



Dirty Work at the Crossroads



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On Conception, Characterization and Consistency

Given the fact that this story has taken around twenty years to develop from a vague idea to a complete work of fiction, it's hardly surprising to find that some things in there don't quite add up.

When I started on the story, for example, no one had heard of the internet, and mobile phones, if they existed, were regarded as yuppie toys rather than the almost ubiquitous items they are today.

Given the fact that various parts of this story have been written at different times over a twenty year period it would be unsurprising to find that there's the odd inconsistency in the text.

A nit-picker might, for example, take issue with the sires of a certain string of racehorses, but those were moderately successful sires when that part was being composed, so there they are.

The story itself owes its origins to a series of conversations in the side bar at the Grandview, and anyone familiar with my social circle at the time would be able to identify a number of characters in the story.

It's fairly obvious that Gordon Jeffrey equates pretty well to the late John Lester, and David Herston shares interests and character traits with the author.

There are fairly obvious real life equivalents for Hopalong Cassidy, Sandy McNab, His Lordship and The Duchess, Dagwood and Blondie and various other characters scattered through the narrative, but in most cases the way in which those characters are portrayed reflects the needs of an entirely fictional plot line.

Conversations about winning the Lotto were commonplace in that particular environment, and the means through which it is done in the plot line was one that I floated as a possibility at the time. Lack of computer programming skills stopped that concept in its tracks, but the idea was there and started me wondering what would happen if such a mechanism had paid off.

Those thoughts led to a scenario that owes a great deal to the Blandings novels of P.G. Wodehouse with alcoholic elements that come from a series of paperbacks titles **MASH Goes To (Insert Exotic Location Here)** which found their way into my library during the seventies.

Having worked out a basic premise, fleshing things out by turning to familiar figures would probably come as no great surprise.

In most cases the roles they play are incidental to the unfolding narrative, though I should note some significant departure from anything resembling reality.

Given the *two blokes with a pile of money* scenario it's easy to come up with a two or more parties interested in getting a share of it.

In this case, it's a mother and daughter looking at a double wedding, though it could, in a future instalment, be a pair of lesbians intending to take over The Crossroads for a *wymmins cooperative* and expropriate a large part of the Jeffrey/Herston fortune to fund the enterprise.

Some of the characters who turn up along the way were put in there to see what happens.

The crew from the tug boat, for example, get far more coverage than they need, but I had them involved in a couple of intrigues I'd pencilled in, including

the possibility that Jeffrey might avoid the wrath of a vengeful Olga by escaping to sea as an unofficial passenger on a tug.

They also provide an excuse for Jeffrey to overhear certain confidences.

Sascha and The Butch, the duo that play in the Palace Beer Garden, have real life models, though to the best of my knowledge those models have never actually performed together. There was the possibility of a Herston-Sascha-Boris The Backdooring Bastard tussle for Bernelle's affections that was shelved so Boris could host a sea-borne party (because someone needed to).

Speaking of Boris the Backdooring Bastard, his original inclusion was meant to add a degree of three-way intrigue to the musical beds side of things.

The inspiration for the original version was a character from the **MASH Goes To** books, a Russian opera singer named Boris Alexandrovitch Korsky-Rimsakov, a backdooring bastard of the first, second and quite possibly third water.

I envisaged an imposing bearded figure with a rich baritone and an unctuous manner that would almost cause women's underwear to slide themselves down, and was more than slightly bemused when an acquaintance claimed the character was based on him.

He did not appear to have any difficulty with that, so the character changed slightly to fit that supposition. Of course, I realize that he's probably changed his mind over the intervening period, and I'll have to change them back.

At that stage he'll probably disappear completely, and be replaced by someone entirely different

Readers may well have suspicions about the identities of Olga and Bernelle, and I can categorically state that there aren't any, at least not in a mother and daughter combination.

You could find the prototype for Bernelle in a couple of blonde students in Hughesy's classes over the years, but if you're looking for my actual model I'd point the reader towards a Jean Kitson character from the mid-eighties **The Big Gig** (if anyone remembers Candida) who has sort of morphed into someone with

a strong physical resemblance to, say, Lara Bingle. If there are any ex-students who now resemble that amalgam I'd like to have met them, say, twenty years ago.

Olga, to the best of my knowledge or recollection, is entirely fictional,.

The northern European extraction is necessary to throw in the requisite genetic material that produces the daughter.

It also provides the possibility for the daughter to change her name by deed poll from Bernelle Butler to Marilyn Mundsén, since Mundsén is Mum's maiden name.

As major players in the musical beds tug of war, The Terrible Twins needed an occupation that would allow them to appear and disappear from the stage, and the publication schedule of the local paper worked nicely.

They needed to work together, and regular shift work, with its week by week schedule didn't quite fit. The Twins journalistic role could have added another plot line to the developing intrigue.

While that didn't turn up this tome, it's always a possibility in a sequel.

It always helps to have a semi-domesticated journo hanging around a fictional environment. Two would be even better. make them female, with ataste for the high life and the possibilities open up further.

The reader may also find an obvious model for D'Artagnan, who I see as the epitome of the temperamental and highly opinionated French chef.

Since he's working in a country pub, the guy's probably not going to be a *real* chef, and in my reading of the situation would probably try to make up for a lack of formal qualifications by insisting that there was a particular way in which things should be done.

That *doctrinaire* character trait that would bring him into frequent conflict with an assertive supervisor with her own version of those issues.

Given a French chef and three apprentices in the kitchen the Three Musketeer references are obvious.

There's a fairly obvious real-life model for Gilhooley, though he never, to the best of my knowledge, mastered the art of computer programming.

His wife was the long-suffering almost diametrical opposite of the character who appears here as The Iron Maiden. That character needed to be a shift worker so Gilhooley could slip surreptitiously back into town in daylight hours without fear of being detected.

Familiarity with the alleged personality characteristics required in aspirants to the position of Matron at a hospital dates back to my ex-wife's stint as a student nurse in the early seventies.

The Iron Maiden side of things also offered possibilities for complications in the plot line that turned out to be unnecessary this time around. The possibility of forensic accountants working through Gilhooley's financial records is an obvious and highly likely starter if there is a sequel.

Anyone familiar with the times can probably identify the prototype for Scott Waddington, though the relocation to Sydney side of things is entirely fictional.

On the racing front, Wally Matthews is a completely incidental character who needed a name while Little Tony the Mafia man is an entirely imaginary construct based on an account of betting on the nod at Randwick from a car salesman who wasn't the template from which Scott Waddington was cut.

Or maybe he was, in terms of a much more substantial physiognomy.

Throughout the story, the reader will come across references to a number of Herston's erstwhile cricket acquaintances which are convenient ways of explaining things away and resolving side issues. In such cases, I've borrowed from real, life and modified to fit whatever the circumstances require.

The members of the two cricket teams also have the odd real life equivalent but all have been through several transformations.

The events within the game are entirely fictional.



The First Bit

The introductory section of the story, stretching from David Herston's arrival in the coastal North Queensland town of Denison to the point in the story where he and his partner in crime succeed in taking out the big one in a Saturday night Lotto draw.

After It Was All Over

In the Beginning

Sunday

Settling In

The Money Game

Going for the Big One

New Faces

Life Goes On

The Big Collect

After It Was All Over

"We all deserve," remarked Jeffrey, "to be kneed in the knackers."

The blue tin in his right hand resumed its northward journey and another mouthful was taken. No further comment followed. I gazed thoughtfully into the depths of my glass of red and nodded agreement. It had been a close-run thing, but through good luck rather than good management the pair of us had, in the end, successfully avoided the dread chains of matrimony.

Not that I was particularly concerned by Jeffrey's escape from the matrimonial noose. After his deeds of the previous fortnight marriage was probably no more, and certainly no less, than he deserved.

I took another mouthful and thought there were many married acquaintances who would have found his latest escape from the institution of marriage unsettling. *Why, they would have asked, should he be happy, footloose and fancy-free?*

Over the years more than one drinker at the Palace, faced with a crisis at home while Jeffrey carried on his merry way at the other end of the bar, had hoped *some real bitch settles that little prick down and gives him a really hard time. He bloody deserves it.*

Whether the opinion stemmed from a desire to *see the bastard suffer* as Captain Headrush might have put it, or a wish to see Jeffrey become a victim of gynocratic oppression that provides a source of amusement when it's some other poor bastard copping it, was hard to say.

Though he'd sailed perilously close to the wind many times, he always seemed to extricate himself at the last minute. This most recent effort had been closer to the breeze than most.

I would not, of course, have ventured to express such an opinion aloud. I knew my companion's views on the subject too well to mention the idea, even as a joke.

The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the greenery above our heads as Jeffrey reached across to take another swig from the ever-present tin brewed in the land of the Southern Cross, but no further comment was forthcoming.

As my mind tracked back over the preceding fortnight, I shuddered.

It had been too close for comfort, but it seemed that the affair of the Old Flame, the Lovely Bernelle, assorted Dipsomaniacs and the Mafia had reached a satisfactory conclusion. I was retracing the events that had led the pair of us to the brink of the matrimonial abyss, when Jeffrey spoke again.

"Yep. Kneed in the knackers. The lot of us."

This was too much to pass without comment.

If anyone had been responsible for landing the pair of us in the crisis from which we had only just escaped, it was the individual advocating the disciplinary knee to the groin.

My part in the proceedings had, in my opinion at least, been exemplary.

"The lot of us be buggered. You're the one who landed us in the shit. If anyone's balls are going to be on the firing line, yours are the ones that should be in pride of place. You keep Olga coming around here while you're rooting the Terrible Twins, and you expect nothing to happen? Olga gets her daughter involved and nearly lands me in the shit. No mate, if anyone's knackers deserve the knee it's bloody yours."

Jeffrey was obviously surprised at the tone of my voice.

More than one acquaintance had remarked on my apparent calm in the face of chaos about me, a character trait coming from years of dealing with fractious students and disagreeable parents.

I sat back and pondered the current form reversal.

Jeffrey did the same for a moment, then springing to his feet with a cry of *It's empty again!* disappeared indoors in search of a replacement.

Past performances in the face of criticism suggested it was unlikely he'd be sighted for at least half an hour.

Given the time of day and the fact that the other occupants of our *menage a plenty* were out and about in the course of their employment-related activities, the solitude presented an opportunity to reflect on recent events.

It may, at times as this narrative unfolds, appear that I have no time for women. This would be a complete misunderstanding.

Over the years, there had been a large number of women with whom I have enjoyed a more than convivial relationship.

They've included bar attendants, girls working in music shops, waitresses, the staff of the local TAB, and wives and girlfriends of friends and colleagues who were sensible enough to blame their late arrival on their own inadequacies rather than the incipient alcoholism of their companions.

That's not to mention those of my former female colleagues who would feel the need for a reviver at the end of a hard day at the coalface.

Teaching can be a difficult profession, and it was not uncommon to find one or more females arriving at the Palace seeking treatment for emotional trauma.

In other words, I get along perfectly well with female acquaintances with whom I have been privileged to share some common interest.

Equally obviously, there had been, over the years, a number of wowsers and prudes, as well as wives and girlfriends of acquaintances who have blamed their late arrival, faced with the prospect of a roast which has been placed in the freezer or a salad to be found in the oven, on the alcoholism of their companions.

You can add to that list those of my former colleagues who regarded the need of a reviver at the end of a hard day at the coalface as a sign of personal weakness at least, or serious moral degeneracy at worst.

I had often wondered how those people, most of them being of the female persuasion, recovered from incidents of emotional stress.

I felt sorry for their husbands and boyfriends.

With several thorny entanglements behind me, I've come to the conclusion that it is wise to avoid things which you perform badly, and stick to those which you do well.

That being so, it would appear to be an idea to avoid emotional entanglement with the opposite sex.

The events of the preceding fortnight would, I concluded, reinforce that view.

On the other hand, I reckon I can drink beer (and other beverages) rather well.

In the Beginning

But let's not start at the end. Let's go back to that Saturday afternoon when a Greyhound Bus pulled up in front of Denison Travel, and a nervous teacher alighted, uncertain what the future held in store.

Having spent ten years at the same school, I thought I'd found a niche which would do me for the duration. A change of principal and the decision to open a new school in a nearby suburb put the kibosh on that and created a situation where current staff allocations were overgenerous, and though the precise impact on numbers was still to be determined, the staffing inspector decided to relocate some of the current staff at sooner rather than later.

In this he was aided, I suspect, by a recently arrived principal apparently intent on remodelling the school into something substantially different from the well-oiled machine he'd inherited.

Once he'd changed the office furniture and redesigned the report card he turned his attention to the staff.

"Let's put it this way, Mr Herston," he remarked as he handed me the transfer papers. "At least you know where you're going next year. There may be seven or eight of your erstwhile colleagues who'll be faced with a much more, shall we say, *sudden* relocation in February or March."

Yeah, I thought, and more than likely they'll be the silly bastards who thought you were joking when you suggested that their classrooms needed a little brightening up. Curtains? Nice vases of flowers? I'll give you a nice bunch of something.

“And I’m assured,” he went on, “there will be a comfortable duplex in teacher accommodation when you arrive there to take up your new responsibilities.”

A phone call the next day established that he was correct in that regard and that my new flat-mate was a Rugby-playing physical education teacher who would take a drink.

Under the circumstances, I had no choice but to set the removalists loose among my goods and chattels and head off on holidays.

A mate had inveigled me into joining the regional primary schools’ cricket team at the state championships. My plan was to start there and adjourn to my parents’ place, returning to Townsville two weeks before school was due to resume to make final adjustments before my relocation.

A phone call suggested there was no need to hurry since those who lived in teacher accommodation would be unlikely to be back much before the second-last weekend of the holidays. It was diplomatic to delay my arrival anyway because it would make it easier to sort out *how you’re going to run things in the flat*.

“So,” I suggested, “bearing in mind that there are pupil-free days on the 24th and 25th and Australia Day is on the Friday I’d be best off turning up around the Saturday. The 20th?”

“That’d be right. If you’re coming on the bus, I’ll drop down to pick you up and drop you round to the accommodation. If Roger isn’t back by then I’ll have a set of keys for you, but I wouldn’t be in any hurry to get your gear down here until the pupil-free days. You can take half a day off to unpack if you need to. We’re pretty flexible down this way.”

I booked a seat on a bus, then rang the removalists to arrange for things to be delivered, and waited.

I wasn’t feeling all that well when I boarded the bus just before lunch time on Saturday, but that was probably due to a mild dose of apprehension rather than anything I’d drunk or not eaten the night before.

A substantial brunch did something to remedy that situation, but while it made a difference, I was only semiconscious for the two-and-a-half hour journey.

I'd had a brief glance at the form for the races, but decided not to have a bet.

As the coach swept into downtown Denison, I prepared to do my best to make a reasonable first impression. When the bus came to a stop, there was nothing for it but to launch into the unknown. I landed on the footpath to find my suitcase and the carton containing the boom box waiting for me.

The driver had disappeared inside the travel agency.

Fine, I thought, there's supposed to be a Principal round here. Mind you, he did suggest a degree of flexibility.

Up and down the street, nothing stirred.

Behind me, the travel agency door opened, and the driver emerged, followed by an older bloke who appeared to have recently been employed as a gardener.

He looked over in my direction.

“You Mr Herston?” he enquired.

I nodded. The Principal had indicated a degree of flexibility, but I doubted that flexibility would transform an educational administrator into a groundsman. *This bloke, I decided, wasn't my new boss.*

“Got a message for you from Mr Bridger,” the horticulturist went on. “He's been called out of town suddenly. His Mum's seriously ill and we've just managed to get him onto a plane out of Prossie. Only found out this morning. He said to tell you he's booked you into the Palace Hotel until Monday, and if you turn up at school then someone will be able to fix you up for the teacher accommodation. Your accommodation at the Palace will be at the right price, so you're going to be out of pocket.”

This bloke was either the local travel agent or his official representative.

“Fine,” I said. “Point me in the right direction and I'll be off...”

“No need for that. Give it a minute or two after the bus has gone so I can lock up the office and I’ll drop you down there. Throw your bag in the ute over there.”

The utility was more or less cut from the same cloth as its owner, and once the office was secure a short trip along the main street and a right-hand turn saw the ancient vehicle grind to a halt outside a building on the corner that could best be described as *big old North Australian country pub*.

“There you go,” the driver said. “Head in the side door and look for Mr Jeffrey. He’ll look after you. The owners are away on holidays and he’s looking after the place.”

I retrieved my suitcase, sat the boom box carton on my shoulder, crossed the footpath and walked through the open door into an angled side bar.

Through the doorway on my right was an L-shaped public bar while to my left a lounge area opened onto what looked like a dining room.

The only sign of life was a figure sitting at the bar with his back to me.

A transistor beside his right elbow and several newspapers suggested he was studying the racing form and might not appreciate being interrupted.

I walked past him and looked around in the manner of a thirsty traveller in search of refreshment.

The figure at the bar looked up.

“You Herston?” he asked. I nodded.

“You’re just in time. Tonight we’ve got the semifinals of the boot-throwing and a round of international hog-calling karaoke. You’ll have a ringside seat. Magpie!”

A woman in her late thirties or early forties appeared round the corner of the public bar.

If this was Magpie, the nickname was likely to originate from a prominent beak-like nose. Subsequent experience suggested the ability to swoop on cash lying on the bar may also have had something to do with it.

“It’s no good, Jeffrey, You know what they said before they left yesterday. No rum until an hour before closing time.” She turned in my direction. “He keeps on trying it on, but he knows I won’t give it to him. What can I do for you?”

Her voice bore a greater resemblance to a crow with a leg caught in a barbed-wire fence than anything human. The nickname was apparently based on more than mere physical appearance.

“This,” the bloke at the bar interjected, “is Mr Herston, Magpie. He’ll need a beer and the keys to Number Twelve. The school rang this morning and asked us to look after him for the weekend. Bridger’s been called away and this bloke can’t get into teacher accommodation till Monday, so it’s the right price. They’ll get their money back from him over the next year or so by the looks. Fix him up with that stuff. I’m off to the chaff cutter to fill up His Lordship’s account.”

He turned towards me.

“You a punter? Got a phone account? If not, slip us twenty bucks and I’ll shoot it into His Lordship’s account to save you a walk.”

As I handed over the twenty I was quickly developing a belief that if *we’re pretty flexible down here* wasn’t the town motto, it should be. Pocketing the money, Jeffrey headed off through the public bar, disappearing through the door on the other side.

I looked towards Magpie and indicated that a stubby of Cascade would be fine. While she headed off I reflected on my venture into the unknown.

I had, it seemed, landed on my feet, at least for the time being.

Magpie returned with beer, keys and directions to my room.

“Up the stairs, then it’s left, right, left.” She waved towards the stairwell as she spoke. “It’s right down the end on the main street side. That way you can sit on the veranda in the morning. You’ll find there’s some stuff in the wardrobe, but if you don’t have anything that needs hanging up that shouldn’t bother you. The door isn’t locked at the moment, but if you want to be on the safe side.”

“Left, right, left,” I replied. “Like marching, eh?”

“That’s the sort of thing he’d come up with.” She nodded towards the door.

A trip upstairs to deposit my suitcase was indicated, before what would more than likely degenerate into a lengthy session. Forewarned is forearmed, and there is an obvious advantage in knowing where you're going to be sleeping and being able to find the location when bedtime approaches.

Upstairs the directions were easy enough.

Left took me onto a veranda overlooking an internal courtyard.

Right led towards the veranda which looked out over the main street, before Left took me down a corridor, odd numbers on the left, even on the right.

Opening the unlocked door I found what I expected.

There was a basin, a bed, a chair and a wardrobe.

A set of doors led onto the veranda, though thick curtains meant there was no way to enjoy the view. I lifted the curtain, peered through the glass and sighted a table and several chairs outside.

Judging by the ashtrays, the spot was a popular rendezvous outside trading hours and either the domestic staff didn't work on weekends, or the veranda was outside their jurisdiction. The bed, however, had been made.

I opened the wardrobe and found a collection of overalls and work apparel hanging there.

Fine, I thought, as I heaved the suitcase onto the bed. *The regular occupant is obviously away for the weekend, and that's the reason for the right price. No drama, I can live out of this.*

I extracted the toiletries bag, placed it on the wash basin, closed the suitcase, shifted it to the chair, shoved the boom box under the bed and decided there was no point hanging around. With the form guide in the back pocket, I closed the door, thought about locking it, decided discretion was the better part of valour, and headed downstairs.

I was halfway down the stairs when Jeffrey emerged from the public bar.

He looked up, remarked that they were up to Race Five at Randwick and turned, indicating that I should follow.

The public bar was L-shaped, and since he was five metres in front of me, by the time I reached the point of the L, I could see Jeffrey's back disappearing into what was probably the office.

Once I'd secured a refill, I headed in the same direction and discovered my guess was correct. The office was spacious, with a couple of armchairs, a desk and office chair, a set of speakers and a TV showing the betting market for Randwick Race Five.

Jeffrey pointed towards the other armchair.

“Make yourself comfortable. I don't usually get in here on Saturday afternoon, but His Lordship's away on the Gold Coast, and this way I don't have to walk to the phone.”

He stood, walked to the doorway, peered around the corner, then disappeared momentarily into the space behind the bar, reappearing with a tin of Fosters in his hand.

“She does a good job with the glasses, that Magpie. Cleanest beer glasses in town... ‘Course, while she's busy with the glasses, there's plenty of opportunity for a smart lad who's quick on his feet.”

He glanced towards the stubby in my hand.

“Lesson Number One, in case you haven't worked it out for yourself. Draught beer may taste better, but it's hard to find at the right price. Unless His Lordship's shouting, of course. Like anything in the next? No? Well, excuse me. You didn't hear this, by the way.”

He picked up the phone, pressed a button, paused for a moment, and rattled off “234043... BHLB... SR 5 Horse 6 five the win ... SR5 Trifecta box 1, 4, 6 and 9 for a half... No, thank *you* very much.”

He hung up, turned towards me and continued.

“Most Saturdays I have to listen on the tranny and watch on the TV in the bar, but this way Magpie can watch what she likes until it gets busy. I can save myself a walk, and drinks are at the right price, provided you’re quick enough on your feet”

“And if it gets too busy?” I asked. “Or if Magpie’s standing between you and the fridge door?”

“In that case I have to walk a little further. There’s a cold room the other side of the kitchen. I have to make sure it’s properly stocked, so I do, if you follow what I mean. Some time over the next hour or so she’ll ask me to bring up a couple of cartons for the bar. That’s about the time when the little esky in the corner behind you will magically receive enough to keep us going for the rest of the afternoon, You’re on Cascade? I’ll make sure I get a few more when I do that run. Anything left will come in handy when I clean the kitchen tomorrow morning..”

“And no one’s the wiser?”

“Well,” Jeffrey replied, “stock control isn’t His Lordship’s strong point, so you’re right provided you drink slowly, stay out of shouts and pay for every second or third beer. ‘Course, since cans aren’t transparent it makes it harder for ‘em to keep track of what you’re doing.”

“You’re not worried about telling me all this? What if I went and blabbed the details to the boss?”

“Then it’d take me a day or two to work out a new system. Basically, they can’t operate without me. Or rather they *could*, but His Lordship would have to do more work. The Duchess would have to drop the kids off at school in the morning, pick them up in the afternoon, pay someone to clean the kitchen on Sunday. Double time, that’d be, and they’re not keen on paying double time. If they weren’t on holidays His Lordship would be looking after the bar himself unless it started to get busy. If it did he’d be on the blower to Magpie to get her to start early.”

“So you’re pretty much indispensable,” I suggested.

“No one’s actually indispensable, but dispensing with some of us might be highly inconvenient.”

“What about the phone account? Won't he notice what's going on?”

“As long as what's in there when he gets back on Tuesday is about what it was on Thursday he won't be too worried. He'll be at the track this afternoon so he won't be using the account himself.”

“So, if you run out of money, I guess you can use some of his as long as you top it up on Monday...”

“Which is, of course, payday.”

“What happens if you win?” On the screen, the field was moving into the barriers for Race 5 at Randwick. “What if you get that trifecta you just put on? How do you get that out before he notices?”

“Well, I know where his swipe card is kept, and where I can get a couple of withdrawal slips with his signature. If I can't get my hands on one of those, I can do a fair approximation. If he gets a trifecta up I usually have to go and get the proceeds before she notices and decides she needs a new outfit or necklace or something.”

“Sort of like the episode of Fawlty Towers where Basil's backed the horse, and he doesn't want Sybil to find out about it...”

“Pretty much. Not that Fawlty Towers has anything on this place. Or the whole town. Welcome to the only open asylum in the world run by the inmates. Anyway, enough of that. What's your story?”

There was a pause while they went around at Randwick.

