Bed of Miracles, in the bastard corridor for Christ's sake, I was accosted by journalistic slime for comment. It was like Roger Hull all over but with the fragrance of stale beer and perspiration. I was quotable about Andy, damned the loser Cops with faint clichés, wished them better luck in future and got in a plug for Mad Bob's and CityZen.

Not bad if I do say so myself.

Christine Carter, Vincent, the foul blubber-in-law Dot, the ugly kid and Derek bloody Mehmet were bunched about the bed, possibly having a bit of a pray. It turned my stomach to see their hurt and shining eyes light on me brimming with simpleton warmth and fellowship.

Everyone wanted a piece of me and I did not dislike thought nor feeling this popularity engendered. Just so long as they maintain a decent distance.

Sure enough, just as Derek the Disciple alleged, Andy Carter looked even better and, though asleep, seemed to breathe unaided through nature's own conduits. The leg had indeed been shunted back towards true. He looked very clean and pink. Who'd have picked it?

Christine Carter, however, was going backwards in all departments. She seemed to grovel before me but didn't quite genuflect. She looked up into my eyes and raised a nun-like limb in benediction.

"Rex," she said, quivering with awe, drugs and exhaustion, "Andy has spoken."

"He what?" I queried.

"The Miracle moves on and, having moved, moves on to move some more. Andy woke, partially I know, but he woke and spoke."

"What did he say?" I asked rather fiercely, surprised indeed by this development. "What the dickens did he say?"

"Furkle newsul follock," said Christine.

"Furkle?" I ventured.

"Furkle newsul follock," said Christine.

"Follock?" I probed.

"Furkle newsul follock," Christine said with firm, born-again pride.

"How are we interpreting that then?" I enquired for the sake of something to say as much as anything else.

A fertile kernel of mirth put forth hairs in my churning innards.

"We are divided on Andy's precise meaning," said Christine. "We were all in silent attendance – Derek, Me, Vincent, Mum Carter, Andy Junior - when *he* did it and *we* heard it. Furkle newsul follock. It was a conscious utterance, not like a retard, but perhaps too garbled for confident interpretation."

"Furkle newsul follock," I mused and I started to slip. It was mere seconds before I was near to cacking my Daks with the explosive force of suppressed laughter. Snot came down my nose, I gasped and wheezed and displayed unbecoming high colour. I

could hardly fucking breathe and waved helpless arms to ward off ludicrous whoops snorting through the convulsions.

With the possible exception of Mother Carter, a filthy old slag and implacably hostile to me, the fuckwits blobbing about the bedside saw me overwhelmed by emotion. My stock went up accordingly.

Eventually I got the laughter more or less under control and dried my eyes. It was business as usual. I will remind you that this had been a long, tiring day, full of incident, opportunity and irritating jerks.

Sooner rather than later I wanted several schooners of good beer and, perhaps, an urgent word with my colleague Dawn Guddmansdottir. I had her phone numbers for starters. I considered telling her that, in a rather general sense, that tomorrow was the first day of our future lives.

I'd never get away with that. She would laugh scornfully at my prattle. She would think me a hopeless wanker and I wouldn't fucking blame her.

She could not see me but recall the night I said that tomorrow was the first day of our future lives and was exposed as an habitual masturbator. She could not, I think, dismiss such a thought from her agile and questing mind for all the sweat in Mexico and it would blight our future relationship, if any.

Fucked from the start, you might say.

"Guys, thank you so much," I smarmed, "I would love to stay at this special time but I still have essential duties before tomorrow's Big Event.

"Friday is a tribute to Andy's fighting spirit as much as Fat Eddie's dead one. We shouldn't forget. I want to be completely satisfied within myself that everything possible has been done to make this day a turning point for many lives in many meaningful ways. At the earliest opportunity: I shall return."

I was out and taxied to The Town Hall Hotel where I enjoyed three good beers in rapid succession. I called for pie but none was found. Nuts were brought. I downed the diabolical cream of a good swift Guinness and, from the satisfaction of that legendary libation, returned to the mischief and impertinence of beer and the countdown to Plan A.

What a plan that was!

Dangerous, daring, a radical departure for me, the potential was huge.

During this beer my pleasure was marred. Out of the woodwork comes the turbaned ruffian Councillor "Stumpy" Nazir Hussein, no less.

He wore a baggy old suit from Yves St. Vinnies and kept waving his fucking crutch all over the place. He had a disconcerting habit of tottering on his lower limb and only recovering when the unhappy observer feared cripple collapse, accidental blunt force trauma and all the fucking red-tape that would entail at this unusually crowded time.

“I don’t know how you keep it up,” whined the chairman of Recreation, Rorts and Bungs. He smiled hideously. “You must be a man made of steel to keep it up in the way that you do.”

“Not steel, Councillor Hussein,” I volleyed. “We are all men of flesh and blood.”

“Too much flesh and not enough blood,” suggested the councillor.

I had no idea what we were talking about but my beer had lost its savour. What was the old shitehawk on? Why did he emerge so often and appear to dog me?

I countered his ambiguous suggestion with: “There is more than one way to skin a cat, Councillor. That is a maxim by which I set great store and it has served me well.”

“But what of the cat?” Councillor Hussein exclaimed. “It is a maxim that, however convenient to your good self, has completely fucked the poor old cat for all practical purposes. Wouldn’t you say so, Rex?”

I had no idea if he was talking the piss or not. He bought me a beer so I let the matter slide. I did rather hope, however, that he would fuck off before long. What did the little pillock want?

Then it came out.

He wanted me to stand for the local council. Silly bastard. He actually wanted me to stand for the local council as an Independent. He was one himself. Apparently non-aligned Independents share enough common ground to form a powerful voice in the affairs of local government. They often went for meals together and a fine old time was had by all. He implored me to stand for the local council and insisted that networking opportunities were to die for.

“Quite possibly,” I allowed, “but, in life, I am a deeply private man Nazir. Your unexpected suggestion has honoured yet disconcerted me. I don’t know what to say. I am much taken aback. I would have to speak to my people.”

Naz seemed encouraged by this. The shrewd little sod knew upward mobility when he saw it. My star was in the ascendant. Nazir, I suspect, wanted many things. From me these included allies and reflected glory.

I was a celebrity of sorts. How things had changed in a few scant weeks. A few weeks ago, never mind how scant, these jokers would not touch me with tongs.

The time had arrived to depart. Duty called.

I told Nazir he had given me tremendous food for thought. As if I didn’t have enough food for fucking thought already. I did not want fat thoughts.

Plan A was a harsh mistress.

I shot through unusually startled. Startled as I was, and fully fed with thought fattening thought food and to spare, I hailed a taxi and bid the driver hasten for The Unit, far from public temptation and the children of the night.

Deftly I rolled six small but potent joints and slid five of them into a box of B&H Smooth for a reserve of support in the coming campaign.

A swift smoke and the siren song of Sleep’s fair discipline was all the go.

Big Day tomorrow.  
No expense spared.  
Plan A.  
You'll love it.

## *LIX*

**11:00** There was no point getting up at sparrowfart. A dignified eleven a.m. was perfectly satisfactory. One doesn't have to be silly with these things. Fat Eddie wasn't headed for the last fry-up until two and a hunk hours hence. Everything was in place. I could relax.

As a member of Andy Carter's inner circle I had been invited to join that wearisome mob at The Carter Residence any time after noon for pre-conflagration fellowship and conversazione.

Bollocks to that. I had every intention of enjoying this day and not hanging around with a colossally tedious bunch of Bible Thumping Dags. I deserved a treat if anyone did.

On with that stylish, signature-look suit of creamy linen in honour of this long anticipated day of delights.

Given that garment's lightness of hue and homespun texture it is a true miracle it could absorb so much punishment and still appear vaguely presentable in a fiercely independent, post-modern, bohemian sort of way.

That paltry thirty bucks once galvanising the fringe-dwellers at St. Vincent's would have to be amongst the best thirty bucks I have forked out in a life of widespread forking.

There was nothing more for it: on with The Miracle Suit and down to The Town Hall to ensure, first hand, that everything was just as it should be.

Following a pause for refreshment I would arrive at the The Carter Residence, register with traumatised residents and, whooshka, down to the ghats. What was the point hanging out with those fucking idiots?

Some considerate goose had saved me a seat for Fat Eddie's farewell parade in a tasty vehicle hired for the occasion. I had every intention of enjoying these wheels.

A liveried fellow would deliver me to the formal obsequies and on to The Town Hall Hotel in ample time for three p.m. and all that three p.m. entailed of piss, disappointment, fireworks, unexpected rogering and more!

Then there was, of course, plan A.

**11.42** A bracing mug of Vongo from the Vongo Vat, on with the suit and down to the bloody old Town Hall where, as far as I could see, everything was pretty-much just as it would be.

I'd just had irredeemable sausage rolls, mitigated by nourishing draughts of Fenian stout, when a slimy, little axolotl man from Channel Seven writhed within my ken. "G'Day, Rex," he oozed.

I vaguely recognised this foetal runt from a previous media encounter.

They surely didn't put that horrible gob up on unsuspecting television screens! Surely not. It was reminiscent of a faintly phosphorescent pinkish-grey latex blob, not at all human enough, spongy. Weird, wide mouth. Long, thin wormy frog lips. He looked perverted right down to the anaemic marrow.

A broadcaster known for wholesome, family values would never poke this creepy amphibian freak into decent, Aussie lounge-rooms unannounced. No way.

Such a broadcaster would hire a hornbag slapper and get her hair done.

Standards have to be maintained. Surely. None would benefit from this ugly mutant leech lobbing on The Box without appropriate warning – least of all the jerk himself. He looked like a space alien for fuck's sake! People would go him in the street.

This little fucker, whose name escapes me, worked for something of other ludicrous at Channel Seven. What the fuck was it? Not the weather bloke. A journalist. He was a trusted member of The News Team.

For the sake of argument, let's call him E.T.