As they hurtled down the straight Jeffrey's selection hit the lead, only to be claimed by the top weight in the shadows of the post. The judge called for the photo to determine third, with the runner needed for the trifecta beaten a nose into fourth.

While I waited for expressions of disgust to subside, I consulted the form guide, picked two runners that could be backed for a fiver each way, and when calm was restored gave a summary of my career and interests.

Half way through, Magpie's head appeared in the doorway indicating the time to replenish the eskies in the bar was at hand. Despite assurances that assistance was unnecessary I finished the tale while cartons were ferried from cold room to bar.

With task accomplished, the rest of the afternoon passed quietly enough.

One of my selections saluted at Sandown, ensuring I could have an interest in the last. The lead-up to that race had seen the office returned to its regular state, empties transferred to the bin out the back and Jeffrey and I relocated to the side bar where I had met him in time to switch the television in the bar over to Sky Channel.

“Good spot, this,” remarked Jeffrey. “Gives you a good view of both entrances and it's close enough to the till to make sure you can always get a drink. You'll see what I mean in a couple of hours. ‘Course, it also makes you easy to find, but that's all part of the deal.”

At that moment, the field headed off, and our attention was diverted for long enough to establish that, again our selections had finished first, second and fourth, so while we missed the trifecta our saver in the quinella paid reasonably, and I picked up a place dividend for the second

Once correct weight was posted I was left to hold the fort while Jeffrey restored His Lordship's account to something approximating its Saturday morning state. Things were quiet, and that gave me the opportunity to learn I might come across Magpie's offspring if I found myself teaching Year Five or Six.

Jeffrey's return delivered a small dividend.

With that tucked away in the wallet, I settled back to see what the evening had in store.

From five-thirty onwards, the pub filled and we were joined just after six by a bloke wearing a T-shirt advertising a well-known rock festival (*Three days of love, peace and happiness*). He walked with a limp and introduced himself as Jack Cassidy.

“No relation, of course, to the bass player from the Jefferson Airplane, who, of course, played there,” I suggested, with a nod towards the shirt.

“You mean *Morning maniac music*? No. Different spelling too. Backing a winner Jeffrey?”

The response suggested that, while proceedings had been reasonably profitable, the right result in a certain photo finish would have been very helpful.

“But you know you’ll never win, Jeffrey. Everyone knows the races are rigged. Taxation by stealth, that’s what it is. Bastards have been doing it for years. The TAB’s just another ploy by money-hungry governments to rip off the workers.”

“As you keep suggesting, and there might well be something in it. We’d be all right if we knew someone who worked for the *Sunday Mail*. Clark Kent’s talking about applying for a job down there. We’ll be all right if he gets that. Clark Kent’s the boy wonder reporter on the paper,” Jeffrey explained.

“So how do you figure that?” Cassidy seemed unconvinced.

“Ever been to the pictures in Brisbane on a Saturday night?”

Cassidy replied he had, but wasn’t sure about the point being made.

“So you’ve noticed when you walk out of the pictures on a Saturday night you can buy the Sunday morning papers even though it’s Saturday night?”

“True...”

“How long do you think it takes to print a paper that size? Takes ‘em three hours to print the local rag. At least that’s what Catfish down the printery reckons. Three hours for the *Sleepy Hollow Sausage Wrapper*, so the *Sunday Mail* would need at least double that.”

The response seemed to indicate agreement.

“Which means,” Jeffrey continued, “if they’re going to have the paper on the streets by ten-thirty, they’d have to start the print run about four-thirty...”

“True.”

“The last race on a Saturday arvo is usually some time around five, and the Lotto draw isn’t till eight-thirty, and those results are all in the paper you can buy at half-past ten.”

“Right.”

“So if you knew someone who works on the paper you could get those results before they happen.”

“Of course,” Cassidy concurred. “But it’d never work because all those bastards would have to sign a confidentiality agreement. Face it, Jeffrey, you can’t win. The system won’t let you.”

He wandered towards a group at an adjacent table, shaking his head.

“Bastard,” Jeffrey muttered. “Fetch me the chain saw. We’ll leave the mongrel without a leg to stand on.”

My expression must have indicated I had no idea what he was talking about.

“That gentleman is widely known as Hopalong Cassidy. Due largely to the fact he drove his panel van into one of the coconut palms on the way into town. Left his right leg in the wreckage. Been nuts ever since. Spends all his time scoffing at anyone who comes up with a way to make a quid. Lives upstairs in the servo next door. If you need your car fixed, he’s the bloke to do it. Does a great job, but that’s no excuse.”

He paused as a couple inveigled their way between us in an attempt to acquire liquid refreshment.

“Pot of Fourex and a white wine for an old digger, Magpie,” the male half of the combo requested. “RSL prices, of course. Evening, Jeffrey. Sorry to intrude but we’re rapidly dehydrating.”

“This, Herston, is the incomparable Merry Frockster, otherwise known as James Winsome, or Dagwood, and this,” indicating the female half of the duo, “is the lovely Jane, widely known, for obvious reasons, as Blondie.”

As he spoke, I noticed the resemblance to the singer of *Heart Of Glass* was quite remarkable.

“I’d buy all my outfits from their boutique, but they cater for the younger set and don’t have a great range for the more mature figure.”

Once their refreshments had arrived I learned the arrivals operated a ladies fashion outlet. With the introductions were complete, idle conversation continued until we were rejoined by Mr Cassidy and another gentleman whose name was Captain Headrush.

“The head rush is on,” he informed us. “Two winners at Home Hill this afternoon.”

While Captain Headrush was connected to the racing industry, hobby training rarely pays well enough to take the place of regular work. As a taxi driver he needed to register zero blood alcohol should he be tested while behind the wheel, so he rarely had more than one beer when he called in to the Palace.

Unless, of course, circumstances permitted him to let his head go.

A head rush of considerable proportions ensued over the next couple of hours.

Over the course of the evening, I concluded the Palace provided a hub for the local night life.

Jeffrey was frequently called away on messages, reinforcing his explanation of his place in the order of things and the statement that his spot at the bar made him easy to find.

He seemed permanently on call, and his habit of awarding himself a range of fringe benefits seemed fair enough given the impossibility of accurately entering his working hours on a time sheet.

The crowd began to thin as the clock rolled towards ten, and once the premises had cleared I found myself on the upstairs veranda with a bottle of red, Jeffrey, Magpie and the Frenchman who had been responsible for the evening’s culinary delights, a gentleman known as D'Artagnan.

Apart from Jeffrey, whose official job description involved dish washing, the rest of the kitchen staff comprised three apprentices named Athos, Porthos and D'Aramis and an assortment of wait staff and associated hangers on..

Once Magpie had decided her offspring needed a mother's attention, and D'Artagnan departed I helped Jeffery drain the bottle, enjoying the still of the night, occasionally interrupted by a car heading along the main street. With the bottle drained, it was time to hit the sack.

As I lay in bed, I reflected on the day's events, eventually falling asleep in spite of the variety of voices, thumps, bangs, crashes and other nightly noises that seemed to have started as soon as I turned off the light

Sunday

I woke the next morning to the sound of someone banging on the hall-side door. The room was pitch black, except for a beam of light creeping through a gap between the curtains and the veranda door. I had no idea what the time might be.

“Yeah?” I inquired. “What’s up?”

Jeffrey’s voice came from outside. “There’s breakfast down in the kitchen if you want it in the next half-hour. After that it’s look after yourself.”

Ten minutes later, showered but neither bright-eyed nor bushy-tailed, I found my way into the kitchen where half a dozen individuals were demolishing plates of bacon and eggs. Jeffrey hovered nearby.

“This, gentlemen, is Mr Herston. First name David, school teacher to the stars and newly arrived in Denison. These gentlemen, Herston, are the crew from one of the tugs tied up over there.”

He pointed vaguely in what I later learned was the direction of the jetty.

“Allow me to introduce The Doctor, Red Rodney, Mumbles, Shuffles, Staggers and Curses. You probably heard them come in last night just after we decided to call it quits. I try to sit up till the bastards get back from the tugs, but they get me every time.”

“Yeah,” the Doctor remarked. “We sit down there on the jetty till we see the lights in the pub go off, don’t we fellas?”

There was general agreement that the hour of their arrival was unrelated to shipping schedules, tides, or any other considerations.

“You know, Jeffrey, we’re only down here on a Sunday morning,” Red Rodney added, “so we can add a few more things to the pile of shit you’ve got to wash up when you clean the kitchen. We’d never dream of lifting a finger to help out.”

“Actually,” he turned in my direction, “the cafe in the main street doesn’t open on Sunday. Otherwise we’d be perving on Sandra, but it’s shut and so we’ve got to put up with this grumpy old bastard.”

“We’ll be nice and give him a hand with the cleaning till the one-dayer at the Gabba starts,” The Doctor added. “Least we can do since he’s been kind enough to fix us this spread of bacon and eggs. Plenty there if you’re that way inclined. There’s cereal, fruit juice in the fridge and the bread’s right beside the toaster.”

While I helped myself, the others started to clear the debris.

When I’d finished the washing up was done, and my new acquaintances were engaged in various activities around the work space. This was the regular Sunday ritual unless the tugs were required to assist with shipping at the bulk coal terminal north of town.

“If we’re on call,” Red Rodney explained, “we get brekky in the galley on board and Jeffrey gets to clean the kitchen by himself, but if we’re here we give him a hand. His Lordship and the Duchess and the kids would join us after church if they were here. Works out fine for everyone.”

My suggestion that I lend a hand was rejected because as Mumbles put it, *We know what we’re doing and if we stop to explain something to you, we’re going to miss the start of the cricket.*

There were four crews for two tugs that worked on a two weeks on, two weeks off arrangement.

As Union delegate, Red Rodney had negotiated an arrangement whereby there were permanent bookings for the crews from each tug at the Palace even though several had homes in town.

“It akes a day to a day-and-a-half for them to load,” The Doctor explained, “and since the wharf can only handle one ship, once they’ve docked and we’re back that’s it till the following day. Those blokes can go home to the wife and kids, and the rest of us hang around here if there’s nothing that needs to be done on board. If they’re only loading twenty thousand ton it’s easier to have everyone here, particularly if it’s late at night.”

“So,” Red Rodney went on, “it was better to find accommodation for everyone. Everyone pays a share, and since we drink plenty of his piss His Lordship gives us a cut on the rooms as long as we pay cash. You’re in the one where we keep spare gear so if someone can’t get the washing done there’s something that’ll probably fit. That’s why the door isn’t locked.”

I expressed the hope my presence wasn’t causing inconvenience.

“That’s fine. They’re loading a hundred and twenty-thousand ton, starting last night so they won’t be done before lunch time Monday. Once this one’s gone, we’re not due for another till the following week, so you’re not keeping anyone out of a room.”

Ten minutes later, with the exception of Jeffrey, all hands downed tools and I joined them in the upstairs lounge since the pub didn’t officially open its doors for another hour or so.

AS Staggers pointed out, *It wouldn’t be right for us to be sitting in the bar sucking piss and watching TV while the general public are hanging ‘round outside waiting for the doors to open.*

Jeffrey was cleaning the stove, a task best performed uninterrupted, so we headed upstairs, where, by coincidence, a well-stocked esky waited.

I spent most of the day with the tug crew, adjourning downstairs at opening time, reconvening after lunch and wandering back down for the afternoon session. Once the evening session was over, hunger prompted a stroll across the road to the pizza parlour, and the resulting purchase was consumed on the veranda, washed down with a couple of glasses of red.

Settling In

Eight o'clock on Monday morning found me showered, shaved, shampooed and standing outside the cafe in search of something substantial for breakfast. Once that was out of the way a stroll gave me with a chance to familiarise myself with local geography and get some much-needed exercise.

Over the preceding days, I'd walked no more than a hundred metres on the rare occasions I'd needed to leave my seat.

With locations of the newsagent, post office, supermarket, liquor barn and TAB agency etched in my memory I headed up to make myself known at school.

After a brief wait, I was ushered into the Deputy Principal's work space, where the predictable orientation package awaited, along with keys to my accommodation.

"Sorry about the stuff up," was the apology Nick Davidson offered. "I was out on the boat all weekend and only found out you'd been left in the lurch when I got home last night and found the message on my answering machine."

"No drama. The bloke down at the travel agency took me down to the Palace. I had a reasonable couple of days there. Better than arriving somewhere on the outskirts of town and sitting around on your own."

"You'd probably have ended up at the Palace if you'd been able to get into the accommodation. It's only a block away. Might be different when they finish the new places near the cemetery, but that'll take six months or so. They'll be nice units, though you might be just as happy down where you're going."

"You might, find me taking a rain check on that. I don't drive, and if the flat's a block away from the pub, that'd make it, what, maybe ten minutes' walk from here? Downtown in between? Couldn't be more centrally located. Still, I guess we

cross that bridge when we come to it. Speaking of crossing bridges when we come to them, it's about time I found out what you've got in store for me."

"Year Six. We'd heard you were loud, so you're going into a demountable down by the tennis courts. Our numbers have dropped, so you'll have the block to yourself. Should suit you as far as the cricket's concerned, since you're right beside the oval and the nets. We've got you pencilled in to take the District cricket side. It'll free up the bloke who has been doing it to look after the League."

"No worries. I'm looking forward to crossing swords with some of mates when the Regional trials come around. This Year Six, though, wouldn't have Magpie from the Palace's kid in it, by any chance?"

Mr Davidson paused, shuffled through a pile of papers, extracted one and scanned it quickly.

"Looks like you got lucky. There's no sign of the Year Six one on here. Must be with Dennis or Sharon. I won't give you this just yet. The names'll all be Greek to you anyway so we won't worry about that till the Pupil Free Day Wednesday, Now as far as that goes."

Ten minutes or so later, the introductions and orientation were out of the way.

"If you don't mind waiting a quarter of an hour or so, I'll be able to drop you down at the Palace and give you a lift down to the flat with your suitcase. There's an appointment for an enrolment coming up. I should be here for that. Normally, Jim or I could look after the enrolment, but since he's not here."

Assuring him I had a fair idea of the distance involved and should be capable of lugging a suitcase that far, I pocketed the keys, wandered back down the hill, and retrieved the suitcase and boom box.

I was in the process of handing over the key to Number 12 before heading off when Jeffrey appeared from the kitchen.

“Hang on a sec. Grab a beer and I’ll save you a walk. I’ve got to head around to the Supermarket so I can drop you wherever you’re going when D’Artagnan has done the shopping list.”

It may have been a reflection on the fitness level, but, at the mention of beer I weakened. Jeffrey emerged from the kitchen just after it arrived, decided the sun was over the yardarm, and I was forced to weaken again.

Unsurprisingly, Jeffrey knew the location since the local Rugby club was based at the Palace.

Jeffrey had needed to assist my new flatmate on the homeward journey when inebriation prevented him from negotiating the obstacle course by himself.

“Nice spot, across the road from the pool. Low set maisonette. Ramjet’s not a bad bloke either. Bit quiet during the week, but he lets his hair down on weekends. From the form you’ve shown you’ll be able to keep up with him. Ready to go? The truck’s out the front.”

The truck pulled up outside two low set units. I retrieved by suitcase from the back, confirmed that I was looking at the unit on the left and headed for the door. The truck disappeared towards the supermarket as I turned the key.

The front door led into a lounge, which in turn became a dining room, or at least a dining table, which in turn became a kitchen. Doors on the left obviously took you into the bedrooms. I guessed the bathroom and laundry would be behind the kitchen.

Right, I thought to myself, which room? If I had the choice I’d go for the front one. The back one would have less problem with traffic noise, not that there’d be much. The front one would have the better view and probably catch the sea breeze. So I’ll be in the back one.

I was.

There was a bed, a mattress, a set of built-in wardrobes that would handle what the removalists would be delivering, a set of bedside drawers and a table. Since there was enough room to fit my bookcases and the record collection, I’d be self-contained once I’d got an air-conditioner for the window.

Throwing the suitcase onto the bed, I was about halfway through unpacking when a car pulled into the driveway. I emerged to find an imposing figure walking through the door.

“Roger Edmunds. Most of the buggers around here call me Roger Ramjet. Dunno why.”

“Dave Herston. Too many bloody Dave’s in the world, so I’m happy to answer to Herston.”

There was a six pack in the fridge, and it was demolished as we sorted out the arrangements.

Not that there was much to arrange.

A cleaner came in once a week, and Roger’s diet was based on takeaways and counter meals. So, with the domestic arrangements sorted and a couple of beers under the belt, it was time to set up the room.

That entailed liberating the boom box from its carton, shifting the clothing into the wardrobe and drawers, locating the bed linen and placing the CDs I’d brought with me beside the boom box.

The process was completed within about fifteen minutes, and I had a couple of hours rest while I thought over various issues now I knew, more or less, where I was and what I was likely to be doing.

Around four, I decided to take a stroll to the Palace with a detour to investigate the options as far as air conditioning was concerned.

Initial inquiries suggested an air-conditioner was going to punch a large hole in the credit card balance or entail a substantial commitment on the never-never.

I retreated to the Palace to consider the options.

There was no sign of Jeffrey, but his preferred spot was occupied by Hopalong Cassidy and someone I hadn’t previously met.

Magically, a beer appeared.

Magpie was eager to discover whether either of her brood was going to have the dubious pleasure of my company through the school year.

Conversation about class allocations allowed Hopalong's companion to work out my occupation, and as Magpie departed to supply thirst-quenching materials, he looked in my direction.

“High or primary? I'm Gilhooley. You're an educated man. Have you read **Puckoon**, by any chance?”

“Dave Herston. I'm up the hill at the State School.”

“And on the important question of **Puckoon**?”

“A novel by Spike Milligan. Yeah, I've read it. Good stuff.”

“Good stuff? It's without doubt the single greatest achievement in the annals of English literature! A work of unsurpassed genius. We'll continue this discussion when I return from a nervous pee.”

He headed through the public bar towards the gents'.

“Who's that?” I asked as Jeffrey emerged from the kitchen. “Seems a man with definite opinions.”

“Definite opinions? Gilhooley? Mad as a cut snake.”

“That description could be applied to us all,” Jeffrey stated. “All the world is mad except thee and me.”

“Yeah,” I added, “and even thee is a little strange. So who's this Gilhooley? What's his story?”

“Like I said,” Hopalong continued, “he's mad as a cut snake. No wonder, since he's married to the senior nurse up at the hospital. Reckons she's next in line to take over from the Matron. She's been rehearsing the bitch routine as if it's signed, sealed and delivered. You'll hear him refer to her as The Iron Maiden. Makes Maggie Thatcher look like Florence Nightingale.”

“Or Atilla the Hun look like Christopher Robin” Jeffrey took over.

“When Gilhooley’s in town he hides out in his workshop out the back of the house or sneaks off to a pub where he hopes she can’t track him down. He invents stuff. Got a pile of patents about a foot high, and when he’s not inventing gadgets in the shed he’s fixing machinery in a mine or writing computer programs. Works for one of those agencies who find people to fix stuff when it carks it. They reckon he’s so good the people he works for are happy to overlook a few foibles.”

“Which you’re suggesting he has plenty of.”

“You’ll see,” was the sage reply.

I subsequently discovered he was right. After weaving his way back through the public bar, as Gilhooley resumed his seat he resumed the conversation.

“As I was saying, there’s no doubt in my mind that **Puckoon** delivers unparalleled insights into the human.” He glanced towards the door. “Oh shit, the Iron Maiden. Catch you later.”

He drained his glass, turned, and headed towards the passage that led towards the main street. Thirty seconds later a blonde in a nurse’s uniform came through the door, headed straight towards where we were sitting.

“Where is he, Jeffrey? Since I had to work, he’s supposed to be at home for Rosalind’s birthday party, not carousing with his alcoholic friends. I’ve already checked at the Bowls Club. They said he was headed this way, so don’t try to pull the wool over my eyes.”

“Margaret, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to provide you with the information you request. However, until thirty seconds ago I was in the kitchen, so I’m unable to be of any help. Isn’t that right, fellas? Herston here is just new in town and wouldn’t know Gilbert if he bit him in the leg. You haven’t sighted the gentleman in question have you Cassidy?”

Hopalong’s expression of regret as he shook his head was worthy of an Oscar nomination.

“Well, in that case I’ll keep looking. If he does manage to materialise from wherever he’s been hiding, I hope you’ll be good enough to inform him that his

presence at Rosalind's birthday party, however belated, may just be enough to save me from presenting him with his genitalia on a silver platter."

"Nothing," Jeffrey replied, "would give me greater pleasure."

The searcher turned on her heels and headed out through the door.

"Ironic, isn't it?" Jeffrey remarked. "There we have Mrs Margaret Hoolihan, a member of the nursing profession, who just happens to share the same name as a character from *M.A.S.H.* Not that anyone would be likely to refer to her as *Hot Lips*. Particularly if there's any likelihood of lobbing into the Hospital and needing a blood test."

"Hoolihan?" I asked. "I thought his name was Gilhooley?"

"Gilhooley," Hopalong explained, "belongs to the same club as you pair. He can't stand people using his first name, which is hardly surprising since his first name is Gilbert. Hell, if *my* first name was Gilbert I'd be beating a path to the Deed Poll Commissioner's door faster than you can say Jack Robinson. Gilbert Hoolihan. Run it together and Gilhooley sounds enough like a reasonable name to pass muster."

Ensuing conversation revealed Jeffrey's full name was Gordon Walter Jeffrey.

Given a dislike of his given name, and a dread of being greeted as Wally his preference for his surname was predictable. The discussion moved onto nicknames until Hopalong announced the time had come for him to depart since there was a dog that needed to be fed and he was keen to put on the nosebag himself.

That made me think of dinner, and a glance at the menu produced an order for a medium-rare pepper steak with mushroom sauce to the kitchen.

Jeffrey liberated an order book from the kitchen, completed the paperwork for his dinner and delivered it in person, thus preventing the necessity of money changing hands.

Around eight, with dinner and a couple of post-prandial cold ones under the belt I excused myself and wandered off planning to spend about ten hours pushing up zeds.

I was about to open the front door when the sound of voices made me pause.

I listened to ensure things could be interrupted without embarrassment, then walked inside, where I discovered Roger Ramjet and a woman of considerable pneumatic charm seated at the table sharing fish and chips.

Introductions were followed by a brief conversation and I wandered off, careful to arrange music to drown out audible amatory activities, should events develop along those lines.

Once the school year started I settled into routine, wandering off to work around seven-thirty, putting in a day at the coal face, followed by an hour or so marking books and dealing with whatever needed to be done before strolling down the hill to the Palace between four-thirty and five for a few beers before dinner.

As time passed, the side bar at the Palace became the meeting place for a group of like-minded individuals.

While the membership varied from day to day, it almost invariably included the trio of Jeffrey, Hopalong Cassidy and I.

The rest of the circle regularly included the proprietors, Bryan Barron (a.k.a. His Lordship), his consort Elizabeth (The Duchess), Dagwood and Blondie, along with Gilhooley (on infrequent occasions when he could evade the Iron Maiden's supervision), used car salesman and leviathan punter Scott Waddington, assorted teachers, the owner of Luciano's Pizza Palace, a gentleman of Maltese extraction known as The Falcon and a gentleman known throughout town, though not to his face, as Boris the Backdooring Bastard.

The strategic location gave us the opportunity to interact with much of the town's population as they passed through the adjacent Quick Service area though the majority of females were not amused if some degenerate suggested they had popped in for a quick service.

Six months after my arrival the new teacher accommodation offered the chance to relocate.

Roger availed himself of the opportunity since the new accommodation was closer to the rugby field and within walking distance of the High School.

I was happy to remain where I was, within walking distance of both work and the Palace.

Once Roger relocated, of course, I was free to switch to the front bedroom.

Over the next few years, I had the place, more or less, to myself.

The occasional flat-mate assigned to my place seemed happy to move towards the cemetery when a vacancy occurred. With the passage of time the two units in the block were unofficially designated as accommodation for those who *preferred to be by themselves*.

The Money Game

A couple of Februarys later I walked into the Palace one Wednesday afternoon to find Captain Headrush ensconced in our regular position.

“Well,” I remarked as Magpie fetched the chilled article, “we’re a day or two early. What’s the occasion? A quiet drink or the full head rush? Inquiring livers need to know.”

“New routine. You’ll be finding me here every Wednesday from now on. Mark Wednesdays down in the diary as Polocrosse mini-Lotto night. Now, can I interest you in a ticket?”

As I filled out a couple, the good Captain explained that, of the \$2 fee, half went straight to the Polocrosse club, half to the prize pool.

“You pick six numbers out of twenty. Winner takes all if we have a ticket with the six numbers we draw in the public bar each Wednesday. If there’s no winner the prize pool jackpots. If it gets over ten grand we cut it back by taking out a number each week. Pick six out of nineteen, six out of eighteen *et cetera* until someone finally picks up the pool.”