I had heard of that. The News Team. I had experienced promotional material in The Media. I did not speak of it at the time but worked my way through that. The News Team was not my sort of thing. It looked woeful and calibrated for the subnormal. I was unreliably informed, by E.T., that T.N.T. rated consistently within the thirty-to-forty-five age band of the influential Home-owning Crypto-Fascist demographic.

As if I gave a fuck.

"G'day, mate," I smiled quickly like a cunning old bastard from the bush. "How's the world treating you?"

"Mustn't grumble, Rex" he whined. "Get you a beer, mate?"

"I really shouldn't, Mate. Really. I've got to dash. Serious commitments. Flat to the boards all day. This is one for the battered battlers of our tight-knit cultural battleground. You know how it is. I can't let them down but maybe I've just time for the one. I'll have to dash and see you right later."

The nameless blob of television sputum that some call E.T. brought forth refreshment and, seemingly oblivious to the ease with which I could put his eyes out with a convenient bottle or even my own sturdy thumbs, leaned close for the exchange of confidences.

"They've got me and a gun crew on the live link," he hissed.

I had no idea what the tit end was talking about.

"You'll be set for the day," I improvised chirpily. Flexibility and improvisation had always been key factors in the formulation and execution of Plan A. Always.

He started up again: the quaint patois of sottish, rubbery media hacks, relentless self-promotion, savage disparagement of colleagues and competitors, generally poor communication skills, a crippling sense of entitlement and half-a-dozen beers rendering his narrative all but incomprehensible.

Nevertheless, I persevered. Meanings emerged and by the time my gelatinous companion concluded his lengthy remarks with: "If they sober up Cheryl Woolgar and get her drawers on, we should have those ABC maggots out of the sheltered workshop and on the job before long," I had a fairly firm idea what was going on.

Because of recent local weird shit, carnage and mystery, in which I often figured, Fat Eddie's funeral became big news on a slow news day. Television stations were covering the tasteless farrago live and many newspaper reporters were expected given the free piss.

I was pleased to hear of blanket media coverage of The Town Hall Hotel. They would have the spectacle of Plan A zipping around an internet thing before you can say: "Farlang farlang fang fan farlang fang."

No fucker mentioned the fact to me but it turned out, during my subtle probing and manipulation of E.T., that Christine Carter's ecclesiastical sibling, the notorious dickhead Vincent, was well in with a colony of Geeks for Jesus.

I should have seen that coming.

Such was the remarkable and on-going progress of Andy Carter's recovery that the Geeks had been prevailed upon to forsake their Geekeries and link up computer things to have Andy electronically present at Fat Eddie's final rendering and Town Hall to follow. It was the first incident of its type according to informed observers and E.T. and could set a trend.

That was good enough for me.

This was going to be big.

I had to go.

**12:34** Do you think you can find a fucking taxi in this city when you actually need one? Do you? Are there no unwashed legions of the unemployed seeking honest toil and provision for the future?

Fucking hopeless!

Perhaps they were changing shifts. They would do that. If the need arose they might well change shifts without a second thought for some fat bastard's cremation or one's buckshee ride in a tasty vehicle hired for the occasion. Shift Changing is widely understood to be one of their techniques.

If pressed, these fanatically politicised so-called Taxi Drivers might grow aggressive and hostile and unrestrained towards the liveried fellow who would deliver me about. That remained to be seen.

I wanted none of these larks.

Anyway. As a consequence of the Public Transport Mal-fucking-function, I hurtle into The Carter Residence at the very last minute.

**12:59** It was everything I expected and worse at Chateau Carter. Everything. Worse.

I had to take a lot in quickly because the instant my foot struck Carter property, I was set upon by Creepy Christine, a veiled vision in muted browns, and chivvied like a bastard. It was not simply chivvying that was going on. The bitch had attitude. She might have become a Ho for Jesus or something.

The Geeks had set up a big television screen in the driveway and quite a crowd had gathered to peer at Andy Carter's vaguely conscious gob beamed live from the Bed of Miracles.

Bloody Vincent stonked around with a huge fucking cross on a long, brown pole. I like to think myself a tolerant man, but what the fuck did he think he was doing? Correctly I predicted a shit fight getting the thing in the car.

What was Andy Carter getting from this?

Fuck knows and, as things turn out, we shall probably never know the full transcript of Andy Carter's soul.

All things considered, however, Andy did look pretty good up on the roadside Geekvision.

From the glimpse I enjoyed I would not have expected Andy's conversation to have advanced far beyond "Furkle newsul follock," but stranger things have happened.

They had left the filthy old Mother Carter thing with her mangled Miracle Boy to provide a bed-bound commentary on "Andy's Experience." The hideous image of the rapacious old cow popped up on screen rather more than was called for really.

You could see where Andy got his stupidity from.

"Will ya look at the fucking hide on some people?" I heard her say from Andy's end. "There's that Smarmy Rex one looking a bit worse for wear."

Fucking cheek.

Had she no restraint?

But I was whisked away, amid much brouhaha, and found myself sharing a limo with Christine, "Laughing Boy" Mehmet, bro Vincent and his bloody crucifix and two peculiar old fogies who turned out to be Fat Eddie's puny parents.

Imagine having to put your hand up for that.

Fat Eddie would have easily outweighed five pairs of these parents. No sweat.

Fucking nature, eh? Cracks me up every time.

It was possible that these ancient cretins were, for all practical purposes, even more gaga than Andy Carter. They were certainly incredibly old and fragile. Both made curious snuffling noises like little rodents and yet were free to come and go at whim amid god-fearing taxpayers and others.

I didn't want to think about it.

Still these gossamer skeins of barely twitching life seemed to appreciate the attention and quietly thrive at a change of routine.

Whither Andy Junior? There was no sign of that prepubescent little prick.

Vincent sat like a strop on a rock – shags being verboten in ecclesiastical circles – fondling his shiny pole and lost in horrible religious delusion.

Christine was on my case and in my face. They'd looked for me everywhere. That was clearly untrue. Did I never answer the phone? This whole funeral-link-up thing had gone quite out of control and had become A Media Circus.

“Good God,” I throbbed. “The last thing we want is A Media Circus.”

Christine had longed for my wise counsel.

Those were her very words as she sat opposite me in the stately hire car and stared into my eyes like a whipped dog. “With Andy unavailable for comment I longed for your wise counsel,” she said. “

Was she taking the piss? Was she making some kind of a move on me? I thought it was weird and so would you in my situation.

She went on: “I fear I have made grave errors of judgement and enabled crude sensationalism and exploitation to triumph over dignity, custom and tasteful innovation?” the daft moll continued.

Christine Carter hadn't got a skerrick of humour in her. What a miserable, whiney, pompous, co-conspiratorial, jerk-enabling troll she was.

And in the back of the car she was still droning on with humourless, off-pissing intensity: “Can this situation be saved, Rex? Can it?” she moaned.

For no particular reason I said: “Prayer is not nearly enough, Christine. Deeds must serve the favour that fate has shown us all. The talk has gone on long enough. We have reached the time of deeds.”

The others sat there like stoned primates.

Christine was back on. “You, more than any of us, understand the minds of these media people, Rex. I was interviewed by someone calling themselves Amanda Mingle last night! She was a complete stranger to all schools of shorthand. That much was clear.

“It has come to this, Rex. This is what it has come to. This. Have I ruined everything for empty words and twenty grand from Channel Seven in partnership with the national leader in women's magazines amongst the over-fifties? Have I?”

I was at a bit of a loss but chipped in with what I hoped would be considered supportive. “What would anyone call themselves Amanda Mingle unless they absolutely had to?”

“I have asked myself that question a thousand times,” Christine commented, “and am still none the wiser. What are we going to do?!”

I needed to come up with something. My reputation for sagacity could suffer here.



“First things first,” I ventured.

“Thank goodness you’re back,” Christine lowed at my cleverness. “What would we do without you?”

Encouraged by success I gave an airing to: “I think we should get today settled before we worry about what might or might not happen at some later date. You’ve got more than enough on your plate already, Chris. Let’s deal with one thing at a time.”

When I spoke, I noticed, Christine kept her trap shut so I just kept talking. It was the only way. I spoke principally about I bloke I used to know called Manny Sergeant who did something illegal with dogs all over the Eastern Suburbs and Upper North Shore. I managed to drag some tenuous straws of relevance to my interminable tale and wrapped it up with a distinctly lame: “Today, Christine, we are powerless, but tomorrow, in a rather general sense, is the first day of our future lives.”

Well it shut her up.

I stared out of the window adopting a pose intended to advertise depth of thought. Then I spent a few minutes watching Fat Eddie’s ancient Mum and Dad cringe and twitch and snuffle away, pinioned by the merciless clutches of senility in a classic hire car.

There should be facilities. Booths. Assembly points. Channels should be opened. The Government should act to ensure that everything be done in the best possible taste. Delay was for wimps. Some would consider it a kindness just to drop them down a sewer and leave it at that.

Christ! We were almost bloody there!

**13:14** For such an egregiously grotesque, unpopular, filthy and easily forgotten bastard, Fat Eddie sure pulled a crowd for a funeral.

All, save the miserable shower of butt-ugly galahs from our sombre transport, seemed to be having a rather jolly time and the Geekvision screens were a popular triumph.

Methought I nosed carnival upon the air.

I spotted that fucking idiot Hussein hopping about up the far end of the Cremmo drive-in. Art and Criminal Classes seemed well represented, cameras and recording equipment were plentiful. Much of the CityZen rubbish put in an appearance but I saw no sign of the lovely Dawn.

As a mark of respect, Kemel sent Mo and the enormous Arthur to assess punters. I recognised scattered cops and managed a brief wave at Inspector Roger Hull.

Derek and Daisy chivvied me to my pew within. After that the fucking chivvying went into remission and I could power down a notch or twain.

I confess that everything was busier than I had anticipated.

Near where the deeply troubled vicar did his work, Geeks had been at their own tasks and flung up another large living likeness of Andy Carter.

Ow! There was that fucking slug of a Mother. Could they not cover her up with something, for Christ's sake?

I looked at the floor.

It made no difference.

Formalities wafted past. The music was hideous; Fat Eddie's fat cousin Gloria, poor cow, blathered on about the deceased gentle giant's joie de vivre and other fictitious nonsense; the vicar was clearly a raving queen; the throng seemed to think they were on a pub crawl, members of the fifth estate looked bored and touched themselves unnecessarily. Cops gawped with patent imbecility paying little heed to the postural norms of such proceedings. At least I wasn't being chivvied.

I thought I heard Vincent muttering away with some unofficial theological discourse and, what with the six foot crucifix, making an absolute pube of himself.

A couple of funeral flunkies wheeled Fat Eddie and his coffin in on a sort of trolley obviously designed to spare the professional stiff shifter painful crooknesses of back.

It was all rather dreamlike.

From the trolley the tub of lard was able to glide directly on little rollers to face the final curtain.

Gloria announced pre-recorded music. It was horrible.

The coffin didn't look particularly large. I'd quietly assumed corpse crates came in a small, regular, economy range at least. No doubt bespoke services were available for the wealthy allowing precious choice in the selection of rare timbers, rich textiles and costly metal furnishings. For Fat Eddie I expected something larger with special reinforcements.

My mind's eye swam with a ghastly view of Eddie's greasy, opalescent sludge flowing and filling the corpse crate to the very brim. Somewhere near the head end a melting mask of Fat Eddie's dreadful features wafted about in this thick, unsavoury soup.

Fears of environmental catastrophe when Eddie hit the flames proved unfounded. I can only imagine the stokers employ non-standard procedures in cases such as this. Extra logs perhaps. State-of-the-art protective apparel and HazChem on standby.

These matters are thrashed out in advance during taxpayer-funded activities.

Surely they hadn't cut Eddie in half longitudinally and crammed the fucker into two economical coffins?!

Surely not.

For the ordered running of society Regulations had to be in place, but what of adherence to and policing of these so-called Regulations?

We who are left are reluctantly compelled to consider the appalling depths to which creatures of the crematorium could sink under challenging economic and cultural forces alone.

They'd deny it, of course.

Who knows what change infected these creatures as they became the playthings of power, whim and decadence about The Halls of Death?

Fuck knows!

If the playthings become sufficiently debased, we might be in a position to detect physical changes amongst their number. Physical no less. Physical!

Had I not other plans, I could have been tempted to return to the crematorium under cover of darkness and keep close observation for the nocturnal rites for the other half of Fat Eddie. At the very least I could ask a servant to spill the beans.

One minute the box was there. The next it was gone and Fat Eddie with it. No sodden blast of toxic vapour, no filthy cloud of gas.

Fat Eddie got fried.

The vicar minced about a bit, Derek invited the throng back to The Town Hall Hotel and, with a clumsy, cringe-making motivational fervour called up to The Face of Andy: "Come on Andy, mate. You're coming with us!"

I winced with embarrassment but possibly; just possibly, The Face of Andy spasmed into something like a dimwit smile.

He might have said: "Urn."

How about that?

I was tempted to believe that, by the time I got to him, Andy Carter might actually be aware of what was getting to him. How good would that be?

**13:55** Getting back to the car was a fucking nightmare.

Bastards everywhere and every one wanting to talk to me about some bullshit or other. Had these fuckers no sense of time or place? Frankly, I wished they would just fuck off.

Christine was having a go about something, Derek was urging me to look at the fucking floral tributes and bastard cards and Fat Eddie's old Mum and Dad were doing a peculiar little dance near the Times Of Opening board. Perhaps they needed their bags changed or something.

Smiling, semi-human strangers, male and female, mostly of below average height, kept wafting into my ambit and gibbering unintelligible things.

Without so much as a by-your-leave these perky but essentially well-disposed goslings would touch me about the forearm and small of the back.

I felt like fucking Gandhi.

But I kept smiling or snarling and tossing out the odd snappy one-liner and it all went down like piss in a gutter.

Nevertheless a flame thrower might be a valued accessory should similar circumstances arise. Christine was still having a go as we climbed back into the waiting limo.

Mr. Fat Eddie was saying something in a soft, dry rustle about oranges.

“Oranges, oranges. Oranges, oranges. Orange. Oranges. Orange. Oranges,” he said and Mrs. Fat Eddie squeaked some sort of twittering reply that may have been a form of laughter.

Vincent looked a complete fucking nong.

Fuck knows what Derek thought he looked like.

But to this observer, gentlemen, the off-duty Detective Sergeant looked like a pious pudding. A pious pudding, sirs, and little more. Steamed, glutenous, soaked with sweet syrup, blotched with dried fruit. He deserved chastisement and had fallen lower in my estimation than I would have dreamed likely. Neither use nor ornament.

I was well pissed off with this tedious lot and anticipated particular relish should their fate in the unfolding of Plan A prove painful and humiliating.

Christine wasn't letting up and as our limo left the unruly mob scrambling for the exits her words began to penetrate my selective deafness.

“That went well, all things considered,” said Christine. “I can't tell you how wonderful it is to have you with us at this turbulent time, Rex. You have wisdom that only comes with age. Andy valued your input tremendously.”

“Thanks for that.”

A verbatim account of what Christine said to sully the vestiges of my chauffeur-driven ride would be dull indeed. I had a technique of zoning out that observers interpreted as deep, compassionate concentration. My ears pricked only when she mentioned four p.m. in the main bar as the time and place for speeches, champagne, signatures to be sought and the solemn handover of the concept and control of CityZen to my tender care.

All dedicated to Fat Eddie and Andy.

It all fitted most comfortably.

**14:48** The Town Hall Hotel was going gangbusters as our stylish road machine drew to a halt in the street.

A tosspot of journalists splashed at my toes as I alighted and graciously hauled Christine's carcass after.

Mo was hanging about respectfully. We exchanged Shit Happens smiles in passing but had no chance to chat.

Many photographs were taken and I was forced, with all the reluctance I could fabricate, to bid adieu to the stultifyingly dull Andy Carter Apostles and undertake to guide a few biddable scribes in the paths of righteousness.

E.T. was well pissed and immediately lay claim to me as a long-valued contact of especial intimacy. The half-dozen Hacks bunched about me at the bar ignored E.T. and his claim to priority. I can't say I blame them.

I was almost painfully dry of throat and in need of nourishment. Guinness, as is so often the case, was the way to go.

What did we talk about?

All kinds of shite really.

E.T. and The Hacks were as thick as fucking granite, and not a twinkle of totty in the bunch, but they all enjoyed excellent Expenses and I thought I should enjoy them as well.

It should not be overlooked that Plan A was about to go global. We are talking about Plan A here. My secret plan, Plan A, is the plan that puts the plan in planet. It is harder for a rich man to piss in the eye of a camel than for a poor man not to be one at all. Nevertheless, each, in its way, camel and man, demands fuel, food or fodder to fully function in its fate allotted way.

Plan A demanded my every energy and why should it not drive on the power of piss? Greater revolutions have done as much.

Time, however, was getting on and I didn't want to fuck this up.

With management consent The Geeks caused Andy's mug to appear on several Town Hall Hotel televisions; photographers, pro and am, were all over the place. There was, I felt, an uncomfortable profusion of bright, casual fabrics among the females at this shindig. It gave the impression of a piss-up. I own that my off-white suit makes a statement all it's own but most will agree that any statement of my Off-White Suit would far surpass in eloquence and euphony the utterances of some fucking inappropriate T-shirts and a truck-load of jeans.

Flash, flash, probe, probe, went the digital revolution, capturing us at every turn. At least one of these snappers was relaying events back to The Miracle Bedside. The disgusting Mother could be heard to grumble: "Who's paying for all this piss? That's what I want to know. I'll be buggered if I am, what with being stuck here and everything. If Lady Muck thinks it's coming out of my kick she's in for a very rude awakening."

The bloated sow was right about one thing: a lot of piss was going down fast and, while the stomach-turning trollop could only posit, not knowing from personal experience of the venue, The huge Pub was swilling with a rare congregation for the time of year: Cops, community leaders, regular piss-heads, media rubbish, Friday revellers, ghouls, a smattering of fair dinkum mourners, Fat Eddie's Mum and Dad, various CityZen shockers, two modest Dealers, at least one paedophile called Bob, all sorts. There was the ponce Goolie, the sinister green arts midget, invisible Bruce and that fat sheila who did subscriptions.

Fuck me, there was Oscar Fucking Lung!

I'd have to keep my nerve.

I'd have to be true to myself to play false with every man and woman.

**15:30** On the tick of half-past-three, I would swing boldly into action for the principle execution element, or stage, of Plan A.

All was set. I felt in peak condition. Peak! Drug abuse was commonplace. The hoi polloi was fuelling itself into a Thank-God-It's-Friday frenzy. This would make the hoi

polloi most unreliable should it be called to testify to events of the day. I had a motza up the fake chimney and a real feel for history. Plan A was all systems go.

My cunningly adapted Vongo Vodka bottles nestled safely in The Town Hall Hotel's spacious cellar and thereabouts were also spread smuggled and conceal'ed aids to infamy. This was it.

I needed but to quit the bar cleanly at half-past and slink to that cellar. That was all. I was half off my stool, poised to make an excuse and leave.

Five dinosaurs, four dinosaurs, three dinosaurs, two . . .

Poised one instant, nearly pissed myself the next.

As I lingered with The Nasty Scribblers, I stood all stoked and motivated like a bastard. I came within a whisker of pissing myself.

Right up close, well into my personal space, almost nose to nose, in person, loomed Dawn. Dawn Guddmansdottir. Suddenly, right out of the blue, unannounced, unexpected, this angular daughter of the Uppsala Guddmansdottirs looked eminently shaggable and unusually close.

"How's your Mum?" I enquired with, perhaps, a little too much fire.

"Fine," was her enigmatic response.

"Fancy you turning up," I beamed. "I've been meaning to turn you up for ages."

"Eddie had his faults," Dawn opined earnestly, apparently missing my impish banter, "but he was a colleague. I will not forget the time I spent close with him."