“How far are you going to take it? You’re not going to end up asking people to pick six out of eight or anything like that?”

“Six out of twelve is as far as we’re going,”

From the edges of the conversation, a passing Red Rodney voiced the opinion that *some bastard was sure to win it by covering all the combinations.*

So Wednesday night mini-Lotto draws were added to the routine.

Though winners were notable by their absence, the interest continued until, six months later, the prize pool passed ten thousand. Predictably, interest rose as the number of ping pong balls dropped, and the prize pool grew.

Conversations turned to the possibility of taking out the jackpot.

It didn't take long before we were reflecting on Red Rodney's opinion.

It took no time at all to decide that if *some bastard* was going to scoop the pool by covering all the combinations, *some bastard* was going to be us.

As the midyear holidays loomed we started to give serious thought to ways this could be achieved.

The first difficulty lay in obtaining enough tickets to cover the multitude of combinations.

As the weeks had passed and the jackpot marched upwards, we were in the habit of contributing to the prize pool, so it wasn't difficult to start the stockpile by grabbing double the number of tickets we needed.

Grabbing a handful when one of us passed an outlet where they were available helped. When we were ready to swing into action the drawer in my desk contained a couple of hundred.

The second problem was to generate a list of all the combinations.

Figuring it would be wise to start before the deadline I dedicated the Queen's Birthday long weekend to the task. Once I started it was obvious if I hadn't been able to cut and paste using the computer there was no way I would have had the patience to complete the exercise without consigning the concept to the too hard basket.

I was three-quarters of the way through the process on Sunday afternoon when Jeffrey wandered in to check on progress.

For the hell of it, I decided to print out what I'd generated, and as the pages of the incomplete list spewed forth it was obvious there wouldn't be too many others indulging in a similar exercise.

Once the list had been completed we needed some way to cut the number of possibilities down to something more manageable.

We suspected there was little chance of a combination being drawn more than once, so we persuaded Captain Headrush to supply a list of combinations that had been drawn so far.

Mathematicians would argue with that, but when you're looking to make a cut you have to start somewhere.

Perusing the results established that, while consecutive numbers often appeared in the draw, it was rare to find more than three consecutive numbers in any single draw. On that basis, out came the highlight pens and a couple of rulers.

It took some time, but we eliminated every combination with more than three consecutive numbers, went on to eliminate every combination already drawn, then turned our attention to combinations with five out of the six numbers that had come out.

The remaining list of combinations was still too large for the pile of entries we had accumulated and, at \$2 a time, way beyond our financial capabilities.

The midyear school holidays arrived just before the first of the twelve-number draws and so, on a Sunday afternoon we sat down to prepare our pile of entries.

Jeffrey, to the consternation of the management had created a minor sensation by demanding a week's holiday from his duties at the Palace.

The initial reaction was to ask where he was planning to go for his holiday. When informed there were no travel plans, His Lordship rejected the request, only to be informed that Jeffrey would be handing in his notice and taking up an offer of a greenkeeper's position and accommodation at the Bowls Club.

This threat left His Lordship with no alternative but to agree, but only on the understanding Jeffrey would still be available to carry out any particularly urgent errands.

There was, however, much to the consternation of the other members of the kitchen contingent, no way he was going to be spending the next two Sundays stripping and cleaning the stove.

Friday evening's celebrations were considerably more boisterous than usual, and while he was officially on vacation Jeffrey consented to perform a couple of minor errands on before he arrived on my doorstep just after nine on Sunday morning.

"I think," he remarked as he slipped through the door, "I might have given the bastards the slip. Sure as eggs, if I'd stayed down there they'd have been looking for me to help out with the stove, so I got out before they started and His Lordship and the Duchess are at church."

"Won't be much use if you've been spotted on the way here," I suggested.

"Which is why I went the long way round, past the newsagent. I usually do the paper run on a Sunday morning, so they've got the paper to read when they get back from church, so I figured anyone looking for me would head there first. I dropped in for a packet of smokes. Instead of taking the paper with me I told them if anyone was looking for me I'd be at Chookie Little's in Plymouth Street."

"Who's Chookie Little?"

It wasn't a name I was familiar with.

"Dunno. But if there's anyone with that surname in Plymouth Street he'll be thinking the sky's falling on his head when the bastards turn up looking for me. Now, what's for breakfast? Bacon and eggs? Chuck us a plateful while I aim Archie at the Armitage."

"Right," said Jeffrey once breakfast had been attended to and we surveyed the pile of pages I'd printed out, "there are still too many of the bastards. Each week, you'll notice there are a couple of numbers that turned up in the previous week's draw, so we take every combination that hasn't been highlighted that has no more than three of last week's numbers." That gave us a pile of possible combinations that was still far more than our financial capacity.

"Okay," I suggested, "my turn. We start by taking every third combination that's still on the list. We mark the ones we've taken. Once we've covered the whole list that way we go back to the top and take every fourth combo. And we

keep on going that way until we've either run out of tickets or funds to cover the bastards."

We ended up maintaining security by working through the morning session, and by the time the afternoon session was due to start there were two hundred and forty tickets filled out, ready to go and sealed in a couple of envelopes. The small one, with forty tickets, would be handed in at the start of proceedings.

It represented a sizeable increase on our regular contribution, but would not be substantial enough to draw anyone's attention to our real purpose.

As we reached the corner opposite the Palace, since the pub doors remained resolutely closed, Mickey's big hand obviously hadn't quite reached its apogee at the top of the hour.

A glance across the street also confirmed there was nobody on the veranda.

"You head across and wait outside the door. I'll do a dogleg up to the corner, come down the other side of the street, head upstairs to stash these in my room and catch you downstairs. Remember, if they ask you haven't seen me all day."

I arrived outside the door at the same time as His Lordship opened it.

"Where is he?" was the question, as soon as I was inside and before I had a chance to organize refreshment.

"Dunno," I replied. "I've been cleaning all day. Had to be done some time. Buty if you've been looking for him you won't need to look much further because here he comes."

"What's happening?" Jeffrey inquired as he pulled up a stool. "Chookie wanted a hand with his gazebo, and when I saw him in the supermarket last week he said he was ready to start. That's why I wanted the holidays."

"So if we need to get hold of you in a hurry," His Lordship interposed.

"That's where I'll be. Chookie Little's place. Right next door to Buster Virgin's. The gazebo's right down the back of his yard, so you can't see it from the street, but that's where I'll be."

His Lordship wandered off, seemingly satisfied.

“In reality,” Jeffrey confided as His Lordship receded into the distance, “if they want to find me they’ll need to wander down your way since I’m planning on some serious research into the Lotto. After we pick up that sixteen grand on Wednesday my share will give me a big enough bank to have a red hot go at the Lotto over the next few weeks. *That’s* why I wanted this week off.”

“If they turn up looking for you at my place?” I asked.

“I’ll spot the car as it pulls into the driveway and duck into the laundry till they’ve gone. Lucky your front door doesn’t look straight down that passageway to the back door. Very handy. Noticed it from the first time I called in delivering the Ramjet home when he was incapable of finding his own way. Ah, Mr Cassidy, Greetings and salutations.”

He paused as Hopalong pulled up a stool.

“May the fleas of a thousand camels,” he went on once Hopalong was seated and sipping his first beer of the afternoon, “nest in your pubic hair and your offspring develop boils on their genital organs. Gotcha!”

A shower of beer sprayed the area in front of the well-known scoffer.

“You bastard,” Hopalong opined once he had regained his composure. “You did that on purpose. That’s a beer you owe me.”

“A debt that will be paid in full when Uncle Cyril is spotted playing the electric violin on the balcony of the Council Chambers. Which is highly unlikely since the bastard’s been dead for thirty years. Either that or when we pick up the Polocrosse mini-lotto on Wednesday.”

That ed into a discussion of the likelihood of the event before the subject moved elsewhere. Before we knew it, His Lordship was informing us the bar had closed.

Our presence could lead to inconvenient inquiries if the constabulary dropped by, so those considerations put a rather effective kibosh on further refreshment.

I turned my attention to the evening meal.

“In that case, it might be time to wander across the road and see if Luciano could be persuaded to knock up something in a Marinara. Would either of you bastards care to join me?”

Hopalong indicated he had leftovers from the roast his mother had prepared at the family mansion for Sunday lunch, and declined the offer, stating that if we were inclined to waste our money on takeaways, that was our problem.

“For my part,” he concluded, “ I’ll be sticking with good simple nutritious home cooking rather than the overpriced product Luciano knocks out. Evening, gents. Catch you in the spring.”

He drained his glass, headed towards the door. Jeffrey and I did much the same, turning left where Hopalong veered to the right.

“If you happen to be getting up for a nervous pee around sparrow fart,” Jeffrey suggested as we crossed the median strip, “would you mind unlocking the front door? I’ll be heading out around six thirty with my research materials. I reckon if I call in for another packet of smokes as soon as they’ve opened the newsagency I can keep this Chookie Little diversion going...”

Our entry into Luciano’s was the signal for jubilation from the proprietor.

While I was a regular, Jeffrey’s attendance at this temple of Italian Cucina was less frequent, due to the ease with which he could extract meals from the Palace ‘s kitchen without the mundane necessity of money changing hands.

“Jeffrey! Profess?! ‘Ow the hell are you! Me, I’m busier than a one-leg man in the arse-kicking contest, but enough of that. Profess? Your usual? The Marinara? Or perhaps the Vesuvio? The Marinara? Good, good. Jeffrey? The Margherita? Of course. Maria!” he turned his attention to his partner, conveniently hovering at his side, “You please prepare a Marinara for my friend the Mad Profess’ and a Margherita for my good friend Mr Jeffrey! Gentlemen, you would care, perhaps, for a little glass of your vino?”

The Sunday evening rush had, it seemed, been and gone since Luciano felt safe to delegate the task of pizza preparation to his better five-eighths and escort us to a table in the inner sanctum.

While his establishment wasn't licensed to sell alcohol, a refrigerator in the kitchen contained wine casks brought onto the premises by those who preferred, according to the official version of the story, to leave their supplies on the premises for next time.

It was a development stemming from a cricket carnival.

We had accommodated the visiting officials at the Palace, but considering His Lordship's rather strict observance of ten o'clock closing, we needed a venue for late night deliberations on selection policy.

Discussions upstairs would disturb the Palace's other guests.

Luciano's remained open into the small hours and had an area where we would be able to sit and argue to our hearts content, or until Luciano decided to call stumps, which, on a Friday or Saturday night would be around two in the morning.

Lack of a liquor licence could have been a problem, so, during negotiations, I suggested Luciano might care to look after a small (say ten litres?) quantity of red wine to be made available should the visitors require liquid refreshment.

"If there's anything left at the end of the weekend," I suggested, "I guess we can gradually knock it over when I come in for a pizza."

A couple of weeks after the carnival I'd been greeted with news the cask had been drained, but since Luciano had, from time to time, felt the need to recharge his glass from that source he'd felt obliged to replace it, although he'd chosen a more modestly sized container than the original ten litre cask.

Subsequent investigations revealed some relevant side issues.

Maria kept a watch on Luciano's intake, and a supplementary source allowed him to sneak extra refreshment while her back was turned.

Negotiations on one of Jeffrey's late-night excursions in search of conversation, refreshment and a snack had resulted in a system where casks arrived from time to time in the course of his various errands around town.

These had, in the official version, been paid for by either Jeffrey or I when we realized the supply was running dangerously low.

We partook in a round of cheerful badinage with Luciano before, during and after Sunday's evening meal. Around nine, I headed homeward.

For some reason possibly associated with holidays I slept extra-soundly.

The next morning a cursory glance through the curtains revealed the eastern sky beginning to lighten when I wandered off towards the kitchen in search of a cure for dehydration. Remembering the previous night's mid-street conversation I unlocked the front door on my way back to bed.

Rousing myself several hours later, I found the kitchen table occupied by Jeffrey and a quantity of research material accumulated during his quest for a winning combination of Lotto numbers.

Since I felt such activity warranted a minimal disturbance policy, I was careful to leave Jeffrey undisturbed during the day, drawing the music selections from the quieter end of the spectrum, spending most of my time reading, pottering around and only speaking when some remark indicated he was temporarily able to relax the intense concentration.

Towards midday I took a stroll around town via the newsagent, calling into the Palace for a counter lunch because I could.

I had just placed my order for the daily special when I was joined by a certain high-profile publican.

"Herston. Got a minute?" His Lordship asked as I pocketed the change and reached for the obligatory beer.

"Sure," I replied, moving towards a nearby vacant table and motioning that he should join me.

"Jeffrey. This Chookie Little. Would you happen to know where he lives? I needed to catch up with Jeffrey this morning, so I asked around. No one seems to know anybody called Chookie Little."

“Including me. All I know is what Jeffrey told you yesterday. Chookie Little lives next door to Buster Virgin. I’ve never heard of him either. Sorry, mate, but I’m as much in the dark as you are. Maybe he’s doing a bit of shagging he doesn’t want anyone to know about.”

Seated with my back to the kitchen, I had failed to notice the arrival of His Lordship’s consort. Jeffrey’s whereabouts was obviously a matter of considerable interest to more than one party.

“That’d be right, the rattlesnake,” came a voice behind my shoulder. “He’s taken a week off so he can screw some floozy behind her unsuspecting husband’s back. Wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest.”

I hastened to reassure them that my suggestion had been idle speculation, and I was totally in the dark when it came explanations of the gentleman’s activities.

“On the other hand, if you were going to do a bit of work around the house you could do a lot worse than get Jeffrey to help. From what I’ve picked up he’s got around a bit and turned his hand to all sorts of jobs. No, if he’s got some mate from the bowls club or somewhere with a spot of bother with a gazebo he’s the sort of bloke who’d volunteer to help out. Look at what he does around here.”

“Yes, but that’s the point, isn’t it? He does things around here without telling Betty or me what he’s done, and now, when we need to check up on a few minor details he’s nowhere to be found.”

Despite his financially secure background, His Lordship had a reputation for frugality, a fact that sprang to mind as I considered a response.

“Well, maybe what you need is to fit him out with a mobile phone.”

His Lordship’s Scots ancestry would discourage such profligate behaviour and I was also aware of the disdain Jeffrey demonstrated towards such devices and those who used them.

“That’d be no good,” The Duchess pointed out. “You know he doesn’t like the things. If we wasted a hundred dollars fitting him out with one he’d leave it turned

off on purpose. Or he'd leave it on the bedside table all day Oh, here's your lunch. Enjoy."

With that, as the most junior member of the catering department presented me with my plate, his supervisor disappeared into the kitchen. His Lordship hesitated, then, having decided his presence was required elsewhere, left.

With the meal out of the way and swashed down I pointed myself towards my sleeping quarters. My arrival at the front door caused a brief interruption to Mr Jeffrey's research activities.

"We're going to have a bit of fun with this," I suggested, before reporting on conversations and the possibilities they raised. We discussed them for a while until I pointed out that the interruption to important research activities had lasted long enough and wandered off for a nap. I emerged from my room around four to find my guest bundling up his papers.

"Right. I'm off like grandma's knickers. I'll be heading back the long way to pick up a few snippets to use when they start getting out the arc lamps and rubber truncheons."

I paused, decided it would be a good idea to be present when the interrogation started, grabbed the wallet and headed towards the Palace via the most direct route. My arrival brought further enquiries as to the whereabouts of a certain party before the party in question hove into view, descending the stairs from the residential section His Lordship was straight into interrogator mode.

"Look," came the reply, "I told you. All this week I'm up at Chookie Little's in Plymouth Street..."

"You never mentioned Plymouth Street," His Lordship countered.

"Didn't I? Mentioned it to someone. Richie at the paper shop? Or was it you Herston?"

He scratched his head in bewilderment at his own forgetfulness.

"So if you're looking for me that's where I'll be. Chookie Little's in Plymouth Street. Half way down the block from the main street. Masonry block place with

garden gnomes on the front lawn. Dunno the number, Chookie told me to look for the garden gnomes. If you miss them, you're sure to spot Buster's place. Queenslander with a shit load of bougainvillea out the front. Sticks out like dogs' balls."

His curiosity temporarily satisfied, His Lordship moved off.

"Course," Jeffrey went on, "there are no buildings matching either description in that part of Plymouth Street. I checked on the way. And the Duchess thinks I'm backdooring some poor bastard on the side? Wait till they start for me tomorrow, and they will. Sure as God made little apples. Doesn't matter whether they need to find me, they'll be up and down that street a dozen times trying to figure this one out."

"Won't be much good," I pointed out, "if they follow you when you leave tomorrow morning."

"No chance," I was informed. "I've got it all covered. There's no way they'll be on deck before six. I'll be gone by five-thirty. I've already got my disguise figured out."

When I awoke the following morning, I discovered Jeffrey seated at the dining table engaged in further research. As I entered the room, he looked up.

"Not a problem in the world," he gloated. "Have a look outside. Not at the front, have a gander 'round the corner.."

Following these directions I exited to investigate.

Turning the corner of the building I discovered a bicycle, a cyclist's racing-style helmet, a backpack and the kind of safety jacket used to ensure the wearer is clearly visible to all and sundry. I turned and wandered back inside.

"If you'd been out and about just after dawn this morning," Jeffrey began, "not that any bastard in his right mind would be, but just supposing you *were*, you might have sighted a cyclist leaving the garage where the Duchess parks the Audi and heading off on his morning ride."

"I'll believe you, though thousands wouldn't."

“Had you been any one of the three or four silly bastards who were out and about, you would have seen the same cyclist all over the streets over the next ten or fifteen minutes. I was totally knackered by the time I got here I can tell you. I reckon if anyone had noticed they wouldn’t have had a chance to work out where I was going. Cruised past here about three times before I was satisfied the coast was clear and I could pull in,”

“What’ll you do this afternoon?” I wondered.

“I’ll ride up to somewhere near Chookie’s nonexistent place, stash the stack hat in the backpack, and walk the bike back to the pub. If anyone asks I’ll explain young Jason, who’s away on that school footy trip, left his bike at his mate’s place last weekend and asked me to bring it back home, so it’s there for him when he gets back Friday arvo.”

“You’ll pull the same trick tomorrow,” I ventured.

“That would be a mistake. When you head over there for lunch, you’ll find His Lordship has been up and down Plymouth Street like it’s going out of style. He won’t have found anything resembling Chookie’s place, which, of course, doesn’t exist, so there’s no shock there...”

“But he’ll be asking questions again this afternoon,” I suggested.

“When I’ll inform him I’d made a mistake. It wasn’t Plymouth Street at all. Now, he won’t believe me when I say that it’s the same description, but in Dover Street rather than Plymouth Street.”

“So he’ll be up and about early tomorrow morning,” I guessed.

“Looking out to see where I go. He won’t be getting any joy in that department because I’ll have left around midnight and crashed in your spare room. Assuming that’s cool with you.”

“No dramas whatsoever,” I replied. “How about I just give you the spare key, so we’re not relying on my memory in the leaving the door open department.”

At lunch time, I found Jeffrey’s scenario spot on. I placed my order, grabbed a beer, sat in the same spot as the previous day and was joined by His Lordship and

the Duchess. Both of them had an urgent need to contact Jeffrey since some evil individual had removed their son and heir's bike and school bag from their usual locations in the garage and the flat upstairs.

This, I thought to myself, *is going to let Tabby loose among the feathered fraternity*, and, once I had disposed of lunch and a post-prandial pot I hastened homewards to see what effect this bombshell might have.

“No problem at all,” I was informed. “I’ll stick to this afternoon’s plan.”

“If they manage to get something to contradict your story out of Young Jase when he gets back from the footy trip?”

I thought it was a possibility worth considering.

“Since I’ll be back on duty by lunchtime Friday that should be no problem whatsoever. About two-thirty she’ll announce she’s got some pressing appointment and can I go and collect the kid when the bus gets back. Those things are never on time, and there’s no way she’s going to want to sit around waiting. And there are a couple of things Young Jase would prefer his parents didn’t know about, so I don’t think we’ll be having any troubles in that regard.”

That afternoon I headed out as a certain cyclist started on the street circuit.

I arrived at the Palace to find both His Lordship and the Duchess awaiting the return of the prodigal. Where I’d assumed Jeffrey would quietly return the bicycle to the garage at the rear of the premises, I spotted him wheeling the chariot through the pub, having entered through the side door.

Their backs were facing the direction from which he was approaching in obvious anticipation of his entering through one of the main doors.

“And here he comes,” I pointed out, giving them enough time to turn around.

“Well,” remarked Jeffrey, “that’s one job we won’t have to worry about between now and Friday.”

Facial expressions suggested bewilderment.

“Young Jase told me last weekend, he’d left his bike and school gear at Baldy’s place. You remember he rode to school last Friday because Maddy had that dental appointment. Janice dropped them at football practice and brought him back here afterwards. He asked me on Saturday if I could pick it up and sneak it back before you noticed. Reckoned you’d crack if you thought he’d left a couple of hundred dollars of push bike lying around for someone to knock off. You didn’t hear any of this from me, by the way. Kids.”

Shaking his head, he continued on his way towards the beer garden and garage before anyone could contribute anything else to the discussion, leaving behind him parents impressed by their offspring’s responsibility in correcting his own mistakes. I thought I could add a little to the effect.

“Don’t see much of that these days, Most of my class would have acted dumb and denied all knowledge if you’d sprung them with something like that. Bloke last week filed his homework book in the garden bed outside the classroom. One of the cleaners found it and brought it to me. You should have seen the performance next morning. *Yes, he’d done his homework, and no, he had no idea what happened to the book.* When I waved it in front of his nose, he claimed his mum *must have delivered it to school in the morning.* When I asked him where he’d done it he reckoned *someone must’ve torn it out. Probably his mum,* he reckoned, *since it was a bit messy.* No, you’ve got a good one there.”

The parental feel-good factor that resulted from this convenient fiction and my supporting remarks drew attention away from the matter of Jeffrey’s whereabouts.

Once he’d restored the recovered property to its rightful locations the subject was completely ignored.

After the Duchess had wandered off to supervise preparations in the kitchen and His Lordship disappeared into the inner sanctum I remarked on the success of the subterfuge.

“Well, that’s it, isn’t it? I’ll bet you were thinking I’d just sneak that stuff inside and hope nobody noticed, but you can bet your bottom dollar she’s been sounding off to all her mates about it and at least one of them will have spotted me on the way so now if anyone asks her about the missing bike they’ll get a testimonial

about how responsible the kid is, and I've still got Dover Street up my sleeve in case I need it in the future.”

Dinner time found Mine Host and Hostess in an expansive mood. The two of us were invited to join them, and I headed homewards just after nine feeling no pain whatsoever.

Rising later than usual the next morning I found the research activities underway and after a stroll to the newsagent to collect my copy of the *Denison Argus* (a.k.a the *Sleepy Hollow Sausage Wrapper*) returned to base for breakfast.

A pause in the research provided an opportunity to inquire how it was going.

“Well,” I was informed, “it’s going as well as possible under the circumstances. I’ve been checking whether there’s a trend towards numbers that came out last week turning up again this week. Believe it or not, it seems you should always have at least one of last week’s eight numbers in your entries for the next draw. Doesn’t help you get the other numbers, of course, but...”

“So how much more research time will you need?” I asked.

I doubted he’d be able to wangle another week’s holiday, and while I was quite happy for him to continue to use the premises for research, his activities placed constraints on my enjoyment of the holidays.

“Won’t need to do too much after today. In any case, I don’t know how much longer I can keep Chookie Little going, but he might be useful in the future, so if I give him a break for a while.”

“They’re bound to keep on getting curious,” I suggested.

“That’s right. No good pushing my luck. I think this afternoon I’ll be informing them Chookie’s work has proceeded much quicker than anticipated and I’ll be able to carry out one or two little jobs round the place if they’ve got anything that needs doing for the rest of the week.”

The lunchtime circuit down to the Palace passed without excitement, except for a pleasant *chilli con carne* and the opportunity to kill another hour while I waited

for the evening's proceedings. Returning to the flat I found the research activities had been wound up, so we sat around for an hour shooting the breeze.

Around three, my companion gathered up his belongings and indicated he was returning to home base *since we've finished Chookie's gazebo and I thought there might be the odd job that needs looking after now I've got this unexpected time on my hands.*

Before he departed, we confirmed plans for the evening.

For a start, there was no way the list of combinations used to develop our entries was going to be aired in public. Once we knew the numbers I would take a walk home to check the result against the master list.

“The place should be packed to the gunwales so if I claim to be heading off for a piss, there's every chance no one will notice me heading out the door. Once we know the result, we can work the rest out as we go along. Now, about handing the entries in.”

“Best,” Jeffrey suggested, “to put the first eighty bucks in early. That's as much as anyone else would be likely to invest in advance, so if we slip Captain Headrush that amount right at the start we can find out if anyone else has done anything similar to date.”