I think I nodded in a rather asinine way despite difficulty remembering much at all about the fat bastard at this stage. He had gone like a morbidly obese fart.

It's no secret I was wrestling, on one hand, with crucial responsibilities to Plan A and, on the other, immediate engagement with Dawn's Muscular Closeness. Not wishing to put the mockers on either and anxious, indeed, for both to prevail, I might have presented as stilted and tense. Was it possible, however, that stilted and tense could be the very leg-opener I sought?

We shall see.

How could I postpone this proximity?

I couldn't.

"Can we speak in the beer garden?" she asked soft and low.

Does an infant foul itself?

The Beer Garden was busy, brutal and buzzing.

What the fuck did she want?

Dawn got straight to business. Dawn owed it to both of us.

Dawn feared that I felt that, like the legendary wooded tracts of her distant homeland, she had been remote and inhospitable since my elevation to the editorship of CityZen.

I agreed with this but said lightly: "Dearest Dawn: tush, tush. I'll have none of this. You must not blame yourself. I have found our social and professional interchanges to

be warm, stimulating and satisfactory in every appropriate way. We must not be unkind to ourselves. Fie and for shame. With suitable apparatus I would hold you in the highest regard. As my old bush-pig granny used to say, 'We mustn't get our chakras in a bind however hard we try not to show them'."

That ought to hold her.

And then it all came out. As it does.

Dawn had striven to conceal unhappiness for some time. A deep, debilitating unhappiness. Nothing to do with CityZen, with which she empathised greatly, but powerful spirits of lassitude and melancholy claimed her and she waned under them. This ennui, she confessed, had been visited on her before when distant horizons, so strewn with wonders, let fly her name in secret tongues on wild, exotic winds.

Sometimes these spirits went away. Sometimes she did.

A guy called Owen Williams happened to be in the right place at the right time. Dawn and Owen met at an Uilleann Pipes (Intermediary) Workshop. After a period of observation and, one imagines, mutual enjoyments we can only guess at; this so-called Owen Williams invited Dawn to join a travelling group of mature artists and musicians currently encouraging, embracing, engaging this wide, brown land somewhere near Bega.

Owen and his superannuated leaches had five colourful and capacious Volkswagen vehicles at their disposal. They would move from town to town and often perform.

I bet they fucking did. Regularly and fucking often.

Elements of this wrinkled blemish of pony-tailed and wanky barnstormers would use their dick-top computers and wirelessness to apply for those grants of public money frequently awarded to unworthy-*and*-dull bits of cultural poppycock cobbled together by the Chairperson's mates.

Fuck me if they wouldn't get a handout half the time or more!

It is a scandalous waste and downright bent.

Sometimes - probably while making a documentary for that Weirdo Loser Television station that beams cheap, metropolitan weirdo loser shit cheaply, weakly and repetitively - sometimes, probably while recording for Tragic Television, our antique roadshow would visit local markets and bullshit tourists and rural idiots into buying hand crafted crap.

Owen Williams. There you have it. Owen Williams.

Another fucking Welsh!

What is it with those?

I didn't like the sound of this wrinkled mobile rootfest at all. Not at all.

Owen Williams, his ilk and fellow travellers had about them the odour of shallow, well-heeled, be-denim'd roué. I think I know a dope-crazed geriatric hippy shag-a-thon when I smell one.

If such as these were indicative of the much-vaunted Grey Nomads, then you may shove them up your arse.

Dumped unhumped.

That was a bit fucking depressing. I thought it was a bit fucking depressing at the time.

Was Dawn, in fact, a bit of a prick-teasing, leathery old slag?

The thought had crossed my mind.

Anyway, it boiled down to the fact that she was fucking off with baby boomer sleazoids and might be out of touch for months.

I hadn't entirely given up on a sympathy root for old time's sake.

I would stall.

"I don't know what to say," I said in a Richard Burton voice, while all about the beer garden grew more energised.

"My thoughts are scattered by unspoken words," I ventured with absolutely no idea what I was talking about. It did sound pretty good but.

With a beguiling twinkle in me eye I ventured on like Richard Burton's uncle Idris: "I am shocked to learn, at this time, that I could lose you Dawn. You are my herald of all-important health and wellbeing issues with particular reference to thinking outside the spiritual square. I'm shocked to the core. I'm very shocked, Dawn, and don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," said Dawn enigmatically, "but au revoir. It is my destiny to fly away and join the circus."

My mien grew more firm.

There's not a lot you can say to that.

"I'm shocked and reeling, Dawn," I insisted, "shocked and reeling to the extent that I cannot handle this right now. I have duties and must away. All Hell's about to break loose. Please wait for me, Dawn. Here, Dawn. Wait, Dawn. Here.

"If you must leave for several months Dawn, then leave for several months, Dawn, but take affection, admiration and respect with you in your dusty bohemian bindle. If you must follow this dream, you must, but I and others would be deeply disappointed, Dawn, to lose our little hope of a fond, even lingering farewell."

"I've got major storage issues," Dawn fretted rather unbecomingly.

I continued: "Until we meet again to present a token of the esteem of all the gung-ho gang at CityZen. We will talk, Dawn, we should, and your friends and colleagues will bid you a fond adieu – all if you will but wait."

"Token?" said Dawn with keen attention to detail.

"I must away," I said and buggered off sharpish.

**15.39** I strode straightway to the lost property bin near the bogs and deftly fished out Derek Mehmet's distinctive flasher raincoat cunningly buried therein but twenty four hours since if that.



It was gratifying to learn that not even the scum round here would scramble for such daggular apparel.

Straight from the bin to the bogs went I where, with a neat flick of the wrist, the DNA encrusted flasher raincoat unfurled and I donned it as to the manner born.

No time to waste. Smoothly, efficiently, finely honed, I pull the pre-planted woolly cap from a pocket and draw it low on the pre-planted head.

None would know me now. One or two witnesses might swear it was Derek for Derek owns that that shocking Mac and none other would wear it. I had to be Derek.

Collar up and out, all disguised, sliding ghost-like from the crapper, across the corridor, through the cellar door, whence none but staff should roam, and, through thickest, pungent dark, down a death-trap timber stairway of significant heritage values.

That would confuse them.

Through the lower door. Close the lower door. Knowing well where to go I bring on the light, blink thrice and straight to the case of Black Sambuca concealing my old friend WonderBar. I had no intention of being distracted by keg changing clowns or cats or slatternly skivers on unofficial smoko.

None.

Plan A was going according to Plan A.

I smoked a swift joint of defiance, one I'd prepared earlier, small but packed and potent with nourishing cannabinoids.

I was quite familiar with the cellars of The Town Hall Hotel, of course, because I'd made occasional deliveries in pursuit of my piss industry interests. I think Ron Monkhouse had something shonky going for a while.

I'd got stuck down these cellars once for about fifteen minutes with a comely Chinese bar staff member named Lucy. It was a Thursday night. Few years back. I had no idea she was there. None. The whole experience was extremely embarrassing and, in the ensuing hubbub, it was briefly mooted that I be barred from the premises and mentioned to police.

It was entirely accidental and a prime example of mindless prejudice, abject failure to communicate effectively and shameful inability to live in harmony with each other and our planet.

I was actually following a cat. I was moderately pissed, I will not deny it, and I followed the cat down to the darkened cellar. It had been eyeing me strangely for some time.

I had no idea that the wretched girl was mooning about in the fucking dark. How was I supposed to know? Why would she do that?

Amongst Lucy's accomplishments we must not number adroit use of the English language. When I called 'Pussy! Pussy!' in the dark, however, it was a recipe for disaster.

I was much disconcerted myself when, from Stygian gloom, came sudden gasps of alarm, wild scrambling, a jarring of wine bottles and arpeggios of fear.

An hysterical moment with a high Shriill Nonsense factor from both parties preceded a moment of terse negotiation and developed into an excruciating moment of electrical switch location in the dark.

I'd got the lights on and just about got the ridiculous creature subdued, about four minutes in, when we both heard an unexpected sound. It was the unexpected sound of the key turning in the lock of the sturdy lower cellar door and locking that door fast.

I was so fucking shocked and embarrassed that I could not spring into action. I could not run to the sturdy door and pound and call after The Fuckwit.

I was rooted to the spot and Lucy, likewise, was immobile and disturbed by these seemingly bizarre developments and knew not what to think.

Eight fucking minutes I had to wait to get out of there. Eight. Eight minutes of humiliation, misunderstanding, pleading, confusion, fear and tension.

More weight.

Lucy had every right to be suspicious, of course, not least because she was, as it happens, a rare pleasure to behold and a leading spunkrat.

My incomprehensible banter probably didn't help. She had every right to be terrified. I was yet a man.

After the eight agonising minutes The Fuckwit came back and unlocked the door, all for no obvious reason.

It should have been a matter of little consequence but when I emerged at the head of the stair blinking owlishly behind a contemptuous cat and a conspicuously traumatised Lucy it seemed every man, his dog and Various Women were there. Feelings of envy and disgust ran high, I was rudely jostled by Stan Borich and had to do much fast and effective talking.

Three swift gins and Lucy had started to calm down, it could have gone either way. Her hurtful allegations that my behaviour had been "spazz" were somewhat mitigated by her admission that I had not tried it on. Previously, she averred, I had always seemed weird but harmless.

A stupid girl bereft of refined judgement.

At length it seemed the lynching moment had passed but not before harsh speculation and memorable assessments sounded from all quarters.

That little prick Stan Borich had to stick his fucking oar in: maybe I got off frightening fit ethnic chicks in the dark. This theory found little vocal support. Several present would have been much beguiled, I suspect, by the chance to frighten fit ethnic chicks in the dark but I just don't think they wanted to go there.

Eventually it fizzled out.

As did my Plan A Inaugural Joint.

I knew the old cellars of The Town Hall Hotel well and saw great potential for havoc in all those cylinders of gas lying about. The vapours of alcohol were almost universally known for their susceptibility to ignition. In addition there was all sorts of flammable rubbish piled all over the place: cardboard, chemicals, wood, bulk bog roll, tins of old paint, rags various, promotional bollocks and, what is more, but yesterday I had secreted aerosols, some turps, half a dozen disposable lighters, old tissues, five candles, half a bag of tea lights and several boxes of matches.