“If we play our cards right, we might,” I pointed out, “be able to find out if anyone else plonks a pile of entries in before we hit them with the big bundle.”

“They'll want to get the draw done as soon as possible after seven, so I'll bring down the big pile about a quarter to. Catch you down there just before five.”

Once the planning was complete, I devoted the rest of the afternoon to meditation on ways financial windfalls could be used.

I meditated so intently I was alarmed to discover it was almost five when consciousness returned. Arriving at the Palace I found Jeffrey in position, tickets at the ready with Hopalong Cassidy also present in full scoffing mode.

Eighty dollars? You bastards are mad. More money than sense, were typical of the remarks issuing from that quarter as I walked in to join the already-substantial

throng in the bar. Shortly thereafter the arrival of Captain Headrush meant we could hand over the initial batch.

“Looks like you’re giving it a red hot go,” was the remark as he added eighty dollars to the money bag and the tickets found their way onto the pile.

Around a quarter to seven Jeffrey disappeared upstairs. Given the number of tickets, the process of checking there were exactly four hundred dollars’ worth in the pile delayed the draw by about ten minutes.

The late plunge did not slip under Cassidy’s guard and, during the infrequent pauses between derisive comments, I explained the pile of entries resulted from hours of research, and great care had been taken to avoid duplication in entries submitted, without explaining the form that careful scientific research had actually taken.

At a quarter past seven with a list of the winning numbers in my pocket I took the stroll to check if we had it, discovered we did, and on the way back considered the approach for the next half hour while Captain Headrush and his colleagues checked the entries to find the winners.

I knew there was at least one, so the question was how many ways the prize money would end up being shared.

An absence of emotion was appropriate, and so, pokerfaced I reentered the pub and wound my way through the crowd. As I approached, Jeffrey looked up, anxious for an indication. There were, however, others present.

“So, Herston,” Hopalong inquired, “now you’ve had your piss, how did you go? Did you get it? Or are you pissed off at wasting a couple of hundred hard-earned dollars? By your expression, no. Told you it’d never work. This scientific approach bullshit is just that. Bullshit.”

Just wait, you bastard, I thought. With a bit of luck we’ll have the only live entry, and we’ll see what your expression is when you discover we’ve picked up between sixteen and seventeen grand.

“You win some, and you lose some,” I shrugged, hoping the facial expression was suitably stoic in the face of adversity.

The air of gloom that opinion brought with it did nothing to diminish the scoffing but I could see Captain Headrush moving through the Public Bar.

“I thought I’d put you out of your misery,” was the Captain’s opening remark as he joined us. “We’ve got to go through and double check the whole pile again, but we’ve only found one live ticket.”

“There you go,” Cassidy interjected. “One ticket and it’s someone sensible who’s put in one ticket for two dollars instead of wasting close to five hundred like you silly bastards. Whose was it?”

Beer was in the process of being transferred to his mouth when the reply came.

“Theirs,” said Captain Headrush.

There was a pause as bystanders regained their composure after being sprayed with amber fluid.

“Obviously,” Captain Headrush continued after mopping up operations, “we’re not going to be able to hand over the sixteen and a half grand tonight, and you probably wouldn’t want it right now, anyway. If you go to see Ziggy tomorrow arvo, he’ll have it there for you. I assume you’ll be wanting it in cash.”

“So,” I suggested, “while we can wait till tomorrow for the big bickies, any chance of getting, five hundred out of it right now? A celebration seems to be in order.”

As the Captain headed back to collect the money for us, word of our success was spreading around the bar.

Our success was not, it seemed, greeted with universal acclamation.

“OK Magpie,” I instructed once the money had been delivered. “There’s a hundred here. Any drink bought in the bar comes out of this.”

“And when it runs out?” Magpie asked.

“It comes out of here,” Jeffrey interjected. “Except for this scoffing prick.”

He nodded in Hopalong's direction. "He can buy his own."

In the end, Hopalong was allowed to participate in the celebrations, not that there was any softening of the scoffing.

As time passed, the atmosphere lightened, thanks to the positive influence of copious amounts of free alcohol and His Lordship was announcing the time for *Last Drinks* had passed. The clientele were advised to make their way homewards when Captain Headrush returned, accompanied by a gentleman we'd noticed around the premises over the preceding day or two.

"So, fellas," the Captain inquired, "everything under control? Anyway. I don't know if you've met this bloke, but I think you'll be interested in hearing what he's got to tell you."

It would have been a gross exaggeration to suggest we were disposed to listen to very much, but as he introduced himself something in his manner suggested that attentiveness was imperative. Perhaps it was an official-looking identity card.

"I won't interrupt your celebrations for long, gentlemen. In fact, I'd expect your preference would be that I didn't interrupt them at all. But my name is Arthur Slaughter, and I'm from the Justice Department."

By this stage, regardless of inebriation, he had our full and complete attention.

"Over the past month matters have been brought to our attention regarding the fund-raising exercise the Denison Polocrosse Association has been conducting which you have, most fortunately, benefited from."

"I don't like the sound of this," Jeffrey muttered.

"When we learned the Association was referring to this exercise as a Mini-Lotto certain legal issues were raised, and I was instructed to travel to Denison to investigate."

The bar had emptied, and His Lordship had arrived, presumably intending to point out there were no exceptions to the rules. A glance from the speaker stopped him in his tracks.

"My investigations," Slaughter continued in the same mirthless, "have resulted in an official injunction being issued to the Polocrosse Association informing them they are to cease and desist from this activity immediately and forthwith. Had this evening's proceedings failed to produce a winner, the Justice Department would have been forced to take action that would have been a source of embarrassment to a number of local identities."

"No kidding, fellas," the Captain interjected. "It could have meant jail."

"However, the jackpot has been won, and I have a written undertaking that the Association will not be conducting further activities of this nature, the Department is disinclined to carry the matter any further."

"And the money?" I asked.

I had a feeling we were about to be reclassified under the heading of *Severely out-of-pocket*.

"Still goes to you. The Department would, under other circumstances, have been forced to impound the proceeds of the activity and attempt to return the funds to the people it came from. Having consulted my superiors, I have come to the conclusion things have reached a satisfactory outcome for all concerned. The Association was unaware of the breach of the Lotteries Act, and can be excused now that we have an undertaking they will not be conducting further activities along these lines. The means which I understand you gentlemen employed to win the money."

"I knew it. Here comes the crunch," Jeffrey remarked.

"While not in itself illegal, provides the Association with an excuse to offer the public to explain the demise of the activity without having to admit they have been in breach of significant legislation."

"In other words," Captain Headrush explained, "if anyone asks why we stopped doing it, we can blame you bastards and Herston's computer."

"And you," Slaughter concluded, "have found yourselves considerably enriched from the experience. Should you wish to attempt to repeat the exercise through

the official Lotto I would, however, point out that sixteen thousand dollars would not be anywhere near the amount necessary to cover all the combinations."

With that, Mr Slaughter turned on his heels and was gone.

In other circumstances, His Lordship might have been inclined to offer us a chance to take a bottle of something and partake of a few drinks on the verandah, but, given the recent presence of officialdom likely to be in close cooperation with the Licensing authorities, he was quick to point out this option was not open to us that particular evening.

Which explains why, ten minutes later, we were seated in the back room of a certain pizza establishment wondering whether the same approach would be able to be used on a Saturday night.

Going for the Big One

Next morning the sun had been up for a couple of hours before I deigned to join it.

Indeed, if it wasn't for a need to void the bladder I would have been quite happy to remain in hibernation till late afternoon.

Once I emerged further sleep was less likely to help the recuperative process than breakfast, paracetamol and something resembling a hair of the dog.

Bacon, baked beans and eggs ticked the boxes in the first category, a couple of tablets looked after the second and, after a spell under the shower I set off towards the Palace to see what adventures the day might produce.

I arrived to find Jeffrey, significantly the worse for overnight wear, in conference with the inimitable Gilhooley.

“So,” I was greeted, “Jeffrey tells me you bastards had a collect last night. Wish I'd been here to see it, but I was half way between Copabella and Middlemount.”

“When'd you get in?” I asked.

I knew his presence would be required at home almost immediately on arrival in Denison.

“Five minutes ago. The Iron Maiden's on day shift, so I'm safe in that regard, thank you very much. Called in just this side of Mackay to tell her I was broken down out near Nebo and wouldn't be home till later this afternoon, so I parked the chariot in a discreet location behind Hopalong Cassidy's. I reckon I can take my time here, get home just before four and be seated on the settee, beer in hand and suitably shagged out after a long and eventful day when she gets home. Now, Jeffrey was telling me how you bastards snagged the jackpot.”

“Pity we couldn’t do the same thing with the Lotto. Then we’d really have something to celebrate. If you’d seen the printout Herston came up with to cover the combinations of twelve numbers.”

“But,” countered Gilhooley, “it could be done. In fact, I’ve got a good idea how you could generate the complete list of combinations. Straightforward. Now, what were you saying about deleting combinations just before Herston strolled by?”

We explained, at some length, the process we’d undertaken while Gilhooley made notes on a handy coaster. After half an hour’s discussion, Gilhooley rose to his feet, placing an empty glass on the bar.

“I think we have something worth investigating. Not for me, thanks Magpie. I’ll be off. Gentlemen, I think we have a project worth investigating. All we need to do is to negotiate suitable remuneration for my valuable intellectual property.”

“Which means?” Jeffrey ventured.

“I am departing forthwith in anticipation of spending the afternoon working on the software solution that will meet your requirements. I’m guessing you’ll probably need to get a new computer to handle the quantity of data involved so don’t go spending your ill-gotten gains yet.”

“Fine,” I stated. “What’s this going to cost us?”

“Initially, nothing. I’ll get started on it this afternoon and let you know if it doesn’t look feasible. I’m in town till Monday and won’t have much time between now and then, except yhis afternoon. I’m back out at the mines for ten days after that, so I’ll be able to work on the finer details while I’m out there. If you like what I come up with it’s yours, but it’ll cost you ten per cent of the profit when you use it. Sound fair?”

A quick glance in Jeffrey’s direction produced a nod, hands were shaken, and Gilhooley departed.

“So that might have answered the question of how we dispose of sixteen grand.”

“The computer,” Jeffrey countered, “won’t cost that much...”

“We don’t know what it’ll cost until Gilhooley lets us know how much memory we’ll need to run the program and how big the hard drive’ll need to be to hold the data. But, and I’m guessing here, it’s unlikely to be the whole sixteen grand. Say we’ve got ten grand left. We could invest a grand each week for ten weeks before the cash ran out. If it doesn’t return a cent in ten weeks it’s not worth persevering with. After three months, we look at the bank and figure out what we’re going to do for the next three months.”

With that course of action agreed to, we shifted the discussion to other matters.

A week later, I was in my regular spot when the phone rang.

It rang frequently at intervals throughout the day and well into the night, but was rarely a matter of concern, which meant I was nonplussed when His Lordship emerged from the Inner Sanctum holding the cordless handset.

“For you,” he indicated as he handed over the handset. “Gilhooley...”

“What’s up?” I asked as I placed the phone to my ear. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing is going on. Nothing’s coming off, either, but there you undoubtedly go. However, I do have some news I wanted to pass on. Rang your place but got the answering machine, so I tried the logical alternative.”

“Right. Fire away.”

“I’ve got your program written and coded. That’s the first thing. There is a slight problem.”

“Which is?”

“You won’t be able to run it on a standard computer like the one that’s sitting in your flat.”

“So I need a new computer. Fine. Let me know the specifications and I’ll buy something that fits.”

“It’s not, that simple. It rarely is. The program generates huge amounts of data and handles it in a way your regular desktop can’t. Handle it, that is.”

“So in other words, we’re stuffed. We’ve got a computer program that won’t run on a computer.”

“On the contrary. It will run on a computer, but it won’t run on a mere smear common or garden computer. I’m going to have to build you one specifically to run this program.”

“Which will,” I replied, “probably cost us an arm and a leg..”

“Like hell it will. I can get the components and put it together myself so it won’t cost you more than three grand at the absolute outside. I’ll be in contact with suppliers tomorrow. I should have the parts in a day or two. I can have the thing built and test driven by the time I get back to Sleepy Hollow the week after next. The Iron Maiden’s not very happy about it, but they need me out there for a bit longer than originally planned. When I get back, I’ll make a flying visit to drop it off at your place before I head anywhere else. Don’t want the Board of Control getting a whiff of what’s going on. Might be a good idea for you to be sick that day. I’ll call to let you know when that’ll be. So you can see why I wasn’t interested in leaving a message on your answering machine.”

“Point taken,” I agreed.

“So, if it’s fine with you I’ll order the bits and pieces and when they get here I’ll start putting this infernal machine together.”

“Fine. A ballpark figure for the budget?”

“I think,” and you could almost hear the clanking as the cogs of Gilhooley’s brain struggled to bring forth the required information from the murky depths of his memory banks, “that I mentioned the figure of three grand when I spoke to you and Jeffrey.”

This figure coincided with my own recall of the relevant conversation.

“You can probably halve that, but I won’t know till I’ve got my hands on all the components. I might be able to pick up a few odds and ends at the right price if you know what I mean.”

“That’s cool,” I replied. “We’ve got three grand set aside. There’s no problem if we need to spend a little more, so go right ahead. I’ll be looking forward to the phone call.”

True to his word, about a fortnight later I returned to find the red light blinking on the answering machine.

The next day Gilhooley pulled into the driveway. A phone call to the Palace summoned Jeffrey while the computer was unpacked, assembled and installed.

I watched the process with some interest.

While the object in question looked like a computer, with a monitor, keyboard, a familiar looking case and a printer, there was no sign of another external input. The assembly was almost finished when Jeffrey arrived, announcing he’d given the buggers the slip, but he didn’t have much more than about half an hour before his absence would be noticed.

“Right,” said Gilhooley, standing back as the startup process wound up. “There are four icons you can see on the screen here. They’re all the machine needs to do its job. It won’t be capable of doing anything else. No e-mail, nothing. Won’t even connect to the internet.”

“Fine,” I remarked. “We only want it to do one job.”

“Here’s the way it works. This icon here is your *List Generator*. Run it and you’ll have a full list of all the combinations of forty-five numbers in groups of eight. That’s your starting point. The list is saved automatically with the date you created the file as the file name, so you can work with more than one file if you want to try different approaches. It’s a big file, but once you get onto the second program the file size should shrink dramatically.”

We nodded in agreement though neither of us had the slightest idea what he was on about.

Repeated exposure to the curious paths down which Gilhooley's mind wanders meant this was not an unfamiliar situation.

“So, once you've run the *Generator* and saved the file you start up the *Deleter*, which is this second icon. From what you were telling me when we started on this, you wanted to cut out combinations with too many consecutive numbers, right?”

This was familiar territory and produced affirmative nods all round..

“So first up here in *Actions* you have the option to delete combinations with so many consecutive numbers. So you can start off with, say seven consecutive numbers, and see how many combinations you have left. If you want to thin it out further, you can choose four or five or six numbers.”

“You wouldn't need to go to eight,” I suggested, “because all of those combinations would have seven consecutive numbers...”

“Exactly. When you're happy with the size of the file you've generated, you click here to save it as *Working* with today's date in the file name so you can come back to it. Once you've done that, you go to this next one under *Actions* which will delete all the combinations with three or four or five or whatever numbers from a draw from this *History* list, which is all the combinations that had been drawn until last Saturday's draw. I got that from the Lotto web site, so it should be accurate.”

“If we want more recent results?” Jeffrey asked.

“You go to this next bit, where you can add the results from each week's draw. I'm guessing you're only looking at Saturday nights.”

“If we want to include other nights?”

“That's covered by choosing another *History* list. Start over again with all the combinations, cut out the combos with too many consecutive numbers. Go from there to taking out combinations already drawn, and you'll end up with a list you can make your selection from for the next draw. You save the file you're working on, and you go to this program, which is the *Selector*.”

This was, at the time, as clear as mud, but still we nodded.

“Where you click on the option to Find all combinations with these *so many* numbers. Pick two, three, four or whatever, click, enter the numbers and there you are, Bob’s your uncle. Hopefully there’s a winning combination in there.”

“So,” I asked, “what do we owe you?”

“For time and effort, nothing. Zip. But you’ll be up for ten per cent of whatever return you get. Fair enough? For the computer, I can give you a detailed account, but call it fourteen hundred all up. I managed to scrounge a few bits and pieces; otherwise it would have been a bit more.”

“The ten per cent. Where does that go?” Jeffrey wanted to know.

“I’ll give you the account details when you’re ready to hand something over. I’ve got an account the Iron Maiden doesn’t know about, and you’ll be able to do a direct transfer from whatever account you’re using to bank the dividend cheques. How are you pair going to work that side of things?”

That side of things had been the subject of discussion over the last fortnight.

We’d assumed we’d have a starting bank of ten thousand, and we’d be investing around a thousand each week in eight number combinations so any entry with more than four out of eight brought a return. The plan had been to run for three months, review the situation and adjust accordingly, repeating every three months until either the money ran out or we became so used to collecting that the novelty wore off.

Once we’d outlined that Gilhooley was quite happy.

“So, when you sit down to figure out what you’re doing for the next three months, the first thing you’ll be looking at will be the balance in your slush fund, right? You look at the balance three months ago, subtract it from the new balance, deduct ten percent of the difference and deposit it in this bank account.”

“If there are any questions asked?”

“They’re going to be asking them at my end, so you’ll have nothing to worry about. The Iron Maiden’s been issuing dire threats involving divorce courts.”

“So you’ve told us,” Jeffrey interposed.

“More than once,” I added.

“She’ll probably keep making them, and every time she makes them they come with an announcement that she plans to take me for every cent I’ve got.”

I nodded, as an indication to continue the explanation rather than agreement with the sentiment expressed.

“So I’ve been getting to know a couple of bank johnnies out near the mines, and I’ve set up an account to safeguard money I make from cash in hand jobs like this. As far as the bank’s concerned, the deposits that go into the account from bank transfers will be royalties for the intellectual property of Dan Milligan, a name with which you’re undoubtedly familiar.”

“From a certain literary work whose virtues you’ve been known to extol.”

“Precisely. Anyway, I’ve spun them a story I’ve sold the rights to this software package and the royalty payments will be made every three months or so, so you’ve got nothing to worry about. Now if you’d like to take a seat here, I’ll watch and talk you through your first batch of information before I head off to face the wrath of the Iron Maiden.”

“I’ll head back,” Jeffrey interjected. “Herston can take me through the process once he’s graduated from his training wheels.”

With that, he was gone.

Half an hour later, so was Gilhooley, but, snuggled away in the hard drive was the beginnings of what we hoped would be a substantial income stream.

Unsurprisingly, that stream did not come online immediately.

Apart from the first batch of entries each week generally produced a return.

By the end of the first three months, the slush fund balance had risen from twelve thousand to twenty-one thousand and Gilhooley was nine hundred dollars better off. The following three month period also produced a substantial increase over the previous balance and as the New Year dawned I looked forward to the prospect of my last, or perhaps second-last, year in the classroom.

New Faces

Towards the end of the year, I'd been reminded that while the vacant room in my accommodation was unlikely to be occupied, the arrangements were always liable to change, and speaking of changes, the flat next door would be acquiring a brace of female tenants.

Fine, I thought. They were likely to be a change from the God-botherers who'd been living there for the preceding two years and had decided to devote themselves to missionary work in some corner of the Third World.

Not that their presence had caused any friction, you understand. They went about their business. I went about mine.

At the same time, neighbours likely to take offence at certain forms of verbal expression tended to cast a shadow over proceedings when acquaintances dropped by if we ended up in the carport to avail ourselves of the prevailing zephyrs.

The possibility of being landed with a flat mate, on the other hand, was pounced on by certain members of the scoffing fraternity with considerable glee.

I suspected there weren't many heavily tattooed gay activist Islamic militant cross-dressing vegetarians in the community,.

While I was aware of suggestions that standards had slipped in the profession, but even if they had, actually, declined it was unlikely they'd declined far enough to accommodate drag queens.

A Tuesday morning in mid-January saw a removals van arrive next door, closely followed by cars containing a blonde of considerable pneumatic charm and parents concerned about their daughter's well-being.

That was the definite impression I gathered when I wandered outside to scope out the new neighbour.

The daughter was Jonelle Carter, keen netballer, and recent graduate, and she was slated to share the unit with a certain Carole Kensington, one of her friends from University.

Mr and Mrs Carter were experiencing serious misgivings as their offspring left home and ventured into the cruel world.

I retreated indoors while Jonelle's worldly possessions were relocated into next door. The process was almost complete when a new pair of vehicles pulled up.

A second figure of pneumatic charm emerged from one, accompanied by the apparently requisite parental escort.

I surmised this would be Ms Kensington.

Her surname, along with the development of the mammary glands meant she would probably become known around town as Mangoes.

In an uncharacteristic flurry of activity, five minutes later, two more cars pulled up. One of them was the preferred chariot of my deputy principal, and I headed outside while Nick Davidson joined the gathering throng, followed by a gentleman who bore a more-than-superficial resemblance to the great Indian all-rounder Kapil Dev although his accent when he spoke suggested a trans-Tasman influence.

Mr Davidson had already met the neighbours. After checking that the accommodation next door was to their liking, turned to me.

“David Herston, your period of sole occupancy has come to an end. Meet Alex MacNab. Someone over at the High School made a typo in the *incoming* list. We thought the new English/History teacher was an *Alexandra* MacNab and allocated her to one of the flats near the cemetery. When this bloke lobbed on the doorstep, I realized someone had blundered. You're the only bloke in accommodation who's got a spare room, so you've drawn the short straw.”

“No worries. I know there's likely to be something unexpected that upsets the apple cart at the start of the school year, so I had Bronnie give the spare room the once over. It mightn't be quite up to standard if you're inclined to be picky, but it

has been dusted, vacuumed and aired since the new year, which is more than you can say for some places around here. Come in...”

My flat-mate travelled light and once a couple of suitcases, a box of teaching resources, an acoustic guitar and a stereo had been placed in the spare room Mr Davidson wandered off, leaving me to take stock of new domestic arrangements.

I gave the new bloke time to unpack and went about my own business until he emerged from the room. The sun was sufficiently far above the yardarm to suggest a beer while we discussed various matters of mutual interest.

Mr MacNab was of Anglo-Indian descent, spent his secondary school days in New Zealand, then moved across The Ditch to study. An uncomfortably recent marriage breakup explained his relatively meagre possessions and tended to rule out Hopalong’s hypotheses about likely co-tenants. An offer of a second beer was accepted. Once negotiations were complete it was lunch time. That provided the excuse to stroll down to check the lunch special at the Palace.

Tuesday lunchtimes at the end of the Christmas holidays tend to be subdued affairs at the Palace, and after lunch we wandered back, arriving around the time the occupants emerged from next door, obviously farewelling concerned parents.

After opening the front door, on the pretext of checking the mail, I wandered out into the carport ending up level with the new neighbours as the cars turned the corner and the not-quite tearful farewells concluded. As the neighbours turned to head inside I suggested coffee or something stronger.

The offer wasn't immediately accepted, but there was the possibility of the girls dropping in later.

About an hour later I was reading with John Fahey playing in the background when a verbal knock suggested next-door had decided to accept the offer.

Coffee was the preferred beverage at this stage of the afternoon.

Given my preference for powerful caffeine infusions on a Saturday morning, the plunger lived in a convenient location on the bench-top rather than tucked away at the back of a cupboard, and I was able to prepare a brew of reasonable

coffee while indulging in the sort of small-talk that accompanies such activities when you don't know your visitors very well.

Sandy joined us.

Before long we were seated around the table discussing matters of interest to recent arrivals in town.

Sandy, I already knew to be a recently separated guitar playing father of two, relocated from Townsville and planning to make a new start while maintaining links with kids aged three and five.

His former partner seemed to be doing everything in her power to minimise contact while extracting the maximum possible child support.

He'd taught in Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Townsville for ten years before his marital situation prompted him to ask for a transfer. His wife's new interest had been an occupant of the same staff room at his last school.

Things would be more comfortable if there weren't constant reminders of his change in circumstances.

Ms Carter and Ms Kensington were recent graduates from university, had ived at home, and were looking forward to the freedom that came with an escape from the parental domain.

"So," I asked, "why Denison? I'd have thought the southeast corner would offer greater opportunities."

"It would, but if we'd ended up teaching anywhere near BrisVegas they'd have been expecting us to live at home until Mum and Dad had successfully married us off to some doctor, accountant or corporate lawyer. So we had to get out."

"Sure," I countered, "but why Denison?"

"Two words," was Carole's response. "Frank Dooley."

Mr Dooley, a former Deputy Principal of the Teachers College in Townsville had moved into Education Department Human Resources when the college was merged with James Cook University.

"Not Brutally Frank?"

The gentleman was legendary for his blunt delivery of unfavourable Practice Teaching assessments. He'd ended up as Director of Human Resources and had a reputation for a continuing lack of sympathy for anyone whose lifestyle choices were likely to reflect unfavourably on the profession.

Knowledge that Brutally Frank filled that role was one of the reasons I was fairly confident about the drag queen question.

"Yes, Uncle Frank. He's Mum's brother-in-law," was Jonelle's explanation. "When we both had graduation coming up Mum asked him for some advice about schools."

"He came back saying Brisbane schools were hard to get into, unless you go into a less desirable area, and while he might be able to pull a few strings, he didn't think it was a good idea for us to have people saying we got into a school because of his influence."

"Fair enough," I remarked, "but surely you'd still be able to land a good spot in the southeast corner."

"Within easy driving distance for concerned Mums," Jonelle pointed out.

"No, thanks. Everywhere between Gympie and the border has people queued up trying to get into the good schools, so we suggested to Uncle Frank that we'd rather go somewhere else where we could find our feet before we went looking to get back into Brisbane."

"Sounds logical," I concurred.

"Uncle Frank did a bit of research and came back with a couple of possibilities that might have been very good schools. But there's the same problem in all the major centres. We're not interested in anything away from the coast, so there weren't too many serious possibilities."

"Only one of them was an hour or so north of Airlie Beach," Carole pointed out. "We could have gone for Proserpine, but we're safer if we're further away."

"So, when the pupil-free days are over we're off to Airlie to see if we've made the right call. We'll be busy with work during the week, and head away to let our hair down on weekends."

From which I concluded there'd be a number of highly disillusioned single males around town.

"If we can find the odd six-foot blond Swedish backpacker in the process, so much the better."

We passed the next hour chatting before the girls announced they had things to do. If I was planning to dine at the Palace they were inclined to join me.

Despite an earlier intention to dine at home, based on financial considerations, Sandy decided to join us. The four of us wandered pubwards slightly before six. As we arrived on the doorstep, Sandy reached for the handle, holding the door open for the girls before I stepped inside to find Jonelle and Carole surveying the scene.

Jeffrey was seated in our regular position, tapping the face of his watch.

His Lordship was stationed behind the bar.

"Where," His Lordship inquired, "is your note?"

"Here," was the reply as I gestured towards the two new faces. "Surely you wouldn't expect gentlemen to leave these two damsels to walk unescorted from the flat next door to my place to your august establishment? No? I thought not. So allow me to introduce. Jonelle Carter. His Lordship Bryan Barron. Mr Jeffrey. Carole Kensington. His Lordship Bryan Barron. Mr Jeffrey, and of course you're already acquainted with my recently acquired flat-mate Mr McNab. So now what are we drinking?"

Once the orders had been placed and His Lordship was engaged in supplying the liquid requisites, Jeffrey turned to Miss Carter.

"Around your eyes," he asked, "what is that? It sparkles."

"A little make up," Jonelle replied. "Plus, of course, a touch of glitter."

"Ah," was Jeffrey's response. "Bright eyes."

The name stuck. It took a bit longer before her flat-mate became widely known as Mangoes, but from Day One Jonelle Carter was known as Bright Eyes.

From there, the conversation followed the same lines as the afternoon version, although the Airlie Beach backpacker-seduction theme received more emphasis, sparking a lengthy discussion of physical attributes attributed to males of various northern European nations.

When the two headed towards the Ladies' Jeffrey turned to me.

"Well, Herston," he observed, "what you've got there is either a prime brace of buffaloes or a couple of party girls who won't be interested in anything in trousers they're likely to find in these parts. Not that you could call them prick-teasers, mind you. They've made it obvious they're not available to the general public if you catch my drift."

Which I did.

Over the next ten months, they proved to be friendly neighbours, celebrating pay day by lobbing into the Palace on a Wednesday afternoon and disappearing southwards on a Friday afternoon.

Their return was usually brought tales of debauchery to curl the short hairs of a credulous bystander.

For my part, I was disinclined to believe much of what I heard, suspecting the descriptions were intended to deflect amatory intentions lurking in the population.

Later that year I found my suspicions were correct.

We'd developed a fairly workable routine to select the cricket squad to go to the regional selection trials.

When the selection occurred in Denison I booked the Proserpine delegation into the Palace, and we conducted our preliminary negotiations over dinner the night before the trials.

When the venue was Proserpine, the same thing happened in Airlie Beach.

That year, as it turned out, it was the southern end's turn to host and having briefed the opposition on kids I thought were reasonable prospects and received the equivalent information from the other side, I found myself propping up the bar in a quiet corner of an Airlie Beach nightspot where fellow-selector Norm Trevelyn was occasionally employed as a security operative.

We'd been minding our own business and were about to make our departure as the premises filled when, to my not-entirely-considerable surprise, I sighted Bright Eyes and Mangoes among the throng on the dance floor.

"The thick," I remarked to Norm as we ordered a round to complete the shout, "plottens. Over there on the dance floor we have my neighbours, who seem to head down to these parts every weekend for a lifestyle of unbridled debauchery with the Swedish backpacker fraternity. Know them?"

He did, pointing out that, as far as the bar and security staff could tell, they were party girls who were rarely seen dancing with anyone apart from each other.

"A couple of stunners like that would normally have every bloke in the place trying to win on, particularly after they're half full of piss and, more than likely, bad manners. The two girlfriend routine seems to keep most of them at bay, though."

Back in Denison on a quiet night over a glass of wine I found that was the way it was.

Advice from Uncle Brutally Frank suggested teachers in a small town were invariably the subject of gossip.

A large percentage of the population in Denison believed I lived upstairs at the Palace when my actual home was as the reader will be well aware, a block away down the road.

"So he told us," Mangoes elucidated, "if we wanted to party we'd best do it out of town. In a couple of years when we get into a larger centre that won't be so important, but you've got to admit we've been able to keep things quiet."

Life Goes On

In the morning, Sandy informed me finances would not permit him to repeat the previous day's expenditures, and he'd be adopting a quieter lifestyle. Fair enough. In discussions that followed, we arrived at an arrangement that seemed workable, and once the school year started, life settled into a steady routine.

It wasn't, however, quite the routine I'd become accustomed to.

Given the fact it was far cheaper to eat and drink at home, Sandy decided while he might be able to stop in at the Palace for a quiet drink at the end of the day he'd be better off heading home for dinner rather than opting for a counter meal.

He also proposed to grow his own vegetables in a plot behind the flat once the season rolled around and intimated he was capable of turning out a reasonable curry given the appropriate fresh herbs and spices. If I was inclined to sample the results and contribute to the costs, I might as well benefit financially.

Under those circumstances it only fair I should do some cooking.

We worked out an arrangement with Sandy cooking on Tuesdays and Sundays while I looked after Mondays and Thursdays.

On Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays we'd make our own arrangements. Sandy would be able to use the leftovers from Wednesday on Friday night.

Before long we found Hopalong turning up on the doorstep around meal times.

Since Jeffrey needed to drop by to work out the Lotto entries it seemed logical to include him in the arrangements. His appearance was usually accompanied by something that could be included in the catering over the next couple of days. Every month or so there was a Saturday night dinner with contributions from all involved.

Sandy's consultations with colleagues from the Agriculture Department meant the plot behind the flat came to house extensive plantings, with tomatoes, chillies and leafy vegetables, with an ensuing reduction in the grocery bill.

As things settled down I found myself, for the first time in years, with disposable income to spare, so I was able to resume buying music, a practice that had fallen into decline through lack of funds rather than lack of interest.

Part of the financial surplus was channelled into reading matter, and I built up a useful collection of tracts about gambling.

A couple of trifectas boosted the balance of my phone account to the point where I was withdrawing rather than contributing regular financial transfusions.

The slush fund for the Lotto project continued to grow to the point where the balance was enough to cover the number of combinations the computer was throwing out from week to week, prompting an interesting possibility.

"Should we," I suggested to Jeffrey one Thursday evening as we sat at the table filling out and checking a pile of entries, "be looking at operating on a Wednesday night? Results from Wednesday nights are going into the computer already, and we can assume the same patterns we've spotted on Saturday nights, the repeaters from week to week, would apply there as well."

So, much to Hopalong's amusement, we diversified our investment profile and doubled the number of entries being filled in each week.

It won't last, you know, was the frequent remark as he wandered into the flat during one of the paperwork sessions, something that happened with increasing frequency in the wake of a Saturday afternoon in the middle of the year.

We'd been sitting in our usual spot when a young lady with an English accent had walked through the door, looking for a pay phone.

The one on the corner opposite the pub was, apparently, out of order again.

With nothing else to occupy our attention there was idle speculation about her occupation.

She was, according to Jeffrey, obviously either a nuclear physicist or a recently qualified brain surgeon.

I thought her manner reminded me of some of my colleagues, and suggested she was a teacher, probably doing the *world trip* thing before settling down with her fiancé, who would probably turn out to be an accountant or quantity surveyor from somewhere like Bexleyheath.

Sandy thought muscles around the shoulders reminded him of certain female teachers and cast his ballot for a Phys. Ed. teacher, or perhaps a physiotherapist.

Hopalong, claiming the most likely occupations had been covered, thought she might be a nurse, and had no sooner come to that conclusion than the lady under consideration replaced the phone and turned towards us.

“Go on,” Jeffrey suggested. “You just finished making up your mind she’s a nurse. Go over and ask her what she does for a crust.”

The inquiry was made, and the rest, as they say in the classics, was history.

Accepting an offer to join us for a cool drink, she had proceeded to hit it off with Hopalong to the extent she decided to alter her plans for the remainder of her Australian sojourn.

She was, according to her version of the story, a member of the Royal Marines employed as an unarmed combat instructress. Her presence in Denison came from an interest in scuba diving and a desire to upgrade her qualifications to the highest level of accreditation.

With the Barrier Reef and the Whitsundays on our doorstep, once she decided Hopalong was the man of her dreams, the decision to spend the rest of the time her visa permitted her to remain in Australia diving in the local area was hardly surprising.

They had even set up housekeeping in a small way, but lack of the appropriate visa prevented a permanent arrangement and required a return to duty in the United Kingdom at the end of August.

Hopalong's finances didn't stretch to the point where he could accompany her, and they decided when her current enlistment was complete she'd be heading to Denison to continue the relationship.

While Liz had no objection to his drinking, she had indicated he would need to change his spending patterns, so it seemed wise for him to moderate his intake. That would have been fine if he'd been able to stay at home and amuse himself, but he seemed to find the living quarters above the Old Servo sadly lacking once she'd departed, and as he wandered next door to the Palace he found his drinking companions increasingly conspicuous by their absence.

Which was not to suggest that we'd signed The Pledge.

Sandy's colleagues in the Ag. Department provided seedlings and were keen home-brewers. Sandy's need to keep an eye on his finances meant that in no time at all he'd caught the homebrew bug and a couple of fermenters in the laundry were turning out a steady stream of liquid to be bottled, labelled and stored in the cupboard.

Hopalong developed a taste for the results, and he was a regular visitor.

Visits Jeffrey needed to make to assist with the Lotto meant there were frequent opportunities for Hopalong to give voice to his scoffing proclivities.

He was in the process of advising us our run of good luck was bound to come to an end when something finally snapped.

"Listen, you bastard," Jeffrey interposed as he crumpled up an incorrectly completed entry, "that may be true. On the other hand, instead of sitting swilling free piss you could be doing something useful with your life."

Jeffrey and I had commandeered the dining table to complete our paperwork. Lack of suitably extensive workspaces was not a source of friction in the ranks but was definitely an inconvenience.

"Yeah," I added. "You're always telling us how good you are with your hands, how you would have been a cabinetmaker if your old man hadn't dropped off his

perch after you finished your apprenticeship, so your mum needed someone to run the servo. How about you knock us up some shelving and workspace here?"

The suggestion gave Hopalong and Sandy something to discuss while the pile of entries were filled out and cross-checked against the printout of Saturday night's number combos.

When we were finished, the four of us returned to the subject.

"The first thing we need," I pointed out, "is workspace that's large enough for two people to get themselves set up and stuck into whatever they're doing without having to take up the whole of the kitchen table. Doesn't have to be me and Jeffrey with the Lotto stuff - Sandy and I could both use some workspace for marking and report cards and that shit, and if we had shelving above the work space everyone would be able to keep their stuff in order without having to leave it lying 'round all over the cookshop..."

"A couple of bookshelves would be handy too," Sandy added. "Maybe we could get something to keep this bastard's records, CDs and music magazines in order. How about a sort of wall unit on the other side of the room to hold the TV and stereo as well?"

"So," I went on, "how about I drop into the hardware store tomorrow arvo and set up an account? You can buy whatever you need there and, if necessary we can use the slush fund to pay for it. Sandy can keep you supplied with piss to keep you going while you're working. With all that, you won't need to be hanging 'round here like a spaniel with a face that's been trodden on."

"But," Hopalong interjected, "what if you move? What then?"

I suspected he was clutching at straws.

"Simple," I said. "You make everything modular. If each bit's no more than a metre wide it'd be no problem to shift them when we've collected the big win."

"As if that's likely to happen."

The Scoffer was back in full force.

"And if that is the case," Jeffrey remarked, "not that it will, because we're going to snag it, but suppose it is, Herston's going to be living here until he retires or they carry him out in a pine box, at which point in time he won't have to worry about what to do with the living room furniture."

"Anyway," I was starting to get intrigued by the possibilities, "we'll need two workspaces about a metre wide with storage shelves above along this wall."

I stood and moved around the appropriate areas of the living room as I went on.

"The whole thing would need to stretch from here," indicating a space adjacent to the front door, "right along the wall to about a metre short of the kitchen. The entertainment unit would go along the opposite wall and dogleg along the front of the flat so we can stick the TV where we can see it from the kitchen table, and the armchairs would go here and here. The lounge would go there. Draw us up a plan along those lines over the weekend and we'll have a look at it and fine tune the bastard on Tuesday night over dinner."

So, over the next couple of months Hopalong had something to keep his mind off certain subjects and we, gradually, obtained working and storage space that was useful when the business end of the school year came around.

As the year went on, there were a few adjustments in Jeffrey's arrangements.

Frequent visits to what was becoming known as The Command Bunker meant, increasingly, he was nowhere to be found when the proprietors of the Palace needed something attended to.

"Really, Jeffrey, it's not good enough," His Lordship stated on an afternoon when no one else was about. "Every time we need you to do something, you're off somewhere."

"Fine," Jeffrey responded. "You can have my notice. I'll take up that offer of the greenkeeper's job at the bowls club. Shorty keeps pointing out how much he'd like to retire. The job comes with a caravan behind the clubhouse so I wouldn't be needing to pay any rent."

"That won't be necessary." His Lordship reportedly responded. "As long as we know where to find you when we need you. How about a pager or something."

"No way," was the response. "I'll tell you what, though. How about I stick around here till six or six-thirty in the evening before I head off down the road to look after this other shit? You've got me on the premises from sparrow-fart till then, and by that time there's every chance I'll be over the limit if it's a matter of driving anywhere."

"Fine, but..."

"There is the small matter of the rent, of course, If you did a time and motion study of hours I do put in around here, you'd be bound to find I should be getting a fair bit more than you're putting my way so I can give most of it back across the bar."

"Yes, but."

"Now I know what you're going to say. I do very nicely out of the arrangement we have at the moment. True. On the other hand, if I head up to the bowls club the bar prices are much lower. I reckon the money I'd save by not having to worry about rent would just about cover the week's grocery bill. Of course, Herston and his mate don't mind if I eat there, either. No, all things considered, I think it'd be better if..."

"I decided to scrub the rent on the room upstairs," His Lordship volunteered.

"And I was able to move to the one on the corner. Much bigger than the cubby-hole you've got me in at the moment. There's that bar fridge in the garage that's not doing much at the moment. Be just the thing to keep a six-pack cool at night without the need to walk downstairs for a refill."

"Which," His Lordship pointed out, "is what you do at the moment."

"Only because there's no power point in the room I'm in at the moment. If I moved to the one on the corner, there is a power point in there. I know because I've checked these things."

"I suppose, you'd like it air-conditioned as well," His Lordship added in a reasonably feeble attempt at sarcasm.

"Won't be necessary. The sea breeze is all the air-conditioning I'll need. There's a beautiful breeze up there on that corner. Much cooler than where I am now. Reverse-cycle would be an unnecessary luxury. We have rum for circumstances where you'd be looking at that sort of thing."

"So that hasn't been a bad day's work," Jeffrey remarked as he recounted the day's events. "They're not going to be out looking for me after six. 'Course if I'm in the bar I'll be only too happy to run a couple of little errands, provided, of course, I don't have to drive. Glad I thought of that angle. I'm eighty bucks a week better off in the kick and in a better room."

"What about the fridge?" I asked. "How're you going to manage that one?"

"Won't be a problem," Jeffrey pointed out. ""There won't be any more than a six pack in there if he bothers to check. Oh, and a bit of milk and a few other odds and ends. The empties won't be anywhere obvious around the neighbourhood. When he looks in the fridge, which he will, from time to time, he won't be able to help himself, and sees a six pack he won't be able to tell whether it's the same six pack he saw yesterday. That's the secret in this sort of thing. Little things often, rather than big things from time to time..."

"It helps to be a move or two ahead of the opposition."

"True. Now about this Saturday's numbers..."

The Big Collect

At the end of the school year, the community dispersed.

Sandy based himself in Townsville to maximise access to his offspring and I headed off to the cricket carnival, returning in time for Christmas festivities.

Christmas morning found me in Dagwood and Blondie's back yard as a stream of visitors passed through. Boxing Day was, predictably, spent on the couch in front of the television while the Melbourne Test and the Sydney to Hobart Yacht race got under way, and the recovery process kicked in.

When Saturday rolled around, with the racing focus switching to Perth, I found Jeffrey in the side bar. They were still going around at Ascot when we sat down to eat and await the Lotto draw.

Various celebrations were still in progress, and, in many cases had developed into a night out at the Palace rather than a family member's back yard or living room.

The draw could easily have passed unnoticed. I was negotiating a fresh bottle at the bar when the balls started dropping. Jeffrey was in a discussion with Dagwood and Blondie, but punters can be relied on to be carrying a pen. Both of us independently noted the numbers before a lull in the conversation allowed us to compare notes.

"There's something uncannily familiar about these eight numbers," I remarked. "Under different circumstances, I might almost be inclined to take a stroll down the road to check them out, but there's a full bottle in front of me. If I head off, some bastard might try to give me a frontal lobotomy, so I'm not going anywhere in a hurry."

Needless to add, by the time I found my way through the door, consulting the printout was the last thing on my mind.

I awoke nine hours later to the sound of someone pounding on the front door.

The pounder was, predictably, Jeffrey, and once I'd emerged from the cave it was time to investigate the convergence between the numbers scrawled on the beer coaster and the printout, and, once that was done, locate the relevant tickets from the bundle stored in the shelving because somewhere in the pile were tickets with enough correct numbers to qualify us for assorted minor prizes.

And one entry, which we found without too much difficulty, with eight out of eight.

Under normal circumstances, anyone in our position would, have been making their way towards the newsagent to ask whether there was an indication of the size of the windfall.

On the other hand, we'd been involved in this activity for almost eighteen months and were immune to the *Whoopee!* Factor. I reached for the Lotto Systems guide book, the calculator and the ball park figure printout from the spreadsheet I'd developed to keep track of the dividends resulting from each draw.

"O.K. We can bank on Division Four paying somewhere between forty-two and forty-eight dollars. Say forty-five. Times fifteen. That's six hundred and seventy-five. Plus Division Two a dozen times. Let's be pessimistic and go bottom of the range. Eight thousand times twelve's ninety-six thousand. Plus whatever Division One pays."

The Lotto authorities had designated the previous night a Super Draw with a guaranteed first division pool of twenty million dollars.

"Of course," Jeffrey pointed out, "this will turn out to be the week when they've got a record number of Division One winners."

"Doesn't matter. We know we've got a hundred grand. You never know. Not many birthdays there."

The majority of numbers were outside the range from one to twelve, and three were greater than thirty-one. When this occurred our research suggested dividends tended towards the upper end of the scale.

By this stage, Jeffrey was almost finished dialling the newsagent.

"Richie, old buddy old pal old china."

He'd undoubtedly succeeded in establishing contact.

"A top of the morning to you too," he continued. "First things first. You wouldn't have received anything about winning entries in last night's Lotto? Not yet? Well, don't go shouting it from the rooftops, but I'm sure you'll be finding there's at least one. You'll let us know when you do hear? Excellent. Herston's place until the pub opens and then I think you'll find there's a small celebration in progress."

"Might be better not to shout it from the rooftops," I suggested. "Let things sink in slowly unless we want every man and his dog wanting to join in the party."

When the phone rang about ten minutes later we'd worked out a basic plan for the next couple of weeks, and when the call was complete we realized there would be a need for significant extra consideration because it seemed there was only one winning entry.

"If you wouldn't mind, mate, since there's around twenty million involved, we'd appreciate it if you could keep it quiet for a couple of days. We're still going to be operating the same way. I assume you're going to be wanting the business. Cool? Yeah, well there's nothing that says lightning can't strike twice. Thanks mate."

I turned my attention to breakfast and considered the possibilities while Jeffrey entered the previous night's results in Gilhooley's machine and began the process of generating the data for Wednesday night, which, coincidentally, happened to be New Years Eve.

By the time breakfast was ready I'd clarified my thoughts enough to start on canvassing the possibilities.

"First up," I pointed out between mouthfuls of toast, fried egg, bacon and baked beans, "we're not handing that ticket in here are we? They'll be announcing Richie sold the winning ticket, and, more than likely there'll be people guessing

who he sold it to, but it's best if the ticket gets handed in in Brisbane. It'll take about six weeks before they can come through with the money, in any case."

When we'd started on the project the first thing Jeffrey had insisted on was no link to the cards prospective investors were being encouraged to use. There had been difficulties with the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation at some point in the past.

"So, we drop into Which Bank on Monday and lodge the ticket there for safe keeping and see if we can negotiate bridging finance to get us over the six weeks until we get the money. Then we find a couple of excuses to get out of town. I'll need to see Bridger and see what I need to do about getting out of teaching and I guess you've washed your last dish."

"In the meantime, who really does need to know? His Lordship, for a start. He can put it around that I've been called away. Uncle Cyril's not a well man..."

"Thought he died years ago," I pointed out.

"He did, but it's not exactly general knowledge. If I get a phone call from my sister, I'll have the excuse to hand in my notice without arousing suspicion."

"If the state cricket team needed some assistance, that'd give me an excuse for heading out of town. So who else needs the real story? More importantly, how do we keep the Lotto thing going? We're not going to lug Gilhooley's Gadget with us..."

"Which means we're going to have to leave someone in charge here."

"And the only one we can trust," I suggested.

"Would, in the absence of Mr McNab, be that one-legged scoffing bastard. Now, we can train him to enter the results and generate the printout. You trained me, so it's not exactly rocket science."

"It'll be nicely ironic to have him administering the project while we're away."

"At least as far as generating the printout and faxing us the results. We can fill in the entries down there. At least that way if anything stuffs up it's going to be our fault."

Once the cover story had been worked out it was time to head off for a low-key celebration.

The doors weren't open when we arrived.

We used the long-established alternative of using the door that provides access to the upstairs accommodation to head upstairs, across and down the main stair well and beard His Lordship in his office.

"Listen," Jeffrey started, "what you're hearing isn't going any further. Not if you're looking to maintain a healthy cash-flow through the place."

"But..." His Lordship began.

"No buts and no maybes," Jeffrey went on.

I suspected he was enjoying this.

"Any word of this leaks out before we want it to and we'll be drinking at the Bowls Club. First up, you've got my notice. Effective immediately. If you ask nicely, I might finish cleaning the kitchen this afternoon. The tug boys are out, and I had to pop down to see Herston before I got it all done this morning."

"But."

"Like I said. But me no buts. Herston and I have taken out the Lotto overnight, and there are a few changes on the horizon. Now, as far as everyone is concerned, The Duchess included, I've been called to my Uncle Cyril's death bed and I don't know when I'll be back, so you've decided I need to be replaced. Tell every bugger I'm likely to end up at the Bowls Club when I get back if they're worried about my welfare. Herston's going to be disappearing for a bit as well."

"If you can keep it under your hat, once we've got things sorted out we'll be back, larger than life and twice as dangerous. Alternatively, we could just relocate to Airlie or Mission Beach or somewhere and the publicans there can."

"I get the picture," His Lordship had surrendered to the inevitable.