I snatched up a bottle seemingly brim with Vongo Vodka but this was deceptive. Yesterday I had drained the Vongo Vodka from its bottle and replaced the fiery beverage with petrol. I had done this with all twenty-four bottles of Kemel's kind donation.

I splashed the bottle contents liberally and plucked up another. Splish, splash, sloosh, spurt, scatter: this was rather fun. Glug, glug, glug: I gave a liberal dousing of B.P.'s finest to the caged electrical engine of the cellar's capacious cold room.

I heard a step upon the stair and froze.

Shit!

Someone is coming.

I snatched up WonderBar.

The door opened slowly.

In came Derek Mehmet.

"By jingo," he expostulated, "steady on Rex."

From the sweet compassion in his thick and clumsy voice, I knew at once what his interpretation of the scene before him had been.

He had no explanation whatsoever for my wearing his flasher raincoat so, like most of the devout coppers I've met, he just ignored the matter.

What he saw, and thought he understood, was a supposed intimate associate, a bit on the artistic side, recently much burdened with crushing care, with a Vongo Vodka bottle in hand, lurching wildly about the Town Hall Hotel cellar and caught in the act of scattering libations hither and yon and going: "Splish, splash, sloosh, spurt," and, "Glug, glug, glug."

His eye were glazed, his speech was slurred, he was drunk sir.

He came towards me. I thought he was going to blub.

"Are you right, mate?" he managed. "I don't mean to intrude but unexpectedly I saw my old coat sliding into the cellar and I thought, 'That's funny,' I thought, 'that's my old trench coat sliding casually into the cellar. How peculiar is that? What's going on? I came to investigate.

"They're all ready upstairs. Your big moment. The hand-over. They'll start the music soon. There's many fine individuals depending on you Rex."

I couldn't have this.

I smashed the Vongo Vodka bottle across Derek's distinctive hooter.

He gasped a bit but, without a word, his hands came up through a rain of blood and petrol and his head went instinctively down for protection. I had WonderBar in hand and brought the metal crashing on the crown of Derek's crust.

Splat!

What a surprise it must have been.

I couldn't have him going on about fashion at a time like this!

Cool and efficient I shed the flasher raincoat and tossed it on the forensic pile of Derek Mehmet. I drained a Vongo Vodka bottle on him for good measure and tucked a couple more Flasks of Doom unopened near some kind of board to do with electrical affairs.

"Almost done," I said aloud and, pausing in my dousing, I checked with Derek's costly wrist watch. It was nearly five to four. Bugger.

I tossed faithful old WonderBar on the Pile of Derek: "Goodbye faithful WonderBar," I announced. "It is time for us to go our separate ways."

Quick sprinkle and I'm out of here.

**15:47** Poised for a safe and speedy departure, I produced my box of Redheads and was about to strike when I myself was forcibly struck by thoughts of the bold departures found in Plan A, by its potential, its simplicity, its classic elegance.

Beamed to the four corners of the earth, I would transform the Town Hall Hotel cellar into a raging inferno and run away to crow of it.

What fun!

On!

I struck the match but immediately considered it prudent to approach the exit more nearby. It would not do if I became trapped in a maelstrom of my own wicked devising and ended up in a plastic bag burnt to a crisp. Fuck that.

With my radiant match aloft I moved calmly towards the exit.

At once a frightful bull-like lowing offended my ear. I turned to see none other than the hefty and vengeful Derek Mehmet stumbling towards me with a well fucked brain.

In one hand he wielded WonderBar which was a really stupid irony that I could well do without.

As the attentive might recall, I had not only put a crease in Derek's head that left little hope for his loved ones, if any, but had liberally doused Derek in petrol and I now held a lighted match.

"Whoof!" he went.

The man could not believe his jellies and he made a horrible keening noise to confirm the fact.

Fuck me he was pissed off. Even with massive ding in his scone he was pissed off and, in every sense, he lit up like a fucking rocket.

Within seconds he was dying horribly at my feet but not before he had scrambled around setting the entire fucking cellar alight with an efficiency that I would not have previously considered probable.

I won't forget that in a hurry.

Fuck me, it was hot.

I had to prance quite nimbly to reach the door unsinged.

I closed the lower door behind me. Boy was that inferno raging within a raging inferno or what? I heard something of glass shatter. Up the tinder timber stair I tripped and out the door prohibiting all but staff.

I closed the upper door and turned about and took steps to get away from that infernal location without delay.

**15:59** "Rex! REXY! REXONA! REXY!" my current name, and selected variants, was sharp and chillingly amplified as Christine Carter shrieked across the pub through a cheap home karaoke system some economical person had provided.

"Not a moment too soon," she projected like a drag queen. "The proceedings are about to proceed. There's not a moment to spare!"

What disagreeable change misfortune had wrought in this drudge and there seemed every possibility that, through the awesome Power of Mediocrity, she might transform into a giant mutant owl, swoop down on me and snatch me off to some high and lonely place to pull all my stuff out.

Knowing my luck I'd still be completely conscious through the whole fucking ordeal and, until the eyes got pecked, I'd see it all pulled out and eaten with chill avian indifference.

Bugger that.

I turned from flight and went straight to Christine. None, in truth, could resist this zealot of wifely virtue and potential were-owl and we could all see she'd had much tension in her wifely life lately.

She and a partial entourage had been installed on the tatty little stage in the corner.

Rising at the back of this podium was a Geekvision image of Andy Carter drooling slightly and there was one of those internet camera things perched on top. There were two microphone stands and five resilient chairs crowded on the little stage. Two of these resilient chairs were occupied by Fat Eddie's senile Old Folk, who appeared to be engaged in a slow-moving pastime conceived about invisible string. One larger and central chair was clearly for Christine herself but she was bobbing about hard downstage and gesturing with uncouth vigour for me to join her.

One chair, I gathered, was for me and I enjoyed a prickle of prankster glee to suspect that the other chair was for the late late Detective Derek.

I then had the horrible feeling that Christine was going to cuddle me in some needy but chaste salutation. Didn't fancy that one bit.

I dodged that by pausing fractionally to signal Reinhardt Goolie, poncing about at the bar, that I was in urgent need of beer. I used an oscillating hand gesture of almost universal currency.

The trick was in the timing. Christine and I tottered around at the edge of the stage but never quite got around to the hug. What Andy made of this fiasco, if anything, is anyone's guess.

Reinhardt Goolie, a shameless miser as well as everything else, pretended not to notice.

I needed to be out of there.

There was a raging inferno but feet from my feet, who could know what mayhem might unfold?

Bloody no-one, that's who.

How could I bugger off sharpish without being seen to bugger sharpish, suspiciously and ignominiously? I was an Arts Identity for fuck's sake!

I was stuck on the island stage girt by a sea of faces and, one way or another, I was photographed so extensively that I feared erasure.

I could hardly simply leg it.

How good would that look?

"Let me out! I do not wish to perish in my own wicked handiwork!" is not a good look or sound and people remember things like that, particularly when worlds collide and shit reigns triumphant shortly thereafter.

I would have to keep my wits about me to make good my escape. That much was clear.

It didn't seem particularly warm but the air was thick with what I can only describe as a Boiled Sherry Vapour rolling over the customary olfactory landscape of uneven pockets of piss, perspiration and popular scent.

I'd missed a couple of sentences from Christine whom, I discovered, was going on in public about the quick and the dead. As she spoke she grunted into the microphone. I think it was a nervous affliction of which she was blissfully unaware. Like some kind of modest pig-like thing, a beaver perhaps or capybara she grunted. It was off-putting to say the least.

Suddenly the lights went out.

It wasn't so bad when the lights went out. No-one went completely mental or needed bludgeoning. Light still fell in the outside world and, driven by the miracle of technically advanced batteries, the Geekvision screen displaying Good Old Andy bathed many of us in its unearthly light and gave orientation to most. Camera flashes and little red lights reminded me that the assembled recording power seemed undiminished.

A few fucking idiots threw up their hands and cried: "Fuck me!" and: "Woah-ho-ho!" and: "Back off fat man!" but it was no huge deal.

Christine just grunted a bit louder and professional television people swiftly switched on powerful lights. Fuck it. I was stuck.

With more spin than a dentist's drill, Mrs. Carter was talking up a memory of Fat Eddie when, of a sudden, there was a surge of anxious people from the corridor and several cries of: "Fuck!"

There was smoke.

The cellar heat had destroyed the lower door, stormed the historic stair and broken through above with smoke.

The crowd looked very jumpy. Christine did not relinquish command. Good on her, say I.

"Please, grunt, everybody, grunt grunt, there seems to grunt, to be an incident, grunt. What is going on?" she grunted.

There was no time for explanation. At that instant there was a deep, resonant and most satisfying thud below our feet. This was followed, at that instant, by an horrendous crunching, light from the floor, no time for screams.

A great, jagged saucer of unyielding industrial metal came crashing up through the pub floor, spinning, blurred, clearly hurled with fearsome explosive force and indifference to life.

Wallop!

Christine teetered on the stage, looming right over the entrance point of this unthinking metal.

Teeter, teeter. Loom, loom.

On the very stage myself I was as close to these tumultuous events as I am to this baboon. The audience was agog, no more so than when it became apparent that this shrapnel had more or less cut Mrs. Carter in half, like a book, and with such massive injuries she could not stand.

She tottered and did not, in fact, stand for long but toppled into the sudden, pillar of fire that blazed up near her feet.

As if this were not bad enough, the hinged halves of Mrs. Carter fell and wedged themselves in the fiery hole. There wasn't much sound but there was a mess of twitching.

You should have seen those legs go!

You don't see much of that.

The Media Pack was shitting itself but there wasn't time for the crowd to think: "Fuck this, I'm off," when the solids really started to fly.