"If we decide to stay in these parts, we're going to be able to look after our friends if you catch my drift. In the meantime, as far as you're concerned, I've had

bad news and don't feel like socialising. Can't get onto a flight till Tuesday so you can explain the drinking that way if you like. Since it's time for you to open up, we might grab a couple of beers and disappear to the beer garden. And if Cassidy wanders in, point him in our direction. While you're opening up, we'll look after this esky."

A quarter of an hour later we were in conference mode throwing options around when Hopalong hove into view.

The expression on his face suggested His Lordship was spreading the cover story.

"Sorry to hear about your uncle," was the opening remark.

"My uncle be stuffed," was the response. "Sit down, listen and remember. What you're about to hear goes no further."

"The long and short of it is it looks like we've picked up the twenty million from last night. We need to slip out of town to make a few arrangements."

"We need someone to look after things while we're gone. We could have grabbed someone else, but they're all out of town. So for the next few weeks you're going to have a few jobs to look after."

"For which you'll be well remunerated," I pointed out. "Now here's what we're looking at."

Various individuals wandered past over the next few hours and might have been tempted to join us, but His Lordship had made sure all and sundry knew about serious news received from the south, and pointed out our discussions were best left uninterrupted.

By the end of the afternoon, the arrangements had been made.

Travel arrangements and financial matters would be looked at in the morning, and, in the interval between making the bookings and the departure Hopalong's training would take place.

Once we'd picked up the loot, we'd head back, basing ourselves in Airlie Beach until suitable accommodation was arranged. While that was happening Hopalong and Captain Headrush were going to ferry us back and forth.

There were a number of matters to be addressed in the morning, so, once the esky had been drained we adjourned to Luciano's then wandered off towards my soon-to-be-former home, where Jeffrey planned to camp overnight.

"I could stay at the pub for the night. As long as no bugger's let the cat out of the bag things would be OK. But it's safer if I crash here. I hope Sandy won't be too put out if I use his room."

"What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over. Since he's going to be featuring in changes to the arrangements when we relocate, I don't think he'd raise any violent objections."

In the morning, once breakfast was out of the way, I sat down at the work space and switched on the non-Lotto computer.

"I know we went through all this yesterday but we put this stuff in writing to make sure we don't miss anything. Might be tricky paying for airline tickets until we've been to see the bank, for instance. And there are places where it wouldn't be advisable to be sighted together. If the two of us front at the bank, for instance. Get the list done, then we get them in order and work out who does what."

Once we'd brainstormed the list, the first round of leg work was best carried out by one person and included arrangements regarding my departure from the teaching profession, so I was the logical choice to carry it out.

"After you've seen Bridger and broken the news, you'll be on time to lob through the doors at Which Bank and inform Darby about our requirements. I'll put the other entries through at the newsagent and continue the cover story. Might head back to the Palace and help out in the kitchen until you've got that stuff sorted out. His Lordship won't object if I borrow the truck for the next round of jobs. At least if he knows what's good for him, he won't."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," I pointed out as I started dialling the number allocated to the Principal's residence.

"Hello Jim? I've got a bit of news you need to hear ASAP. Would it be OK if I called around to see you in half an hour? An hour would be better? No worries. No, need to open your office. Holidays, remember? Catch you then."

I arrived to find Jim Bridger sitting in an armchair on the veranda.

"You're not going to tell me you won the Lotto on the weekend are you?"

"I am, actually, Was that a guess or has someone broken security already?"

"You wouldn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out. What else could it be? So, how much does it look like?"

"As far as we can tell, it looks like the whole twenty million. When we checked at the newsagent, Richie reckoned there was only one live ticket. We've got one, so unless they've made a mistake..."

"So what are you thinking? I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to burn bridges."

"Depends what I can actually do. I gather I can just give a fortnight's notice if I want to quit and they've always asked for six months notice for anything like long service. So, what are the other options?"

"There's Emergent Leave - the kind you take when you've had a death in the family, which I think could apply in this case, and if we play your cards right we can wangle leave without pay for you until you've decided you don't want to come back. You'd have to keep your Registration up to date, but if you've just picked up a couple of million that won't break the bank, and if you do decide to come back, you won't have burnt any bridges."

I left with the name of a contact at head office in my pocket, and a promise a completed Emergent Leave form would have found its way to him within a week, so I could negotiate directly with the real power brokers, including, I suspected, Brutally Frank.

Still, I thought as I headed down the hill, I had three weeks before the crunch came and school resumed. I'd started on the right foot by giving them a warning of my intentions at the earliest opportunity.

As I was passing the newsagent, a voice boomed out.

"Herston, you bastard. It was you wasn't it?"

I halted in my tracks, turned, and entered the shop.

There, large as life and almost as ugly was Dan Campbell, a member of the High School teaching fraternity.

"Dunno. Depends on what I'm supposed to have done."

"Richie here," Campbell explained, "has just been explaining that whoever it was that's taken out the twenty mill, it wasn't you."

I made a mental note to do something to reward the attempted disinformation. At the same time, I noted two people who'd broached the subject had made the same accusation.

"Jeffrey's already been in here to cash in a couple of tickets from Saturday night. None were worth anywhere near twenty million."

Which was true. Cashing in the minor dividends had been a part of Operation Disinformation, but Campbell was having none of it..

"On the other hand, Richie doesn't share a staff room with Sandy McNab. I do, and I've heard about the pile of entries you bastards put in every week, and when I asked about your strike rate he reckoned it was surprisingly good."

I affirmed that, indeed, seemed to be the case.

"So I asked him a few months ago what would happen if and when you took out the big one."

"And?" I asked.

"His reply seems to fit with what I found when I wandered through the Palace yesterday."

I recalled sighting the gentleman in transit between the main building and the beer garden toilets during the afternoon.

"So?"

"So, in the opinion of Sandy McNab, rather than yelling it from the rooftops and hiring Albert Einstein wigs while you threw money round like confetti."

I noted the reference to a frequently discussed scenario.

"You'd be more likely to keep mum about it until you'd collected. Then you'd let the cat out of the bag. Yesterday afternoon when I walked through the pub what did I find? You and Jeffrey in your usual spot at the bar? The spot where every bugger knows they can find you at any hour of the day or night?"

"You're exaggerating. We're not there twenty-four seven. There are working hours for a start."

"You don't sleep there either. But yesterday, for the first time in living memory, both of you were skulking at the arse end of the beer garden with an esky full of piss in deep conference mode with Hopalong Cassidy."

"Hardly surprising since Jeffrey's got a serious illness in the family," Richie cut in. "If it was me I wouldn't be talking about it to every Tom Dick or Harry that wandered through the bar."

"But you're not these bastards. You're normal," was the response. "Well, maybe not *quite* normal. But as close as you'd expect someone silly enough to buy into a newsagency to be. So Herston, what was it?"

"Simple."

I refused to concede anything, regardless of the accuracy of his surmises.

"Jeffrey's had some bad news. I've been thinking of heading back to Brisbane because a couple of the NQ kids made the state cricket team and the cash Jeffrey collected this morning will cover those expenses. I've organized Hopalong to look after things while I'm away. Like the computer stuff we use to generate the Lotto entries which Sandy's obviously told you about as well, So that's it."

"You still haven't answered the question."

Campbell wasn't giving up. I was glad his facial resemblance to a bulldog didn't extend beyond physical dimensions.

"Mate," I replied as I headed towards the door. "The first bloke I'll be talking to when we win the Lotto will be Sandy. To let him know he'll be facing a change of flat-mate if he stays in the accommodation and suggest he consider relocating to wherever we decide to relocate to, even if he still needs to work for a living. Least I could do."

"And?"

"Since that hasn't happened, I think you can put your mind at rest."

I conveniently neglected to mention the uncertain nature of the gentleman's holiday plans meant he'd advised me not to try contacting him, even in the event of the direst emergency. *The only emergency that would be dire enough would be if something happened to my kids. Since I'll be with them most of the time, that's not going to be a consideration,* had been his summary of the situation.

There was a substantial crowd gathered outside the doors when I reached the bank, though most were more interested in withdrawing cash than contacting branch manager, Darby Dunning.

There would be a slight delay before I could see him and I was offered the chance to see one of his underlings instead if I didn't feel like waiting.

"I'll wait, provided I can get in to see him within the next hour. I don't think he'll be too happy if he finds out I took my banking business elsewhere because I couldn't get in to see him."

"So," the girl on the information desk suggested, "I should say you've won the Lotto or something."

"That," I replied, "would be a very good idea."

Despite attempts to maintain security that made three references to the subject in the space of forty minutes.

She was back ninety seconds later announcing Mr Dunning will be able to see you immediately.

"So, David, you've won the Lotto or something, That's what Carly said when she told me you were looking for an unscheduled appointment. So which one is it? The Lotto? Or the something? I called into the newsagent at the Plaza on the way in. They were talking about the winning ticket from Saturday's Lotto being sold in Denison."

"So there's not much point in denying anything," I said, producing the ticket.

"This might best be kept somewhere secure for the time being. I see you've got the paper on your desk, so you'll be able to verify the numbers are correct. We're not too keen on publicizing the result until we've got our hands on the cash if you catch my drift, so we'd appreciate it if that news didn't travel any further. I guess there'd be plenty of financial institutions that'd like a slice of the action. Now what we're looking at."

"Will be an account separate to the one you and Jeffrey have been operating over the past few years."

"A little more than that. There's plenty in that account, but what we need right now is enough to cover us for the next few weeks. I could do with a substantial lift in the credit limit on my credit card so we can get down to Brisbane to collect the cash. We'll be only too happy to invest the money with you if you've done the right thing by us in the interim."

There were forms to be filled out and procedures to be followed before the other arrangements could be completed, but it took virtually no time at all to boost the limit on my credit card and I was promised a visit later in the afternoon with all the paperwork that needed to be signed.

With that out of the way, I headed along to the travel agency, emerging twenty minutes later with two one-way tickets from Proserpine Airport to Brisbane on Tuesday afternoon and a booking on the airport shuttle bus.

By this time, it was eleven, and I was undecided whether to head homewards and go to ground for the rest of the day or maintain something resembling the regular day to day routine.

Considering earlier comments, I realized following the familiar routine might do something to quell the rising wave of interest in our financial affairs. I had a ready-made cover story to cover my impending absence from town, so I headed for the pub.

Wandering into the side bar, I was greeted by the Duchess. There were the usual array of barflies in the public bar, but my favourite spot was vacant.

"So," the Duchess asked as a beer appeared in front of me. "How does it feel to be a multimillionaire?"

"Dunno," I replied.

I wouldn't actually know until I had my share of the dividend in cold hard cash.

"Come off it." She entered theatrical mode, declaiming for the edification of the public bar. "Cut out the bullshit, Herston. You're off to Brisbane tomorrow and Jeffrey's heading south as well. Everyone around town wants to know who took out the Lotto dividend, and everyone I know has you and Jeffrey pencilled in as odds-on favourites."

"Makes a change. I thought the general opinion was the two of us were mad."

"Which is true. No doubt about it, and you're mad if you think anyone's going to swallow this bullshit story you're putting around."

"Hang on for a second," I responded. "How about taking a couple of minor considerations into account before wego jumping to any conclusions?"

By now the full and frank exchange had the full and undivided attention of the public bar. This was, I decided, an ideal opportunity for *Operation Obscure-the-Real-Facts-Without-Telling-An-Actual-Lie*.

"Where did I go for the first part of the holidays? A cricket carnival in Toowoomba? You were talking about how cold the place gets. Reckoned I'd come

back singing in the soprano section of the brass monkey choir, even if I was going there in December. If you recall, I came back pointing out we'd missed a place in the final by *that* much."

I indicated a suitable interval between my fingers.

"And, if you recall, I countered suggestions I was exaggerating by pointing out that we ended up with three kids in the team chosen to represent Queensland in the national challenge, which starts in Brisbane on Friday."

All of which was, conveniently, true.

"I haven't been to one of these national bunfights. They only get to Brisbane every four or five years. And by the time I get back here just before Christmas, I've usually got just enough left from the holiday pay to tide me over till school goes back. Check the subs book for the past couple of years 'round mid-January if you don't remember."

By this stage, the Duchess's pose had morphed into sceptical onlooker weighing the evidence. It seemed my explanation wasn't generating instant disbelief.

"So when we had a pickup on Saturday night, it made me able to do something I hadn't been able to do before. Unless I'm very much mistaken Jeffrey fronted the newsagent to cash in a ticket worth a tad over four grand, and I reckon my share might as well go into an air fare. Three NQ kids in what looks like a strong Queensland team that's a good chance to win the national title again, and for the first time I can afford to go. What do you reckon I'm going to do?"

As I paused, I sensed someone approaching from the general direction of the kitchen. I turned. Jeffrey, sporting a cabbage leaf on his head, was approaching, brandishing a piece of paper.

"Got anything you want to add to the shopping list?" he asked.

The question was directed to the Duchess rather than the lesser mortals nearby. For my benefit, he turned to advise the visit to the newsagent hadn't been totally successful since the amount on the ticket was more than Richie's cash reserves could cover.

"Asked me if I would take a cheque," he continued as the Duchess studied the shopping list. "Under normal circumstances, with the money going into the slush fund I would've. But you want two grand for the cricket trip, and I need about the same to get me to Uncle Cyril, so he asked me to drop back on the grocery run when he'd be able to give it to me in cash. If you want to come along for the ride, I can drop you at your place after. Give you time to pack."

"You're not," the Duchess instructed, "leaving here and going about in public with that on your head."

Jeffrey's version of the cabbage tree hat, while perfectly acceptable in the kitchen, did not feature on this year's version of what the best dressed dishwashers are wearing.

"And kidney beans on this. I want to do a Mexican thing later on this week. Dried, not canned."

The shopping list was handed back.

"Speaking of which," Jeffrey rejoined, "you might need to call the ambulance. Remember half an hour or so when that song about not putting beans in your ears was on the radio? You told Brendon not to pay attention. If he wants to put beans in his ears, you said, he should. So he did."

Brendon was the apprentice chef in the kitchen. Self-restraint was not his strong point.

"Been spending the last half hour trying to get them out with a toothpick. All he seems to have managed to do is push them further in. Finished? Then we're off like granny's knickers."

The latter remark referred to the stubby in front of me, which was conveniently empty and provided an excuse for departure.

Once we were safely on the road I handed over an air ticket and reported on the morning's events.

"Darby'll be round at my place between two and three this arvo," I concluded. "According to him, the way to go was to transfer ten grand from the slush fund to

a new account linked to a couple of debit cards. Like credit cards, but the money comes out of an account instead of going on the never-never. We can put it back into the slush fund once we've got the payout. He'll have all the stuff that needs to be signed then. Reckons we'll be able to pick up the debit cards in Brisbane while we're down there."



Setting Things Up

The section of the narrative that takes the story from the point where Herston and Jeffrey have collected their fortune to their return from an overseas jaunt.

To the Crossroads

The Transformation

Way Down Yonder in New Orleans

Enter the Punter

A Day at the Races

The Hunter and the Hunted

Travelling North

Welcome Home

To the Crossroads

To most people, news they were twenty million dollars richer would spell the end of mundane financial worries. That is, after all, is the theory behind the television advertisements for lotteries and the like.

To some extent, they would be right, but money, as has frequently been pointed out, cannot buy happiness. A twenty million dollar windfall brings problems, and while day to day worries about making ends meet and stretching the pay packet to last the fortnight rather than a dozen days disappear, in their place new cans of worms emerge.

For a start, various government institutions need assurance that tax obligations will be met, and a fair chunk time spent in Brisbane was devoted to negotiations with the Australian Tax Office.

Once those matters had been attended to it was becoming increasingly obvious a multitude of interested parties, particularly of the feminine persuasion, had their own ideas about how our wealth could best be spent.

Especially on them.

Not that Jeffrey nor I needed assistance in spending money.

Once negotiations had been completed, and the cricket challenge had reached a successful conclusion as far as the Queensland side was concerned, it was time to bite the bullet, head back home and admit, yes, we had taken out the big dollars.

As we explained, reticence had been prompted by disbelief that it had actually happened. Now the funds had been deposited it was time to ensure the benefits were shared around the members of the social circle.

Returning to Denison just before the start of the school year, I'd removed my worldly goods from the flat and placed them in storage until new accommodation had been found.

While the search was being conducted we set up headquarters in Airlie Beach, commuting to do the rounds of real estate agencies. Ferrying services were carried out by Captain Headrush.

When he was unavailable, our liaison officer was Hopalong Cassidy.

Airlie's a party town.

Our accommodation was designed to allow revellers who were returning around the crack of dawn to sleep without being disturbed by a vestige of daylight penetrating into the bedrooms.

While we usually returned before midnight, that factor meant it was usually well after nine before we were on the blower to organize a rendezvous.

With the best part of an hour while the vehicle made its way down, and the same while it made its way back, it was usually noon before set about activities that needed to be carried out in and around Denison.

There were properties to inspect, Lotto coupons to be filled and lodged at the Investment Agency and other matters to attend to before we assumed our regular spots at the bar around four-thirty.

Once we had a flow of visitors would pass through until we decided to draw stumps, contact Captain Headrush and make our way back to base.

These arrangements left something to be desired, but locating suitable living quarters in Denison proved to be more difficult than we'd anticipated.

Building was one possibility.

On the other hand, deciding on a design and the delay while the edifice went up meant buying a ready-made residence seemed the way to go. We started doing the rounds of houses that had come onto the market.

Few offered the right blend of communal living and individual privacy and when we found one that might there was invariably some consideration to rule it out.

Having drawn a blank as far as houses were concerned, we turned to farms in the district surrounding the town, and though complaints from neighbours kept awake into the small hours were no longer a consideration, we found the privacy problem was still a matter for concern.

While he was quite happy to join us for a glass or three, Sandy had preparation and correction activities that needed to be carried out undisturbed.

The same concerns did not apply to Hopalong, but we needed quarters for him and his intended once she'd completed her enlistment in the British military.

It didn't seem right to take prime farming land and render it unproductive or subcontract someone else to do the farming. While it might be possible to leave the responsibility to whoever undertook the task I had a feeling I'd end up intrigued by what was going on and end up doing something resembling regular work.

Having ruled out a farm, we considered a virgin stretch of countryside with separate encampments around a central hub.

We could acquire a number of caravans and set them up in a circle around a building housing the communal entertainment facilities. That would have fitted most of the criteria involved but would have been too far from the centre of town.

It was several weeks before we found what we were after.

One Wednesday afternoon we'd handed over the evening's Lotto entries and retreated to the Palace for lunch and further discussion while we perused the latest edition of the *Denison Argus* (a.k.a. the *Sleepy Hollow Sausage Wrapper*).

Magpie was in the middle of delivering a brace of brimming beverages when His Lordship loomed over the horizon with the news that local real estate identity Bevan Walton had been in touch with a request that Jeffrey or I should call him as he'd found a property we might be interested in acquiring.

Our experiences over the past weeks meant I wasn't optimistic as I dialled the number. I was mildly surprised when the gentleman himself, rather than one of his underlings answered the call.

"Herston," he replied once I'd identified myself, "when the phone rang I had a sneaking feeling it might be you. Still in the market for somewhere for you and your mates to set up camp?"

After the initial wave of inspections had ruled out most of the available options on the market things were in a state of *don't call us, we'll call you*. We hadn't looked at a property since Monday afternoon.

"Yep, and rapidly coming to the conclusion we're going to need to..."

"Well, I might have come up with something. Do you know The Crossroads? Got a call this morning to ask me to come out and give them a valuation."

The Crossroads was a motel on one corner of the junction of the north-south highway and the route into town. There was a significantly larger and decidedly flashier establishment on the opposite corner and farmland on the other side of the highway.

"Sure," was my response. "Bit run down but looks OK from the outside. Give us half an hour or so for lunch, and pick us up at the Palace, if you're free around then and we might have a look at it."

Once we arrived a glance was enough to realise this was what more or less what the doctor ordered.

There were fifteen rooms, each large enough to make a comfortable bedroom with an ensuite. So, no bathroom queues. *Advantage Number One.*

Above Reception, the manager's quarters would suit a married couple and a couple of offspring. Behind Reception the Restaurant could serve as a communal living and dining area. *Advantage Number Two.*

The kitchen was large enough to handle catering requirements and came equipped with labour-saving devices, including a dishwasher. *Advantage Number Three.*

Between the highway and the front of the units there was a pool and spa, with possibilities for a degenerate lifestyle, comfortably away from the sleeping quarters

so it would be possible for Sandy to work without undue disturbance from outside revelry. *Advantage Number Four.*

Having completed a preliminary inspection, we headed back to the Palace and retreated to the beer garden, leaving instructions Hopalong and Sandy were to be informed of our whereabouts when they lobbed on the premises.

Once we'd eliminated the need to walk back and forth we settled down to nut out the possibilities.

"We've got fifteen rooms to start with," Jeffrey observed. "Take out two for you. You've got your music, books and shit, so you need about twice as much space as a normal human being. One for me, one for Sandy and one for that scoffing bastard and there'd still be ten left."

"Leave a couple free for visitors and we'd be able to fit a few more permanent residents on site. Once we'd found 'em of course."

"You'd need to refit the restaurant," Jeffrey continued. "No need for that many tables. One big long bastard right in the guts would be the go. You could fit a smaller one away in a corner if someone needed a more intimate spot."

"The bar there could stay, and there's enough cold-room space to hold about a week's supply. What do you reckon about a pool table? I don't play myself, but there'd be room for one in there without getting in anyone's way."

"Not a bad idea. You could get one with a thing to go over the top, I guess, and end up with something that'd do as a table if you wanted to do a smorgasbord. What do you reckon about entertainment?"

"There's the corner near the bar where you could fit a stage, plus space that'd do for a dance floor. Dunno we'd be getting much live music, but you'd want a jukebox, Something like an antique Wurlitzer would be the go if we could find one."

"Stocking that would be your department."

"Yeah, ideally you'd get something that played vinyl and stack it with a pile of 45s. Might be hard to find 'em on vinyl, though. On the other hand with my CD a burner I can fix that, provided we can find something that looks the part."

"That'd be the go. Comfortable seating. Plenty of padding, subdued lighting, with a spotlight over the pool table, and a bartender with an electric blue bow-tie with flashing lights to mix something tasteful in a cocktail and we'd have a classy establishment with no pimps, shoe salesmen, or professional virgins allowed," was Jeffrey's summary of the possibilities.

When Sandy lobbed over the horizon, beer in hand, having put the car to bed, when we took the other prospective residents for a tour it looked like Hopalong would be doing the driving.

Sandy was already *in situ*.

It would be unreasonable to expect him to refrain until The Scoffer emerged from whatever activity was filling in his free time. We secreted the esky in a secure location and headed indoors to await his arrival. The esky would come in useful when it was time for Captain Headrush to ferry us back to Airlie Beach.

As luck would have it, we arrived at the bar with just enough time to organize a round before Hopalong hove into sight.

"Afternoon Magpie," were his first words. "Pot of the usual if you don't mind."

"Better put a hold on that," Jeffrey interjected. "This bastard is going to have to be sober to drive us to our new living quarters for a quick squiz. Once that's out of the way he can drink it by the bucketful."

"What about him?" was the Scoffing response as he pointed towards a recently arrived High School teacher. "He's got to be under the limit. Saw him go past the garage about twenty minutes ago. That's why I waited to head down here myself. Could have turned up half an hour ago but I'd have to put up with you two mad bastards. At least while he's around there's someone sensible to talk to."

"Mr McNab," Jeffrey replied, "has undoubtedly been at the medicinal brandy bottle in the staff-room during the day and now he's on his second beer he'd cause

the crystals to turn all the colours of the rainbow if we were unlucky enough to have Mr Plod ask the driver to blow into his little bag. No, it's got to be you. That's assuming, of course, that you're amenable to an offer of free board and lodging for yourself and your lovely bride for an indefinite length of time once you've tied the knot."

Put in those terms Hopalong had to concede temporary sobriety was the wisest course. Five minutes later Sandy had drained his glass, declining a refill because *we'll be off shortly*.

"You lot," Magpie remarked, "have been off for years."

"Yeah," Jeffrey observed. "As the Gorgonzola said to the Danish Blue."

Another five minutes had elapsed before I was ready to roll. Magpie, having scoped out the lie of the land, was discreet enough to know I didn't need a refill. Ten minutes later Jeffrey's last dregs had been drained from his can, and we were able to leave the premises.

"If you just hang around on the footpath," Hopalong advised, "I'll head down to get the car,"

"You could," Jeffrey remarked, "have done that while we were finishing the round and saved a bit of time."

"And given you bastards the chance to sneak in another round and keep me waiting again?" Hopalong responded. "Not bloody likely. My name's Billy, not Silly."

We watched his back as it headed towards the Old Servo.

"Knew that," Jeffrey explained. "Finished that last can when Sandy finished his."