Unbeknownst to me, and others, there was a truck. The truck was outside on the far side of the beer garden wall. The truck was transporting a tank of rancid grease, an unsavoury by-product of our city's thriving fast food, liposuction, night-life and fine dining scene.

Suddenly a part of this truck exploded next to the beer garden wall.

Fuck knows why it exploded but we heard it inside quite clearly.

The blast knocked a big chunk from the wall and the vehicle burned vigorously. It was a miracle none was killed or seriously injured. It was a big wall, as these things go, and, made of sturdy brick, weighed a fucking tonne.

I wondered if, perhaps, this grease truck had been abandoned near some flue or vent from the cellar, with no thought of vents or flues, and had been subject to unbearable heat as it stood.

Who knows?

For punters in the beer garden this is very alarming. Three of their number collected brick. Many became shrill to a degree. Many leapt up in the beer garden and said "Fuck," a lot and surged to the building.

But they stopped as though choreographed. The punters ceased their flight and paused in the garden, bunched near the building, lit by the leaping light, to gaze back awkwardly at the grease truck burning merrily through the unexpected wall hole.

But the grease truck had not exhausted its reserve of surprises.

From within the building we heard the truck explode a second time, louder, this time rupturing the grease tank and showering grounds, patrons and much of The Town Hall Hotel with gobbets of flaming grease.

It sounded painful from within and I'm sure that it was, in fact, painful.

I was lithe as I stepped from the stage.

And as I stepped I caught sight of Old Andy Carter up there in Geekvision, watching his missus chopped in half and plugging up a fire hole.

And I don't mind telling you he looked fucking shocking.

For an instant I heard that abomination of a Mother screaming like a stuck pig before someone pulled the plug.

The air was not good.

Whooshka: a great tentacle of fire must have sprung from the charred remains of the Old Cellar Door and snaked along the ceiling.

All of a sudden the floor was bloody hot.

As if by instinct, representatives of The Media instantly repaired to secure locations the better to interpret tragic events that might turn up.

First out the door.

As a result of this withdrawal, our media folk missed a top photo-op.

Burning gas ballooned from a fissure in the floor and completely enveloped Fat Eddie's Old Mum and Dad, still on stage playing the slow-moving invisible string game thing.

Not a sound.

They burned away like the wisps they were; without care, with no evidence of pain, so quickly, like burning hanks of coir, a myriad instant candle flames gone, ribbons of smoke, crumbling to ash.



The smoking floor dances with wisps of flame about the crumbled husks of Fat Eddie's people.

It was over all too quickly for mine. This was an outstanding image of the day.

There was a fair amount of unattractive, degenerate panic going on at the edges but a depressing number of punters just stood around opening and closing their mouths like llamas.

A roaring noise grew louder. Stuff could be heard smashing, and collapsing and bursting. Flame was spreading faster than a speeding bull ant. Things were falling over. The air was as caustic shit to my lungs.

The time had come to leave. I was late. Fiery Shit Of Doom was breaking out all over the place.

**16:13** The route to the pub passage, through an hysterical turmoil of self-soiling arty types and a small herd of tightly-wound estate agents, was not appropriate for one determined to survive.

The route through that red passage - past cellar door, bog and lost property bin to beer garden - was, in the prevailing conditions of fire, smoke and unpredictability - clearly a route no prudent escapee would assay.

I saw one bloke well drenched in runny lard go up a Roman Candle.

It was all very perilous.

Fie on that route. I was heading for the main door.

Overcrowding remained an issue in the unseemly scramble for that exit. Too much scramble, not enough exit.

I could see pushing and shoving but there was nothing to suggest that anyone was getting seriously fucking hammered. Claret did not flow. Bones did not break. Foot and footgear did not enter the fray.

Given the life or death environment, I thought the violence half-hearted and girly and was confident I could drill my way through that lot no worries.

Should the need arise, I could see half a dozen acceptable and accessible bludgeons from where I stood - including a very small child.

What on earth were people doing bringing infants to pubs in circumstances such as these? Have they no concept of the uses to which an infant can be put by desperate men in times of need?

Some of these people don't even deserve the consolation of bereavement.

Children should not be allowed in pubs. It is my long-standing and oft-expressed belief. It is simpler, safer and better for all concerned.

Here, for example, was a child small enough to be used by a determined rogue as a cudgel, sap or blackjack. A cudgel, for fuck's sake!

The parents or guardians of such children were asking for trouble and can hardly come crying to me when they don't get what they have been asking for. Just so long as it's not me they get when they do it.

I would be reluctant to impose a precise age for acceptance of The Young in a public house. Let us not be tyrannical. Reason must prevail.

Can the Young Person conduct his or her affairs in a public house in an adult way? That is surely the important issue. That goes directly to the heart of this matter and is surely the way of the future.

Let society be the judge. We have enough interference in our lives already without more officialdom rogering our goats.

If compelled to a number I would say: "Fourteen."

That does seem a bit young.

What do *you* think?

I can't be expected to do all the fucking thinking around here!

Perhaps there could be an intermediary or probationary scheme in which the fourteen to sixteen-year-olds could be allowed in, with full drinking, puking, coma and going psycho rights, on the strict understanding that, during this probationary period, they do everything a Distinguished Committee of Mature Regular Patrons tells them to do. Without question.

"Shut up," would be a popular. "Shut up and be still," smacked of a perennial favourite and variations on, "Lend us a lobster 'til the pension clears," could enjoy some currency amongst optimists.

There would have to be regular check-ups but I'm sure something can be arranged. Personally I think it's an idea whose time has come.

So I'm heading for the main door, wheezing like an expert and the floor's hot and twisty.

Reinhardt Goolie stands in my path so I grab the astonished, yet still dapper, bean-pole and scream: "Cunt!" into his writhing face and fling him heedlessly away, quite a long way away, to one side.

It was easy, I have no regrets. Sometimes I know my own strength.

Then it happened.

Ker-blammo!

A huge explosion right outside the main door!

How huge?

Fucking huge if you want to know the truth.

The huge explosion activated car alarms past the T.A.B. and shattered windows in that Halfway to Shitsville House for ambulant veggies that catches fire a lot. It's behind Mad Bob's. Used to be a nunnery.

Gas main.

Would you believe it?

Had to be.

A fucking gas main went up right outside at that very instant.

Big flash.

Ker-waff!

Surely not another Ducts or Vents issue!

Crash, waff, tinkle, roar, light, voor-whhoom!

Outracing a tumult of incandescent gas, clods and bitumen alone blasted the front doors of The Town Hall Hotel and had it not been for the sacrifice of convenient poets, playwrights and a textile artist I might have been well fucked.

The truth of the matter was, however, that I was partially fucked. I had been knocked from my booted feet by the cushioned blast and had cracked my skull on the inconvenient edge of a fucking marble topped table.

Ow, ow! Fucking ow!

Thunk!

A curtain of blood obscures the world. My fucking blood, I assume, and it's all over the fucking Miracle Suit. That won't come out.

How the fire did burn all about.

My head and I bounced off the marble slab and we hit the smoking deck like a derelict too long with Madam Metho. My eyes were independently going in and out of focus like unhelpful bastards. A high and horrible whine filled my head. Who knows what the fuck my legs were doing.

I knew nothing of arms. Nothing at all.

Ow, ow! Fucking ow!

Swimming before me, framed by flame, was the monumental form of Kemel's huge, hairless, offsider Arthur.

"Fucking Arthur," I said.

"Fucking right," said he through the choking chaos. "What the fuck is it with you?"

I saw fire rage in the front door. By internationally accepted standards this blazing territory no longer earned the designation Exit.

All kinds of cinders and bits of burning fabric were wafting on the hot and wafty air and blotting up the scene. This air was thick with shit.

My legs were still as strangers but Arthur assisted me upright and barked: "Shift your arse!"

I drew from hidden reserves of arse shifter to dash through all this flame and people rubbish going on, albeit more steadily with Arthur's mighty hand at my collar.

We were heading for the bar itself. "There's the bar," I thought, a little lamely, still vulnerably unfocussed.

Smoothly Arthur slid over the top of the bar and dragged me after.

"Ow!"

The bar area seemed less fiery than our former location but other would-be escapees just weren't heading that way.

Funny that.

It might have been something to do with panic and stupidity.

Still, getting seriously slammed on the head with a marble slab had greatly fucked my physical and mental coordination. Trusty Arthur led me behind the bar with direct but effective motivational skills.

We found ourselves in a couple of shitty piss industry offices.

Blam! Something very heavy appeared to have fallen into the roof nearby.

I knew not what that fallen something was but all available evidence suggested it was heavy and had fallen into the roof nearby. Above and over to the left. Human screams were detected and, unless I'm much mistaken, the sounds of crudely disintegrating pub.

A billow of smoke swept into the room.

Arthur threw a swivel chair through a window and motivated me after it and out into The Beer Garden.

This was a radical change of scene. It grew dark. I wheezed and spluttered but did not burn. The Soundtrack for Hell played but paces from our person, yet here was uniquely cold and quiet, still and horrible.

From the pandemonium of the blazing pub to the dancing torchlight on boneyard stillness in The Beer Garden the battle had been lost. The news would be wormwood to all who wished the venture well.

Now The Beer Garden actually was a boneyard. A nightmare from the trenches of The Great War. There were even a few horribly burnt and twisted corpses strewn around for good measure.

Flickering flame lit shattered pots of greenery and mangled beer garden furniture including umbrellas.

Clods of burning grease still dotted the terrain and one particularly large meaty lump burned and sizzled like a barbie on the galvo roof of the shitty office whence I had but recently emerged.

A further slab of garden wall collapsed even as I tried to stand and settle.

Through undulating eyes I saw the battered Ute drawn up nearby and, with cool detachment, surveyed its generous load of unconscious women.

That was fucking peculiar.

Even in my semi-conscious state I was semi-conscious of the peculiarity of a battered Ute, at that place and time, all loaded with a dozen fairly good looking unconscious women.

Where the fuck was Arthur?

I staggered towards these unconscious women. These were women all right and all of them pleasantly unconscious. In the midst of all this tragedy and challenge, what the dickens had I stumbled on here?

As I reached the edge of the Ute and clutched at it for support, I noticed that the unconscious women were stacked on top of four well-known, middle-aged homosexual men about town.

“By the Eureka Flag,” I mumbled, “zizzall fucken weird.” This gay-linked stacking revelation only deepened and darkened the mystery that enslaved my very soul.

Fortunately what could have become a rather unseemly reverie was interrupted by the arrival of none other than Mo and Arthur supporting a fairly good looking unconscious young woman.

“Woman!” I ejaculated, like a nervous tic. “Wozza fuck!” I cried aloud. “Hornbag zorn manse doe!”

Indeed it was!

My fucking oath, it was none other than Dawn Guddmansdottir, 31, and she was uncharacteristically floppy and well unconscious.

Fully clothed. Some temporary mud. No obvious breakages.

“Give us a second, Rex,” Mo called casually. “With you in a tick.”

So saying, the two of them bore vulnerable Dawn aloft and slotted her into the pile.

A homosexual groaned peevisly from the depths.

“Now let’s get you and us out of here,” said Arthur.

“No!” I managed daz’edly. “No, no, no, no, no! What are these unconscious women and poofs for?”

Under the stars and light of the flaming pub, Mo and Arthur looked one at the other, sympathising with the plight of my brain.

“There are many unconscious women,” said Mo, “all over the pub.”

“We saved some of the best for later,” said Arthur.

What the fuck was he talking about?

“Later?!” I whooped.

“We reckon chicks might get really grateful if we save them from a horrible death,” said Mo.

“Who can say where it might end,” said Arthur with a leer that was particularly chilling.

“They’d introduce us to their friends,” said Mo.

“We would be widely honoured,” Arthur relished.

“What about the poofs?” I demanded in my first utterance of reasonable clarity for some time.

“Kemel told us to ease up on the poofs,” said Mo. “Generally.”

“Now he’s got these interests in The Yartz,” Arthur explained, “he told us to ease up on poofs.”

“They can be loyal, discreet and seriously cashed-up. Excellent clients,” Mo added.

“So we saved some as well,” said Arthur.

“It’s good-will as much as anything else,” Mo remarked.

“And it might look suspicious just loading up with babes,” Arthur cautioned with a cheery grin.

“What now?” I probed, wiping blood from my bloody face with someone’s bloody pashmina.

“We drive round the front,” said Mo.

“To a hero’s welcome,” said Arthur.

“What sort of welcome?” asked Mo.

“A heroes one,” Arthur beamed.

“Fucking awesome,” said I in stark, unvarnished admiration.

**16:28** The vehicle tray being fully laden with unconscious women and poofs, the driving seat falling to Mo and the passenger seat fully occupied by Arthur’s formidable frame, I was left without an actual berth on the Ute Of Mercy.

Mo said he would gladly toss out a poof in favour of me but it would mean reorganising the whole load. I wouldn’t hear of it. I still had a ringing in my ears.

Arthur enjoined me to perch on a distressingly narrow, vestigial running board adjacent to his window. We were only going round the fucking corner. Just stand on that thing and hang on.

I am not comfortable with feats demanding protracted vim and vigour. I did not want to be held on to by Arthur. I did not wish to be jolted alarmingly any more but that Heroism is some powerful shit, man.

While still deprived of my full faculties I consented to perch. Feet on the so-called running board, I half sat in the crook of uncomplaining Arthur’s outcurled arm, excruciatingly painful to a lesser mortal, and managed to cling to the metal of the roof rack thing. The subtlest of negotiation with Arthur allowed us to travel without fear of ribald censure.

We started moving. Knocking a few bits of crap out the way, we were jerking up the metres of crap towards the riven ruin of the beer garden wall and the guttering remains of a once-proud grease truck beyond.

Crossing the ridge of fallen wall was a moment of unsettling turbulence. I closed my eyes, held tight and hoped the unfettered and unconscious young women would not bounce out.

I clung. I must have clung well enough but I was well over that well before I was well over that.

Very traumatic to the fingers and calves. Fuck knows what it was doing to Arthur but he gave no sound of complaint. Perhaps he was communing with his ancestors.

Then we were round the back, down, thank Christ, and driving too quickly down an ill-made lane.

A helicopter churned morbidly overhead. It made no effort to rescue me, clinging precariously and conspicuously to a speeding Ute-load of crumpet, obviously preferring to churn morbidly for P.R. value.

This was excruciatingly uncomfortable. Hanging on like this. I could very easily slip and take a nasty fall at speed.

Mo scooted around the corner and pulled close to the blazing and hopelessly lost Town Hall Hotel where perplexed emergency knobheads mingled with the usual range of rubbish attracted to such events.

All at once our Ute of Mercy, and its perishable cargo, was besieged by media ferrets left over from the piss up earlier.

And then, as they should say in all of the classics at least once, the ceiling caved in.

A pool of darkness opened up at my feet and I dived in.

I didn't come up for quite some time.

## **L**

WITHOUT MORE ado, seconds became minutes. Minutes became quarter, half, three-quarter and full hours. Hours became other hours and, with further transformation, statistics show Days to have elapsed unbeknownst.

It can be touch and go in circumstances such as these.

I knew shit about what was going on but no fewer than thirty-two staff and patrons of The Town Hall Hotel were touched and went that night. Gone. Non-entities taken in the youth, prime and scrag of life. Hopes dashed, worst fears realised. Shit-loads were injured.

That night holds international records for all sorts of reasons.

I knew nothing. Still out. Well fucked. Shot full of pharmaceuticals. Plugged in. Observed to buggery. Drip fed. Given a bit of a hose down every so often, one would hope.

I was out for thirty-four hours. Thirty-four fucking hours. I won't get that back. Dead to the non-medical world. My affairs in disarray. My home and business untended. Cultural work neglected.

But I knew nothing so I didn't give a shit.

What will be, will be.

Sound came first. Voices, things banging, all filtered through tissues soaked in lard – or so it seemed.

The sound wafted in and out as I so wafted.

At length there came unfocussed, pearly light. These woolly clouds of vision joined the wafting sound and these modest stimuli continued independently, concurrently or not, to waft for a while, as did I.

Gradually I woke up.

I lay thinking how absolutely excellent I felt. What wonders a couple of hearty blows to the head and few days' kip can work. I think it was the life and work of

Augustus John that first brought that concept to my attention. I was now a living example of proof.

I had connived myself to a standstill. The human form is not meet for such outrageous burden.

Yet in this perfectly acceptable taxpayer-funded cot, drugged and waited on foot and mouth, I felt good.

Excellent i'faith!

I ratchet up my eye-lids one crank and give the room a squiz. I notice a lot of fuzzy white shit and a big, thick-headed copper near the door and I did not feel so good.

They had a copper on the door. Bastards.

Two much-obscured but Not Bad Nurses fluttered in and asked me several times if I was awake. I moaned and wriggled as necessary. Their girlish questions turned to goads: "Come on now," said one. "Wake up now."

"Can you hear me?" said one in tones of deep suspicion.

"Yus," said I thickly, but I actually did waft off to sleep at that very point.

I was more conscious the next time I zoned back in.

The horrible visage of Police Inspector Roger Hull dangled over my field of vision and I didn't like anything about that.

I think I must have winced a bit because Old Roger took that as his cue to start boring the tubes off me. I had every need of news but feel that, as a direct response to Roger's dreariness, I did tune out a few times.

"Can you understand me?" said he plaintively. "I would appreciate a verbal indication, please, that verbally indicates your ability to understand me talking to you verbally now."

"Yus," said I.

Inspector Hull flashed a cold, grim smile. "Excellent," he said which helped none.

"I'm here on a delicate mission, Rex. A delicate, not-quite-official mission if you get my drift. It's difficult to know where to start."

"Yus?" said I, far from sure I liked the sound of this.

"First of all, Rex, I think I must explain at the outset how you came to be here in the first place.

"Pray do," I said but Roger did not recognise the sound I made as having meaning and, from his unease and prune-like expression, seemed to fear I might be introducing babble into the equation.

He bored on, heedless: "These are strange times, Rex. My colleagues and I have never known times like it for strangeness. It's like a sickness out there, Rex. A sickness. Slick. Sick. Spreading. Strange. A slick spreading sickness spreading faster than any of us scrutineers of such stuff imagined a slick strange sickness could spread.



“It would help enormously if I could get a nice photo of you getting to know the new Police Minister.”

Whoops. Lost myself for a moment there. I tried to concentrate on Roger’s leaden ramblings. That’s where I went wrong.

“Zeal!” snapped Hull with unexpected rancour.

Impertinently he plonked on my bed-linen fit to make my attachments jangle. “Pure zeal,” he snarled into my gob. “Pure perverted zeal. All coherent evidence, from the highest levels down, suggests that fanatical zeal of perverted fanatics has brought you here, Rex. We must put your being here down to pure and simple perverted zeal of fanatics and make no mistake about it.”

“Eh?” said I, knowing not what the fuck he was on about.

I wasn’t up for this dullard’s Perverted Zealot drivel and, after a moment watching the ugly fucker swim before my weary eyes, I feigned sleep.

Soon I found it for real.

I stayed in my cosy hospital quarters for a further two days, feeling better, piecing together the state of understanding in matters of multiple murder and maimings at The Royal Hotel, arson at that venue, the late Fuzz Derek Mehmet and the Piss Industry Murders, Kemel’s creative business proposals, how I came to be flat on my back in the fucking Wrecker’s Yard, CityZen magazine, the Ute of Mercy, its defenceless cargo, all the fucking heroism I didn’t cop, Andy “The Veg” Carter and much, much more.

As I lay, towards the end of my hospital stay, I also learned how much richer I could be, thanks to my current profile, history of artistic pursuits and unique intimacy with the subject matter, if I signed a document before Thursday to say that I would write, or cause to be written, a film script to be called Fat Freddie’s Funeral.

I pointed out that his name was Eddie but I was assured that Freddie was better for legal and marketing reasons.