"So why," Sandy inquired, "did we wait the extra ten minutes?"

"Because," Jeffrey explained, "an extra ten minutes between drinks won't make the slightest difference to me. But it will make a heap of difference to him. Just watch. He'll be on about it all the way to The Crossroads. If we aren't able to start

a discussion about what we're going to do to the place before we're back in the car he'll complain about it all the way back as well."

The prediction, unsurprisingly, turned out to be true, and we copped a severe earful on the way out. Once we'd alighted, it was another matter.

"The residence above Reception on your left," I pointed out, "will make an ideal setup for you and Liz once she's made it out here. In the meantime, you can use a motel room. No point giving you ideas above your scoffing station."

"We reckoned," Jeffrey explained, "once we've got our hands on the place we'd stop the driveway about here, rip up the bitumen and put down pavers through to the end of the building."

"Once that's done," Sandy commented, "I suppose you're going to ask me to do something with a couple of planters under the awning. Could be a classy-looking little area."

"True," I replied, "but remember most of the action's going to be around the pool. You'd want to keep the space in front of the rooms as somewhere to lie back and relax. Party area over there, chill-out zone in the middle and the private space over there. That way someone who needs a bit of peace and quiet will be able to get it. Now, if we take a look into one of the rooms, you'll see they're bigger than a standard bedroom. Plus, everyone's got their own shower."

I could see the owner headed in our direction and since he was carrying the master key we were able to inspect the living quarters. After a quick stroll through the restaurant and reception area we were back in the car bound for the Palace.

"So," I started, "do we have anyone, not in favour of this concept? Room for the four of us, plus a few extra. The Lotto winnings will cover the day to day living expenses. You two get rent-free accommodation for as long as you like. Plus we'd be able to fit a few more in. Who do you reckon would be a likely starter?"

"Dunno," was Hopalong's contribution. "One thing's for sure. You're going to need a chauffeur or someone who's happy to be the designated driver. Bugger this staying sober caper so you bastards can drink like fish while you're being carried around in style."

No one was able to come up with a suggestion before Hopalong's chariot pulled up. We made our way indoors where, large as life and twice as gorgeous, Bright Eyes was gracing our favourite area with her presence.

"I don't suppose," Bright Eyes asked while Jeffrey was arranging refreshments, "any of you would be interested in looking after a Year Nine Cit. Ed. class for me? No? Thought not."

"I thought," I suggested, "Cit. Ed. went out the window when they lumped all that stuff together into the Studies of Society and the Environment thing."

"Which they did," Sandy stated, "but call it what you like, Cit. Ed. is still Cit. Ed. and, more importantly, Year Nine boys are still Year Nine boys. Right, Jonelle?"

"This mob are right in the middle of the fourteen-year-old grot stage," Bright Eyes responded. "No one in their right mind would take them on, so I guess until I can find someone with a history of lunacy in the family I'm stuck with them."

Jeffrey was in the middle of handing glasses to their respective recipients when he made the observation that there were alternatives.

"What alternatives?" Bright Eyes responded. "Sandy knows what this mob are like."

"Yeah. You remember, Herston. You were complaining about your Year Sixes from three years ago. Reckoned they were a blight on the human race..."

I shuddered at the memory.

"They've reached the stage where the scrape marks around the knuckles have healed, but only because instead of walking around with their knuckles scraping the ground they're walking around masturbating like chimpanzees. Glad I'm not teaching Year Nine at the moment."

"Relax," was Jeffrey's contribution. "There are alternatives."

"Like what?" Bright Eyes asked. "At the moment suicide's looking like the only viable alternative."

"You could take up the vacant position of chauffeur to the multitudes who'll have assembled at The Crossroads."

"How much," Bright Eyes responded, "does it pay?"

"Probably not a great deal," was my contribution, "but we could guarantee board and lodging. Weren't you talking about doing some post-grad diploma stuff by correspondence? You could take leave, get supply work here and there, study and probably have enough in the kick to get down to Airlie for a spot of child-bridegrooming from time to time."

The offer wasn't immediately accepted, but about a week later Jeffrey and I were minding our own business in the side bar when we were confronted with a lone and highly agitated Bright Eyes.

"Jeffrey," she asked. "That chauffeur business last week. Were you serious?"

Jeffrey indicated the position remained unfilled.

"We'll definitely," I added, "need someone to drive us backwards and forwards between The Crossroads and here. Could use the taxi service, but it'd be handy to have what you could call a dedicated chauffeur. Duties wouldn't be too onerous. Wouldn't pay much, but you'd get the same deal as Sandy and Hopalong - a room at The Crossroads, free board and lodging"

"I'm sure," Jeffrey added, "we could cover the cost of chauffeur's uniforms, though. Something in a polka-dot bikini might be the go."

"But," Bright Eyes insisted, "there's got to be a chauffeur's cap. I've never seen a chauffeur without a chauffeur's cap."

"Which would rule out," I suggested, "the polka dot bikini. A red and white polka-dot chauffeur's cap just doesn't seem appropriate somehow. Gold lame, on the other hand..."

"Would be the way to go. Gold lame chauffeur's cap and bikini. How does that sound?"

The note of frivolity lightened Bright Eyes' mood somewhat.

"What," she asked, laughing, "would I be driving? A gold lame bikini wouldn't go with a Rolls Royce."

"Nothing short of a red Mercedes convertible would suffice. Right, Herston? Free board and lodging, a lifetime supply of gold lame bikinis and chauffeur's caps, a red Mercedes convertible to drive and a bit of pocket money on the side."

"Sounds fine to me," was my response.

"The pocket money would be the only bit on the side," Bright Eyes pointed out. 'just remember, as much as I enjoy your company you lot are too old and drink too much to qualify for any romantic interest. Assuming that's understood I'll look into the possibilities and let you know."

We didn't see much of Bright Eyes over the couple of weeks it took to tie up the deal to buy the new property, dot the i's and cross the t's. Around the time the deal was completed she burst in to inquire whether the offer still stood.

"For you, Bright Eyes,' Jeffrey remarked, "everything still stands."

"As I've told you, on more than one occasion, anything like that is totally out of the question."

"A standing prick," Jeffrey observed, "has no conscience. A standing prick has no memory either. Greetings and salutations, Mr Cassidy. Before you assume your seat, a question for you. Do you have any memory of pronouncements from the lovely Bright Eyes regarding."

Hopalong appeared flustered and obviously in urgent need of something to cut the dust of the trail.

"Pronouncements? Pronouncements? I don't remember any pronouncements. Yes, thanks Magpie."

"See?' was the reaction. "A standing prick has no memory. And Mr Cassidy, who is still on his feet is renowned as the biggest scoffing prick in the village."

I decided it was time to change the subject slightly.

"So, Bright Eyes, you're on board for the chauffeur's gig. Now, I assume, we'll need to fulfil our part of the deal and find the red Mercedes convertible. Won't be easy."

"Bullshit," Jeffrey replied. "Quick call to Waddles in Sydney. If anyone's going to be able to find us a red Mercedes convertible. He's probably got a string of them in the yard."

Waddles, leviathan punter and former secondhand car king of Denison had packed up his car yard, his better half and his string of moderately performed racehorses and relocated to Sydney. He'd tried to persuade Captain Headrush to join him as his personal trainer, but the negotiations were put on hold while the Captain was needed to ferry certain degenerates back and forth between Denison and Airlie. Now the property negotiations were complete, and the chauffeur's role had been filled there was nothing to prevent the Captain taking up the offer.

A thought crossed my mind.

"What," I asked, turning towards Bright Eyes, "about Mangoes? Don't tell me you're going to leave the poor girl in the lurch."

"OK," was the response. "I won't tell you, but I could ask one question. How long since you've seen her? Noticed recently, whenever I've turned up here Carole's been noticeably absent."

I was forced to admit I had noticed but had been too polite to mention it.

"Well," Bright Eyes went on, "the explanation's straightforward. At the start of the school year, your ex-boss matched her up in a team-teaching situation."

"With Melanie Maynard," I contributed, more interested in indicating I was aware of the situation than in interrupting the narrative.

"Whose boyfriend drinks at the Excelsior."

The Excelsior was the next pub along, and attracted a clientele who preferred a quieter location.

"Anyway, Carole and Mel have really hit it off as a teaching combination, and they've been doing a lot of cooperative planning.."

"As you do when you're in those situations."

It wasn't something I'd been asked to do very often.

I had a reputation for being loud.

"Carole started popping down to the Excelsior on Fridays, and the poor girl's found the man of her dreams. Here in Denison. Strange, isn't it? All those trips to Airlie. All those Scandinavian backpackers. All those Austrian ski instructors and poor Carole finds her dream man right here."

"If she's found this bloke," Hopalong interjected, "how come you're saying poor Carole?"

"Because," Bright Eyes responded, "he refuses to acknowledge she exists."

"Must be gay," remarked Jeffrey. "That'd tend to explain it. Who is this turkey anyway?"

"You'll never believe this, but it's Malcolm."

"Malcolm?" was the almost universal response. "You're kidding."

Malcolm Eggers was the short, dark, not particularly handsome offspring of the Excelsior's licensee.

"Well," remarked Jeffrey, "chop me off at the knees and call me Shorty. I would never have picked Malcolm as a shirttail lifter."

"He's got a kid, too," Hopalong added. "Got one of the barmaids up the spout a couple of years back. Wiped her like a dirty rag and she had to leave town. Maybe he likes it both ways."

"There's a simpler explanation. He just doesn't like female teachers. Reckons we're all sadistic bitches."

"Hang on a bit." Jeffrey had come up with something. "Malcolm's the same age as my young bloke."

A short-lived liaison twenty-five years ago had produced a son employed as a venue security operative.

"When they were in Year Six they were in the same class. I was groundsman up there at the time. The kids were always talking about the teacher. Reckoned she looked like Cruella DeVille out of *1001 Dalmatians*. They were particularly cut up when she refused to let them to go to football trials because they hadn't finished their Social Studies project. Or something."

"That explains it," was my contribution. "Something like that could scar a bloke for life."

"In this case it has. Anyway she's not interested in heading off to Airlie any more, and when I mentioned the chauffeur idea Mel announced she'd be only too happy to move in."

Melanie Maynard lived, in the teacher accommodation near the cemetery.

I seemed to recall her boyfriend lived somewhere in town, though the exact details were hazy.

"So," I asked, what's the plan?"

"I've spoken to Uncle Frank, and he's going to push through my application for three years' leave without pay. He's checking a few things at the moment. Starting in July I'm doing a post-grad diploma in Special Education and once I've got that out of the way I'll do another one in teaching English as a second language. I can do both by correspondence, and there's a bit of overlap between the courses, so I'll be able to finish both in about three and a half years."

"What'll you do for money?" I asked.

"That's where Uncle Frank comes in handy. He said since I'm doing the post-grad diploma in Special Ed, and every school in the district has a special needs group.

"If someone's off sick they can call you in to do supply,' I guessed. "Nice work if you can get it. Pays a hundred and eighty a day and no preparation, correction or any of the other shit they load on the classroom teachers."

This last remark was intended for the non-teachers in attendance.

"Uncle Frank reckons I can expect to pick up one or two days a week, and still have plenty of time to study. I can do the chauffeur bit as well as long as you two don't mind my being unavailable from time to time between about eight-thirty and three in the afternoon."

"Which seems," I suggested, "an elegant solution to a number of thorny issues. Magpie? A bottle of the finest bubbly if you will. We have something to celebrate. In a few short months Bright Eyes here will have taught her last Year Nine Cit. Ed. class."

The Transformation

Once the purchase was completed, it was time to transform the buildings and their surrounds at The Crossroads from a commercial enterprise to a private haven.

The first step was to remove indications the premises were open to the public. Advertising hoardings at the front came down. Parking spaces in front of the units were replaced with communal parking outside what had been Reception.

"The convertible goes there," Jeffrey indicated, "and if Sandy, Bright Eyes and Cassidy need parking spots, there's room for them over here. You can fit half a dozen cars over towards the highway."

"If there are more than half-a-dozen?" Hopalong inquired. He'd been handed the responsibility of operating the back-hoe to remove the old bitumen.

"They'll more than likely be gatecrashers who can take their chances and park on the side of the highway," Jeffrey explained. "Come for a walk. If you stand out here, you'll notice the spot where the resident's cars are parked is hidden if Mr Plod's driving along the highway. When the fence that's going around over there's in place the visitor's car park will be nicely hidden from view too. If the coppers are heading along the highway you can bet your bottom dollar they'll note the number plates of anything parked out here. Now, what about a gate at the front?"

"Might as well," I suggested. "It'd stay open most of the time, but it might be handy."

Having sorted out the concept, the bitumen in front of the units was removed and replaced with pavers. With these laid a shipment of planter boxes, a pallet of potting mix and a round of visits to local nurseries meant *Operation Transform the Old Parking Area* was well underway.

As the transformation continued each of us found a convenient niche.

Sandy's gardening efforts were nothing short of staggering as the area was transformed into a jungle.

Hopalong was making structural modifications as if there was no tomorrow.

Jeffrey installed himself as supervisor, and assumed responsibility for ensuring all available fridge space was permanently stacked to the brim with potables.

Since we would need musical accompaniment, a room next to mine was set up to house the sound system and the CD library. Having cashed-out my long service leave when I left the education business, I had the cash to fill gaps in the collection, and my days were spent browsing on-line music stores, cataloguing the collection and building up a collection of disks for the jukebox in the bar.

Since the device held a hundred disks, there were decisions to be made about the contents. I started by putting together a disk for each year from the late fifties to the present, samplers covering musical genres, and a selection of greatest hits of various performers.

The challenge of producing something better than the standard *Very Best of* was useful mental stimulation.

Having assigned the four of us our various responsibilities, there was the matter of working out what we were going to do with the rest of the rooms.

Starting with fifteen rooms, once we had allocated bedrooms for Jeffrey, Sandy, Hopalong, Bright Eyes and myself, plus one for the music library, we had nine left. The consensus was we'd need about half a dozen rooms to accommodate anyone needing a bed for the night.

The layout of the premises, with three rooms forming a little subsection on one side of the building that housed Reception, Restaurant and Residence and twelve in the main wing, had a fair bit to do with the allocation of living quarters.

Bright Eyes' student status meant she needed to be away from distractions and would logically have been allocated Room One if she hadn't claimed it.

Hopalong, we reasoned, was more or less Mr Handyman on the site, and would be moving upstairs to the Residence when his intended arrived on the

scene. Since he's not the most mobile of individuals he needed to be close enough to Reception to answer the phone when necessary since incoming calls might well be coming from overseas, which probably indicated Room Three or Four.

The shed that housed mowers and other mechanical equipment was behind the smaller block, so Three was the logical spot.

Proximity to the bar was a prime consideration as far as Jeffrey was concerned, so Four was a logical fit.

Which left eleven rooms and two permanent residents.

Logically, given sonic considerations, I needed to be at one extreme of the premises, so I'd live in Fifteen and use Fourteen as my library and music room.

Sandy, presumably, would fit somewhere in the middle, and Nine was neatly symmetrical between Four and Fourteen, so Nine it was.

So, what to do with the other eight?

Jeffrey, recalling his visit to some Stateside bordello, came up with the idea of transforming a couple of rooms into theme bedrooms, in which anyone who got lucky could entertain his companion in luxury.

What to put into these rooms was discussed at length in the evenings when we gathered beside the pool.

One room was to be decorated in classic *bordello* style with Five allocated to the purpose, largely due to proximity to Jeffrey's quarters in Four.

Another would be transformed into the Chamber of Mirrors, and a third into a tent-like venue in which a sheikh entertaining one of his harem favourites would have felt completely at home.

Choosing where to put the others was the subject of lengthy discussion, and eventually decided the House of Mirrors would go into Six. With Thirteen as a dumping ground for various mainly Herston-related odds and ends, the Sheikh's Harem went into Twelve, leaving Seven, Eight, Ten and Eleven for incidental and itinerant guests as the need arose.

Once we'd come up with the plan, we'd headed off to consult furniture stores. When we'd bought the building, standard motel furniture came with it, so there was no problem there, but the contents of the theme rooms was another matter.

Finding what we wanted was going to take time because furniture of the styles required did not grow on trees.

So with the basic refurbishing of the premises completed, we locked the feature rooms without a word of that part of our plans to anyone who did not need to know, and turned our attention to other matters.

Hopalong could add the finishing touches as the opportunity arose and various items of furniture arrived.

Since every country estate worth its salt has a name, although many suggestions were forthcoming, it took a while to reach a consensus.

One option would have been to keep the name the motel had operated under, but a sign outside bearing the name might suggest the establishment was open to the general public.

Among our friends, it was appropriate to refer to it as The Crossroads.

Students of blues history will know Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul to the Devil at such an intersection, in return (or so the legend goes) the song-writing and instrumental prowess that raised him above his contemporaries.

Sitting at the Palace on a Saturday evening, I refilled my glass from the bottle currently under consideration. It was a recent addition to the wine list, and having completed the refill, I perused the back label. After the usual blurb about the grape varieties in the blend, a potted history of the winery involved, and details about preservatives and processes involved in fining the wine, there was a message. *Enjoy Wine In Moderation.*

“That’s it!” I remarked. “*That’s* the name we need.”

“What the fuck are you on about now?” inquired The Duchess who had joined the crowd at the table once calm had been restored to the kitchen after another record-breaking Saturday night. All around us the joint was jumping.

“The name for the new place. We’ll call it Moderation.”

There was a temporary silence at the table while the idea was considered.

“Look on the back of a wine bottle. What do they say? *Enjoy wine in moderation!* We’ll be knocking over plenty of bottles out at the new place, so why not call it Moderation?”

So a visit to the sign writer was added to our jobs for Monday morning.

The actual wording was easy to come up with, though there was a dissenting voice. ***Moderation. Private property. No admittance unless invited*** was decided on, after Jeffrey’s suggestion of ***Moderation. Fuck off*** was rejected due to the likelihood of prosecution.

A week later we were pottering round when an unfamiliar vehicle pulled into the driveway. The vehicle may have been unfamiliar, but, once it came to a halt and the driver's door opened the figure that emerged was someone I recognized from frequent visits to the Palace.

Bob Thorogood, known to all and sundry as Mad Bob was the farmer whose property adjoined the motel. While he'd done fairly well producing the vegetables that were the mainstay of the local economy he'd been moving into hydroponics, producing herbs and doing very nicely, thank you.

"Well, boys, looks good," was his opening remark. "I was just on the way into town for the missus, and I thought I'd drop in to see if you might be interested in a couple of hectares over there I won't be needing in the future."

I expressed surprise he'd be willing to let go of such a prime slice of farm land.

"Ordinarily, you'd be right. But I've got to the point where I have to decide whether to go totally into hydroponics or continue running a mixture of things."

"I thought," Jeffrey suggested, "farmers had done well last year."

"They did. But it was like every other year. Most of them got good prices when the frosts wiped out the crops down south, and that happened twice. It's the same old thing. Prices go up. Prices go down. Plant at the right time, get the right

breaks, and you'll do very nicely. Your costs are going to be the same regardless of the price you end up getting in the end."

"And with your hydroponic stuff?" I asked.

"I've got contracts with set prices for everything. No market variations. I know what it's going to cost me to grow, and I know what I'm going to get for it when it's ready. On top of that, we can run the whole thing between me, the missus and Old Tom. If we need a hand there are people I can call in if I need a casual for a couple of hours. Low costs, guaranteed returns. Way to go."

"Sounds like it. So what's on offer?"

"Two-and-a-half hectares of prime agricultural land with water allocation. I thought you might find it handy if you want your own cricket field, or something. Tried to sell it to the last bloke here to use as a caravan park, but he reckoned a caravan park'd be more trouble than it was worth. Besides, he'd have needed to borrow the capital to set it up."

As a moderately successful coach whose ambitions had been frustrated by lack of facilities, I realized what was on offer was as close to a no-brainer as it gets.

"OK, leave it with us and we'll be back to you," was my final remark as I set off to put together sketches of a complex which could be offered to the local Primary School representative team, coached, after my resignation, by the inimitable Scum Dog, my offsider for the previous few years.

Leaving the coaching was my only regret about leaving the education system, and this was a way of making up for it, as well as maintaining some involvement. On the other side of the field we could set up a pavilion and practice complex. with access from the road on the other side of the field from the motel.

Sandy's green thumb would ensure a suitably lush sward and Hopalong's list of tasks could include constructing shaded areas away from the residential section, so our activities would not be unnecessarily disturbed by spectators.

A phone call arranged the inaugural match, to be played between the town's cricket fraternity and the Dipsomaniacs, who I'd had dealings with in Townsville before my transfer to Denison.

Meanwhile, Jeffrey, with the keen eye of an ex-green-keeper, spotted a suitable area in one corner that would comfortably accommodate a bowls green.

Once the ground had been laser-levelled and top dressed, a concrete pitch went in the middle with Astroturf glued on top, and the foundations for the green were laid out, awaiting the attention of Jeffrey on his return from the overseas jaunt which we felt, now a suitable home had been found, was the logical next step.

Way Down Yonder in New Orleans

As far back as mid-January, I'd pencilled a visit to New Orleans into the *Things to do* list, but the accommodation issue meant it was mid-March before I could do anything about it.

Knowledge of Crescent City culture suggested the best time to visit would be during Mardi Gras, which had passed, or Jazzfest, the two-weekend extravaganza in late April and early May.

If that didn't work out there was the two-day Ponderosa Stomp in September, but Jazzfest, with its variety of stages and tents hosting a multitude of performers, looked to be the way to go,

By the time I started looking finding accommodation wasn't easy.

I was resigned to waiting till the following year when I remembered a reference to a company offering tours of the Louisiana Cajun heartland bookended by the dual weekends of Jazzfest.

The website wasn't hard to find, and revealed tour package accommodation in the heart of the French Quarter. An attempt to book two places, however, revealed the tour was fully booked. I made a tentative booking for the following year, but asked the operators to let me know if there was a cancellation.

It wasn't the sort of thing that would have you holding your breath, but the first week in April saw an email advising a couple had been forced to cancel. Was I still interested?

Was I what?

A phone call got us booked in, things fell in place to get us across The Pond a couple of days before Jazzfest started, and a layover in L.A. would give us time to deal with jet lag before the festing kicked into high gear.

Having visited New Orleans years ago, Jeffrey didn't need any encouragement to return. There was a streetwalker who never failed to bring a delicate touch of wistfulness into his voice when he recalled their all-too-brief encounter.

If the physical contortions and muscular control Jeffrey had described were half way true, she must have been some lady.

While Jeffrey's interests were going to centre around physical activity, after years collecting music, with an interest in rhythm and blues, the opportunity to visit the home of Professor Longhair and Fats Domino was not to be missed. Jazzfest would give a chance to sample the musical styles on offer. I reckoned if we stayed on for another month or so there'd be ample opportunities to explore these things more deeply.

During our absence Hopalong could work his way through the renovations without anyone breathing down his neck.

Sandy's seedlings would have time to mature and the grass on the oval would get the chance to reach an appropriate degree of lushness without being disturbed by impatient onlookers.

On that basis, or those bases, our colleagues were hardly likely to object when I suggested we'd leave them to themselves for two months, give or take a week or two, so with arrangements made covering nurseries, hardware stores, furniture showrooms and liquor outlets, off we went.

The first port of call was Los Angeles, not so much out of a desire to visit the place as the need to start somewhere, and recover from jet lag before we got to our real destination. A couple of days seeing the sights through the smog were enough to last a lifetime, but we succeeded in finding a number of novelties which, would raise the odd eyebrow on our return to Denison.

The best was a device which could be according to an eager sales attendant, connected to the cigarette lighter in your vehicle and used to simulate oral sex as you drove around. It did not take much effort to think of drivers around Denison who were, it was believed, wankers. We bought a couple of these as presents which might, we felt, contribute to keeping the road toll down.

At least they would be able to keep their hands on the wheels.

The parcels were posted home under plain wrappings before we headed to New Orleans.

We got there with a day to settle in, then a private dinner on the Thursday night and three days wandering around twelve stages, catching as much of what was on offer as possible.

Jazzfest closes down at dusk, but there's no shortage of action in the downtown clubs and bars, so it was usually somewhere in the wee small hours before bed time rolled around.

The following week saw us travelling through Cajun country, with *gumbo* lunches, barbecues, and crawfish boils. The tour got us back in the Big Easy with a day to spare before another go at Jazzfest. Negotiations with the hotel secured us a base for another month, so once the tour operators were gone it was a matter of starting an in-depth investigation of the local music and food.

We'd been forced to share a room for the first part of the stay, which cramped Jeffrey's style, so when we'd obtained separate rooms he had a bit of catching up to do while I set about my research.

The musical side of affairs was fairly straightforward.