The fact is, I could easily be richer to the tune of ninety thousand lovely Australian dollars or more. If this film was actually made, which was unusually likely, there would be more money.

These were proposals quite devoid of down side. “More!” I say.

In the course of this project, and others, I would be almost guaranteed introduction to impressionable and ambitious young actresses, some of whom might be deprived.

This was but one of many intriguing scenaria.

I remain convinced, however, that my recovery was hindered, if not actively retarded, by the ceaseless stream of fucking idiots and others beating a path to my sickbed to spruik one load of old bollocks or another.

Roger Hull was the first, he came back for another go later actually, but he was by no means the last.

Fuck me, they kept coming.

Journalists? Don't talk to me about journalists. They must breed like rabbits – all hunched up and twitching.

But gradually, through the headaches and blank patches, the hallucinogenic, rubbery weirdness of stuff, the passing slack-jawed yokels pausing, the Bulk Irrelevant Prattle, relentless encouragement, the naps, real and imagined, a few medical procedures, twaddle, the awful, aching, longing for a smoke, through all of these a picture was beginning to emerge.

Mo, Arthur and The Ute of Mercy did, indeed, enjoy a hero's reception by the flaming shell of The Town Hall Hotel and the incident was featured extensively in award-winning news broadcasts across the globe.

Comment was sought from the highest in the land.

Great fuss was made of the better looking women, several of whom had lurched awake during our late night mercy dash, and thoughtfully Arthur, Mo and myself were up for several humanitarian awards.

The poofs, as such, didn't get much of a mention mainstream but I understand that, for a while, they were feted by jaded novelty-seekers of their own curious subculture.

One of the poofs, I hear, bears a scar on his shoulder to this day.

All's well that ends.

It transpired that I was still lined up for serious Hero Worship – arising not least from remarkably deceptive photos of me clinging to the Ute of Mercy, that somehow looked like Laurence of Arabia, bloody, buggered but unbowed, releasing a bunch of good sorts back into the wild.

The pricks who took the pix deserve nothing less than a Certificate of Distinction. I missed it all, of course and that happened like this.

For reasons of his own Vincent, Christine's Carter's fuckwit, Geek-friendly vicar brother, was wandering around all day, even at The Town Hall Hotel, with a fucking great brass cross on a stout stick.

Trying to drum up a bit of business, perhaps.

He missed the spectacular demise of his sister having shot off like a greyhound when Hellfire got a bit close. As Sis was gutted and burned he found himself and his accoutrement to be out on the grass and not unlike a spare prick at a wedding.

Vincent and The Cross got their photo taken repeatedly. Vince always looked constipated when they were widely reproduced later.

I don't know what came over him.

Mad cunt.

Roger Hull thought it an excess of zeal. Others, not charged with beating out minor blazes spilling from the conflagration central to The Town Hall Tragedy, thought Vincent had simply snapped and gone fucking mental.

It was thought there might be sexual issues.

As the Ute of Mercy rolled to a halt, Vincent was there. He came round behind me. I couldn't see a thing. Some claimed he sought to protect unconscious women from a buffeting at the hands etcetera of a horde of floodlit hacks and drunken halfwits storming the rescue vehicle.

It can't have been too comfy for the poofs but apparently Vince leapt up on the Ute and started waving the bloody cross around like a fucking maniac.

He is reported to have cried aloud: "My gorilla puts back song for me!" or words to that effect, as he brandished the brazen cross wildly and looked to be well mental.

His frenzied swings missed the wretched mob entirely and, allegedly inadvertently, he bashed the grey shit out of yours truly.

That's how I came to be in hospital.

Fucking Christians.

I was disgruntled about missing out on all the hero worship but Arthur and Mo assured me knowingly, that vigils had been held and pleas for my recovery widely bruited. I didn't have to do a thing. My brain had ceased to function adequately yet I had achieved international celebrity and would, at the very least, have the pick of Old Boilers upon my discharge.

Vincent felt very badly about my grievous clobbering and so he fucking should. The first time he came to my bedside I simply went all glassy eyed and said: "Mimp," every so often.

He was very upset.

Let the fucker suffer, say I.

Perhaps the most remarkable news of all came from that old fart Detective Inspector Roger Hull.

I was actually sworn to secrecy, which I consider a fucking liberty, but apparently The Cops, much maligned and drained of urine, had actually found The Piss Industry Murderer.

Can this be so?

Apparently it can. Apparently The Piss Industry Murderer was none other than suspended state police officer Derek Mehmet who had gone mental with fire and accelerant in the cellars of The Town Hall Hotel, and reduced it, himself and others to five-eighths of fuck-all.

This cannot be true! He was a good natured harmless nong at best!

With Derek's remains lay the awful iron bar with which The Piss Industry Murderer did his fatal wallopings. Derek was seen going into the cellars in his flasher raincoat. He had been noticeably fucked for some time. We failed to heed his cry for help. He was one who slipped through the net.

You fucking beauty!

Derek copped for the lot, every element of walloping, every breakage and loss and was a fuck's sight more use in death than he had been in life.

I could not have been better pleased and, insofar as I was able propped in a bed, I hung my head with pretended woe.

Basically Roger Hull wanted me to think well of and say nice things about The Filth, the Health Service and The State Government. I asked myself what young Kemel might do in my situation.

I told Roger I was shocked by this shocking news. I characterised it as “shit news” and sought pardon for my French. I had trusted and confided in Sergeant Mehmet, I confided, and he in me. I knew he was doing it tough. He didn’t complain, Derek was no whinger, but he changed. I thought I noticed a slow change. He changed and became, I think, more furtive. He helped me at a difficult time in my life and I will never forgive myself for not knowing the opportunity to repay that debt.

When did I think I might be up for that photograph?

I said this was news that needed serious thought and that my mind and body was raw with injury and cure and care. I said this was appalling news and, until I came to terms with it, I could do nothing else.

“Nothing at all?”

“How could any of us have known?” I implored the Inspector, determined to let the little twat stew outside for half an hour while I relished this magnificent development.

“And we did catch the fucker in the end,” he stressed.

“I don’t blame you, Roger. You are but a messenger doing your duty. A harbinger, if you will. In this instance one of destabilising catastrophe. When a leading figure in our State’s fight against the forces of anarchy indulges in senseless slaughter and destruction of property this is bad news for all of us.”

“Any chance of that photo today?”

I looked at him with death-bed sincerity. “Roger: you have shocked me to the core. Give me half an hour. Let me get my head around this abhorrent but persuasive theory you introduce to me.”

He left. I loved it.

They took photos and it was a right fucking circus.

But there was other remarkable news as well.

Vincent came in again and looked shithouse. Twitchy and teary. He had this little, fat bastard Monk as a minder and grovelled in ways I would not have thought seemly for one of his office.

How could he seek forgiveness for my injury in his clumsy and inept attempts to be cluey and ept? How, how, how?

Oh how that fucker wailed.

I’d have to forgive him or never be shot of the prick. I forgave him, so I did, and he slobbered all over my hand. The Monk beamed with delight.

Vincent came closer to my face than I would have preferred.

“We’ve lost Andy,” he sobbed. “Gone. Lost. Surrendered. Lost. Andy is with The Lord.”

The snivelling fucker wouldn’t let go of my hand.

“Andy saw everything, you know. Everything. From his heroic bed of pain. Just as he was building up his strength and mental health he saw everything on the link: the explosion, the flying thing that did Christine, the way she plugged up that hole.”

Woo-hoo!

“She wouldn’t have felt a thing. Thank you Lord. It was over for Christine well before she hit the flame. The twitching was all nerve related,” he blubbed.

“But Andy saw everything. Everything. Every horror. Every twitch. Live. High definition. And it was too much for his noble heart. He made a few strangled gasping noises, went a filthy colour and died of a massive heart attack.”

The little fat Monk spoke for the first time: “Our Lord does work in mysterious ways,” he smiled, “it’s widely recognised,” and he led Vincent away to get better somewhere quiet.

I’d killed Andy Carter by remote control. How about that?!

That one-legged independent clown Councillor Nazir Hussein hopped in like a little ray of moonshine.

He was all over me like a rash. Boy, was I fucking great or what?! He could almost guarantee me a seat on the Municipal Council in the forthcoming elections. With the right advice and friends, who knew where this ascent would end?

I thought I might have a word with Kemel about that one

Boasting legal qualifications an infant with a name like Wokkapin brought me CityZen documents.

Apparently Andy Carter’s old cow of a Mother had been so affected by the death of her dead-shit daughter-in-law and half-dead son that she dropped dead on the spot. Vincent was my plaything and, there being none remaining, having reached majority, left to dishonour Andy’s wishes, I copped the lot.

I should sign where indicated, save copies marked B for my files and return copies marked A and C at my earliest convenience.

No worries.

I was being heartlessly turfed from my downy couch at two p.m. Most of the stuff had been unplugged. I was idly feeling my old self when Dawn walked in.

That was a surprise. I imagined she would be hanging with mature manure artists and surplus musicians near Bega.

Her visit was brief and bewildering.

She was not going. She was staying. She could not desert CityZen after all that had happened.

Fair enough I thought, determined not to give too much away. So be it.

She claimed to have been greatly conflicted for some time.

Fair enough I thought again. So be it.

She said she would leave me now in peace. She would be in touch. She said we would have to see how things went.

I gave a wan smile. What the fuck did she mean by that “how things went” observation?

What things?

She gave me a look that could have meant anything or nothing and walked out very visually.

Talk about fucking enigmatic!

Reinhardt Goolie was my Number One fan. It made the flesh creep but I saved his fucking life. Back in The Town Hall Hotel, he believed, I grabbed him, screamed: “Come on!” into his writhing face and flung him to safety. Had he remained at his place certain death from flaming pub lumps was his lot.

Kemel had not been idle in my time of disability. He was bursting with ideas and enthusiasm and introduced me to a smarmy git in a suit. The git was called Garth Fotter.

Garth was bursting with ideas as well.

How well things had turned out after all.

My thoughts be bloody.

I could hardly wait.

*. . . here endeth the first lesson . . .*