During the day, I made my way around the music shops, grabbing everything that looked worthy of further investigation and gathering as much print material as I could find. All of this was bundled up and posted home, and by the end of the stay I was on first name terms with most of the clerks at the nearest post office.

Nights, once dinner was out of the way, were for sampling live music, and the investigations provided fuel for the next day's shopping activities, which weren't limited to music and associated purchases.

Given the abundance of seafood at home I wanted to investigate Cajun and Creole cookery, and while what we sampled was a little spicy for Jeffrey, he likes his tucker tasty, and tasty it certainly was.

Knowing how it was supposed to taste was one thing.

Turning out something that tasted the way it should was quite another. I needed more than just the right ingredients if I was going to deliver something close to the real thing when I got home.

While it was easy to acquire ample stocks of Crab and Shrimp Boil, file powder and Peychaud Bitters, I needed to learn how to use them, and enrolled myself in crash courses on the basics of the local cuisine.

Each day I would rise fashionably late, settle down to a solid brunch and set out for whatever I'd pencilled in.

Late afternoon was time to catch up with Jeffrey and settle into one of the places where a thirst could be slaked before dinner at one of the local eateries. That readied us for the action that usually ended with a collapse into bed, not necessarily to sleep, some time before dawn.

A series of phone calls kept us abreast of developments at home, particularly the progress of the renovations at the motel. Eventually, hearing furniture for the theme rooms had been arrived, and their conversion was almost complete, it was time to pack our bags and set off on the return leg.

We were, in any case, just about ready for the comforts of home.

A flight to San Francisco, a short stopover in Hawaii, and before we knew it we were disembarking at Sydney airport, once again in the land of Oz.

Enter the Punter

Although we didn't get to see the Wizard, the sight that hove into view as we left Immigration and Customs made up for the disappointment.

There, clad in the briefest chauffeur's outfit in the history of what passes for Western civilization, was a certain statuesque blonde.

There was a strong possibility the gold lame hot pants that could well have melted titanium, and recently liberation from Year Nine Cit. Ed. seemed to have worked wonders with the complexion.

With the re-entry formalities concluded, the next item on the agenda was to take delivery of a red Mercedes convertible.

Given our need to locate a specific car in a specific colour, there was only one path we could head down.

That path lead directly to the door of Scott Waddington, known, due to what could only be described as his ample proportions, as Waddles.

He'd been a habitu  of the Palace just before the mini-Lotto era, retreating there at the end of a hard day in the used car business, and summoning his spouse to deliver him home at some point in the evening's proceedings.

Waddles was a punter of considerable daring and an uncanny supply of good fortune, the recipient of quality information from well-placed sources within some of the country's leading stables.

His successes on the punt resulted from a combination of accurate information and sheer arse, and allowed him to build up a stable of moderately performed racehorses. At first they were castoffs unable to pay their way in the hurly-burly of metropolitan racing.

Such conveyances were regarded with deep suspicion by the local bookmakers.

Faced with a situation where everything he owned ended up running at very short odds, regardless of the quality of the field Waddles started investing in tried fillies and mares, giving them a couple of runs in the area and retiring them to stud.

The practice of matching moderately successful mares with unfashionable but reliable sires should have paid dividends.

Waddles was a reasonable judge of horse flesh and was able to sell any colt or filly that failed to match up to his rigorous requirements.

There was, however, a difficulty.

It's one thing to breed and prepare a horse for the track, but once it's ready to race you need to be able to recoup some of your outlay, and prize money alone doesn't suffice.

You need, in other words, to be able to back your horses, and bookmakers tended to become uneasy when Waddles hove into view.

As soon as his name appeared in the race book and Waddles attempted to place a substantial wager on the horse the price on offer plunged into the red and stayed at long odds on for the duration.

Faced with these circumstances, much as he'd enjoyed life in our neck of the woods, Waddles came to believe he needed to relocate, and moved his commercial interests, his racing stable and his beautiful, if not excessively intelligent, better half to Sydney.

In Sydney, Waddles had assured us, there was greater volume to be traded in the motor vehicle industry and bookmakers less likely to have a coronary if one wanted to get set for a few multiples of a grand on some neddy whose trainer has just had a word in your little pink shell-like appendage.

Once we'd decided on a preferred conveyance, a word in Waddles' shell-like was needed.

The call had been made before our departure on the Stateside Odyssey and Waddles summed up the situation in a flash.

"You want something along the lines of a red Merc convertible? They're a bit hard to come by, and you might not be looking at an actual Mercedes *as such*, but give me a couple of weeks and I should be able to track down something more or less along those lines."

So the problem was solved. Red convertible. Curvaceous blonde chauffeur. What more was needed?

Having assured Waddles there was no hurry, we'd prepared for our overseas sojourn, knowing we would collect the machine, should he succeed in locating one, on our return. A call from L.A. revealed that he had succeeded, so we collected our luggage from the carousel, and with Bright Eyes in tow, headed for the cab rank and repaired post-haste to Parramatta Road, to collect our new chariot of fire.

On arrival, it was obvious from the way his already ample girth had burgeoned since we'd last sighted him that Waddles had been doing very well for himself. *Been in a good paddock* was the way Jeffrey described it, and I couldn't have put it better myself.

Guiding us into his headquarters, he remarked the sun was over the yardarm, so we might care for something in the way of a Jack Daniels to cut the dust of the trail while we concluded the paperwork.

Those details didn't take long, and our host suggested we repair down the road for further liquid sustenance. With matters relating to the motor vehicle industry assigned to one of his minions, Waddles wanted to catch up on news from the North.

He would also, predictably, be delivering details of his most recent successes at Randwick and Rosehill.

For all his charm and wonderful urbanity, Waddles does possess some minor character defects.

The first is an ability to relate in detail, and considerable length every facet of his activities on the punt.

If he could bet as well as he could talk about it, there wouldn't be a solvent bookmaker left in the country. Races would be viewed from the perspective of his investment, but details such as the result, notable runs from other horses and form reversals would be part of the narrative and would provide an opportunity to catch up on developments in Australian racing while we had been away.

So as we wended our way pub-wards, we knew what would be forthcoming.

As we entered the bar, the second of Waddles' character foibles came into play.

Since his preferred tippie is bourbon, he'd frequently been amused at the rest of the shout forking out for his more extravagant tastes while everyone else drank beer. A bourbon and coke in a seven-ounce glass is also a smaller container, which allowed frequent references to lack of pace as far as everybody else in the shout was concerned.

He obviously preferred a 1200-metre sprint to a mile and a half event for stayers, though his bulk meant there was plenty of capacity to be filled with liquid.

The sun was barely over the yardarm, so it was no surprise to find the bar was almost deserted. We found our way to a quiet corner, our host placed a roll on the bar, remarked it was his shout, and asked for *the usual, and whatever these gentlemen* are having. Having dealt with pressing matters, he departed towards the gents to make room for some more piss by relieving pressure on an overstressed bladder.

As he wended his way loo-wards, strategies discussed while crossing the Pacific kicked in. Experience suggested he would insist on shouting. This tendency to play the grand seigneur had frequently been noted.

We also guessed the venue would be one where he was a regular, so once we'd been informed that it was his shout, the order would be along the lines of the usual and whatever we'd be having.

Once details had been worked out, he'd place a bankroll on the bar and head off to relieve himself, knowing he could expect to pay for one bourbon, two beers and *whatever the lady's having* every round, and the rest of us would be subsidising his drinks.

We also suspected the bankroll would be a bundle of \$100 bills with a fifty wrapped around the outside as drinking money.

The bar attendant would more than likely be out of sight, or at least have her back turned while the round was assembled, and we doubted there'd be anyone who wasn't part of our circle nearby.

So there was a better than even chance we'd be able to extract a couple of bills from the roll without their absence being noticed, provided we kept his attention away from the bundle.

Since he would be busy telling us all about his punting exploits, as long as we kept shouting, he wouldn't notice. We figured if the bundle looked thin a business card or something similar in the middle would make the absence of a note or two less noticeable.

That was almost exactly how things had panned out.

The bar was deserted, the bar attendant was locating a Fosters for Jeffrey and a Cascade for me, and a brick pillar separated the corner he'd chosen from the rest of the bar. The fifty-dollar note on the outside of the roll had been removed and placed underneath the roll.

It was, as expected, the designated source of funds to cover the first round.

Unaware of what was going on, Bright Eyes watched, amazed.

Jeffrey extracted two notes from the roll, pocketed one, passed the other to me and slipped one of Waddles' business cards, on which he'd written *Gotcha*, into the middle.

After a slight adjustment to the position of the roll in relation to the fifty, an eagle-eyed observer would have been flat out telling the difference.

Three minutes later, the bar attendant and the drinks arrived just as Waddles approached, having prepared room in his barrel-like torso for a substantial intake of bourbon and coke.

With Waddles within earshot, Jeffrey casually mentioned the first round was out of the money which our friend had placed on the bar, but subsequent orders

should be paid for from the hundred he placed conspicuously on the bar, stating *it's out of this one for the rest of the session, and if that runs out I've got plenty more.*

That was the signal for me to object *we couldn't possibly work things like that, and every second round should come out of here* as I placed the other hundred on the bar.

Waddles picked up on the idea in a trice.

“Since I bought the first round, from here Jeffrey looks after the even numbers and Herston does the odd ones. Figures, you were always a bit on the odd side.”

It was almost possible to feel the radiant pleasure as Waddles imbibed his first. He'd got in the first shout, he was on the dearest drink, he had a captive audience for the next few hours. Exactly as he liked things to be, and he wasn't going to have to pay for another round.

A cat, having swallowed several canaries and escaped with the cream could scarcely have looked more satisfied.

The conversation turned to the vagaries of the turf, spineless bookmakers who refused to supply anything approaching value to a struggling investor, confidently tipped conveyances with a heart the size of a pea and jockeys who would be flat out getting out of the car park if they drove the way they rode.

His days in our home territory meant we knew what was coming, but in his pomp Waddles can deliver the indignant putdown with the best of them, raising to an art form the denunciation of anyone who might have been responsible for the failure of the chaff burner he'd backed.

Winners, on the other hand, got extremely short shrift, and would be more than likely dismissed with a passing reference to good oil or recent runs that had suggested a foot on the till.

Having been out of the country, this gave us the opportunity to catch up on what ran where in which race.

Through all this, Bright Eyes worked her way through the nonalcoholic drinks on offer. After two and a half hours of boredom, she inquired whether we had given thought to overnight accommodation.

Caught up in reunion mode, we hadn't.

Another journey by Waddles to create space allowed us to confer on the matter. Bright Eyes volunteered to take a look around the options, promising to return around four.

When Waddles returned, we pointed out the search for somewhere to stay did not require three participants, there was plenty of money left on the bar, and we were more than happy to learn more of his recent exploits, though perhaps some lunch might be advisable.

Counter lunches were demolished, rounds consumed, races dissected in detail, and it was no time at all before our chauffeur re-entered the bar. Even before she had made her way around the partition that separated the corner we occupied from the rest of the bar, it was possible to tell something was afoot.

The hum of Friday afternoon conversation fell away to silence, I looked around the wall, saw the explanation approaching, and noticed every pair of male eyes in her wake seemed to be focussed on Bright Eyes' *derriere*.

This should have been the signal to depart for greener pastures, but this would leave Waddles, who had gone to some lengths to stress Friday afternoon business in the motor vehicle industry was apt to be slow, to drink on his own.

While there was money on the bar, he would have no inclination to depart. At one point when he seemed to be paying a little too much attention to the bankroll, we persuaded him to phone the yard to check everything was under control, which, as it transpired, it was.

It was probably never going to be otherwise. We also managed to inveigle him into calling the lovely Hilda, with whom we would not otherwise have been able to catch up.

Hilda was, in any case, going to be needed to deliver Waddles home since he was, after disagreements with the constabulary, no longer permitted to drive.

She arrived forty minutes later, and provided us with the opportunity to head off around five, after making a stopover at the bottle shop, in search of sustenance and a motel bed to enable the effects of jet lag to be overcome.

As we were turning towards the exit, Waddles thanked us for our generosity in shouting for the afternoon's alcoholic entertainment. He had retrieved his bankroll from the bar as he spoke.

"Maybe you'd better check that roll before you go handing it over to one of the bookies tomorrow," Jeffrey suggested. "They could be slightly pissed off it isn't the full grand." Opening the bundle, Waddles went directly to the business card which had been placed in the middle. When he saw the *Gotcha!* he was forced to admit he'd been done.

"Not for the first time, either. Remember those nights at the Palace when you were pointing out to everyone how generous they were paying for your JDs? Did you realise when Magpie was behind the bar we had it set so your shout always paid for JDs while our shouts always paid for beer?"

Waddles was forced to admit he had, up to this point, been unaware of any such arrangement.

"In that case, how come I never noticed?" he asked.

"We made sure someone was talking to you when Magpie was swooping on your money," I pointed out. "That way you'd be looking away from the bar. It didn't work if someone else was serving, but that inconsistency made it less likely you'd twig. Ever wondered how Magpie got her nickname? We knew you wouldn't remember how many you'd had when you got home, and with whatever you'd put through the pokies that night, you'd put it down as a bit more expensive night than you thought."

"Remember that night when you reckoned she'd shortchanged you and I picked a twenty up off the floor behind you? That was the only time you looked like catching on."

"Bastards," he observed as we headed towards the door. "That's one I owe you."

“Be looking forward to it,” Jeffrey replied as we reached the door. “Now what’s the plan from here?”

“Something to eat first,” Bright Eyes suggested, “and then back to the motel. There’s a Chinese down the road. Put in an order and I’ll drop you at the motel and head back to collect it. You guys look like you need a break.”

After a substantial order at the Chinese restaurant, it was a matter of heading a couple of hundred metres down the road to check in. With luggage in our rooms, Bright Eyes declined offers of company on the short haul to the takeaway, stating the pair of us looked like something the cat should have known not to drag in, and that, really, she didn’t mind since the car was an absolute pleasure to drive.

Ten minutes later she was back.

After dinner beside the swimming pool, we adjourned to the rooms, and retired to the realms of totally justified sleep, knowing further adventures awaited. We would need to be at the top of our form to deal with whatever slings and arrows outrageous fortune had in store for us.

We were, in other words, going to the races with Waddles, and would need our beauty sleep.

A Day at the Races

After a solid meal and a good night's sleep, after a hearty breakfast, it was time to set about research before heading off to Randwick.

Since we'd subscribed to a number of information services we spent a busy hour collecting the oil we hoped would fuel a successful afternoon on the punt. With the calls out of the way, Jeffrey and I set about sifting through the data in search of winners.

Bright Eyes had invested in the latest edition of a well-known fashion journal and used that to stave off boredom, though I doubted there was enough content in the publication to see out the afternoon.

I was looking for a couple of standout bets. If I could link them in a couple of all-up bets that managed to get up, we might be able to eat somewhere reasonable. That had me working through tipsters' polls, ratings, selection systems and expert advice before settling on three in each state I thought were fair chances.

At midday, with Bright Eyes at the wheel, off we set in search of fame and, more particularly, fortune. We found Waddles roughly where he'd promised to meet us, and in an expansive mood since he was up a couple of grand after the first race. Recriminations over yesterday's stratagem were temporarily forgotten.

Knowing Waddles wouldn't be venturing in search of liquid refreshment until the last was done and dusted the three of us made our way into the nearest bar, selecting a spot where we could keep an eye on the fluctuations board, and there we sat, with Bright Eyes taking in the atmosphere, flicking through her magazine and sipping on a cola while we kept an eye on the markets.

A visit to the tote to put on my three all-up bets meant there was little to do but sit back and watch for some sign in the fluctuations that further investment might

be warranted. Spotting a noticeable shortener, it was a simple matter of a stroll into the ring to put a couple of hundred on, then back to the bar for refreshment.

Money, they frequently claim, talks, and it seemed, after the first two shorteners got up at twos and threes that the money was yelling fit to burst its lungs.

With six hundred nestled in the betting pocket, a chance remark indicated Bright Eyes was a genuine punting virgin.

Being comfortably ahead pondering what to do with the surplus, I remembered the adage concerning beginners' luck. I decided to pass her two hundred to invest as she thought fit.

“This way you’re playing with their money,” I pointed out. “You can pay me back out of the winnings. Why don’t you just pick out four horses with names you like in each state? We can link them up in a ten dollar Yankee.”

When Bright Eyes suggested I was being overgenerous, I pointed out that any seeming upsurge of generosity was only fair in view of the boredom she'd had to put up with over thirty-six hours while Jeffrey, Waddles and I raved on about the pursuit of profits on the turf.

The Yankee would involve eleven combinations of the four horses, including an accumulator on all four as well as various doubles and trebles.

Since that all-up cost would come to two hundred and twenty Bright Eyes would need to contribute twenty dollars, so some of her objections disappeared.

The financial negotiations completed, Bright Eyes set out in search of likely conveyances. When I noticed another shortener in Melbourne, I headed for the ring, returning to find choices had been made, and our chauffeur was wondering what to do next.

Jeffrey was nowhere in sight. I explained that investments of this type were best made on the tote, but I suggested that she should have the accumulators with the bookies, maximising participation in the different aspects of betting.

Once the tote tickets had been filled in, we crossed paths with Jeffrey on the way to the betting ring, and once the accumulators were under way, returned to the bar to compare notes.

Jeffrey's offer to contribute to Bright Eyes' investment was declined because what she'd come up with should be quite enough to lose.

Never let anyone tell you that beginners' luck is a myth.

For the rest of the afternoon, I failed to back a winner.

Eventually, having exhausted the resources in the betting pocket, I decided enough was enough, and three hundred in the cunning kick would be better spent on strong drink, rather than joining four hundred that had gone down the gurgler.

Needless to say, during the afternoon, Bright Eyes' selections came up in a dream run.

She had Sydney winners at 12/1; 5/1; 8/1 returning more than \$9,000 with six accumulators still running and Melbourne winners at 6/1; 6/1 and 10/1. The problem now was that we needed to get \$7000 on the final selection in Sydney and \$5500 in Melbourne, and were trying to work out how to get it on without stuffing up the prices.

The best we were able to come up with was the suggestion that, armed with wads of a thousand, the three of us would have to use our legs and get the money on the two selections as best we could.

Earlier, we'd exchanged comments with a gentleman at the next table who did not appear to be doing much apart from an occasional jotting in a notebook and waving to what we assumed were passing acquaintances too busy to join him.

As we were about to head for the ring having overheard part of the discussion, he asked how much we wanted to get on.

Nonplussed, we told him, and, in the proverbial trice our new acquaintance had turned towards the ring, exchanged various arcane signals with the nearest bookie and put it on the nod.

It was at this stage we realized that we had a punter whose levels of activity left Waddles far behind, less, as they say, than the dust beneath his chariot wheels.

As a token of our thanks, the least we could do was to buy him a drink. He settled himself beside Bright Eyes, and stories were exchanged. We explained we were back on our way north after an overseas holiday. Our new friend attended the races on a regular basis, but only had a couple of bets in the normal course of events.

The day had been fairly quiet since he was only up seventy.

Bright Eyes said seventy was better than nothing, obviously talking dollars.

As he headed for the gents, we told her to forget about decimal points, as, from what we had seen we he meant thousands.

On his return, the final selection in Melbourne went on the same way. Both horses, in case the reader hasn't spotted the obvious result, got up, at 3/1, resulting in a return for the day of somewhere over \$75,000. Our friend even went to far as to collect for us, declining our offer of a percentage, but having no such qualms about a couple of beers.

As we headed out to collect, it was fortunate Bright Eyes had a large handbag. Otherwise, we'd never fit it all in.

We thanked our friend for his assistance and invited him to join us for dinner, an invitation he declined, stating he had to catch up with the family, and it was high time he left. In view of all he had done for us, the least we could do was to give him a phone number in case he was ever in the North, and tell him to feel free to drop in anytime.

The casual reader may wonder where our portly acquaintance had been while these adventures were in progress.

Waddles, despite his fondness for bourbon, or the odd gallon of beer, tends to avoid the demon drink while investments are being made. He does, however, tend to make up for lost time afterwards. As a result, we were unaware of his financial status as he joined us after the last, moaning he'd dropped ten grand after being well up. The later, longer priced winners were, of course, to blame.

After proceeding to call on the heavens look on those connected in any way to the last two winners and to blight them, he inquired as to our fortunes.

Ever tactful, Jeffrey and I reported we were about even, maybe up a hundred or so. Knowledge of our betting habits made him feel this was a reasonable result, so he turned to Bright Eyes and inquired if she'd had a bet.

Bright Eyes, following our example, reported she'd had a few, and that she was up about seventy-five. Waddles remarked that she had been lucky, to which she agreed, stating that it has been her first bet, thus allowing Waddles to remark on beginners' luck.

Nodding sagely, we agreed, but were becoming nervous about the amount of money we were carrying, and decided to leave, pleading jet lag and exhaustion. That decision had little or nothing to do with the fact that Waddles continued to bemoan his bad luck.

In any case, we couldn't say much since the horses he was berating were the agencies by which we were seventy-five grand to the good.

Quantities of liquid consumed suggested, at this point, that I visit the Gents, and Bright Eyes, thinking of delays likely to be caused by Sydney traffic, decided to visit the Ladies, telling Jeffrey to keep an eye on the bag.

The instruction produced the usual reaction as Jeffrey leant over and squinted at it from about a foot away. "Why? What's it likely to do?"

Unfortunately, this also served to focus Waddles' attention on the bag, and brought a comment that it looked pretty full.

When she returned from the Ladies', Bright Eyes needed to rummage around for something. Opening it brought into view bundles of hundreds, which caused Waddles' eyes to spring from their sockets and wave around on their stalks.

There was little we could do, except explain that with all this money around we'd better be going and leave him dumbfounded. As we headed towards the exit, our pockets full and our faces flushed with success, we discussed the possibilities for the coming evening.

Last night's accommodation had been a spot to lay our heads after the rigours of intercontinental travel and our incontinent assault on the booze with Waddles. As such, it had been a roof over our heads, nothing more and nothing less, with the additional disadvantage of being an uncomfortable distance from the centre of the city.

In our present cashed-up state, some more central overnight address was indicated, so our return to the motel lasted long enough to collect our belongings, make a phone call booking us into the penthouse at a five star establishment and another to secure a table at one of the Sydney's better restaurants for dinner.

As we made our way towards the new digs, we casually informed Bright Eyes that, once the chariot had been stabled, she was not going to be doing any further driving.

We celebrated with a sumptuous dinner, working through their extensive and expensive wine list. A Grange, a Chateau Mouton Rothschild from a good year, were every bit as good as I'd anticipated and we concluded with a Chateau d'Yquem over dessert, and accompanied the coffee with a liqueur Muscat.

The Hunter and the Hunted

Under normal circumstances, faced with the inevitable aftermath of the evening's celebrations, I would have stayed in my room, quietly recuperating until hunger forced me to set out in search of brunch.

And if that idea of going out to search went in the too hard basket, there was always room service.

But as consciousness returned on Sunday morning there were more important considerations than sleeping-off a hangover. Over the preceding forty-eight hours, plans for the journey from Sydney to Denison hadn't progressed beyond the fact that the journey would be made.

With a dose of Vitamin B under the belt and a jug of water by my side, I lay back to think things over.

After I'd considered all relevant factors, given my eyes a little further rest, and undergone a good session under hot and cold showers I decided to summon the others for a conference.

Being in the middle of three adjoining rooms made it easy to figure out the numbers to dial. Jeffrey, I knew from overseas experience, was largely impervious to knocks on the door. The squawking telephone would be harder to ignore.

It took a while to rouse him, and once he'd voiced his displeasure I was able to point out that breakfast downstairs was scheduled to conclude within half an hour, and I'd considered a warning to be appropriate.

Once that minor difficulty had been negotiated, a call to the room on my right was a simpler matter, although Ms Carter, from what I could gather, was hardly at the peak of her Bright-Eyed form.

After a third call to reception, since I'd already hurled myself in the direction of the hot water I had time for a stroll downstairs and an initial assault on the

breakfast buffet before the others emerged from their caves. I took a second turn around the items on offer while they made their selections. Back at the table, it was time to get down to business.

I already had things figured out, and thought mouthfuls of food would serve to keep debate to a minimum.

“Now,” I started, “we’ve got to plan ahead. First things first. When do we want to get home? Remembering it’s going to take us a good couple of days. Three as a minimum. Four, if we’re going to stop in Brisbane to pick up what Bright Eyes wants to collect. Stopping in suburban Brisbane rather than zooming along the motorway is going to lose us a couple of hours. So we’re looking at four days if we assume Sydney to Brisbane’s too long for a one-day stage. Right?”

There was general agreement this was the case.

“So working on that basis, if we want to be back in Denison on Friday night.”

“Not good, Herston,” Jeffrey interposed. “Friday night after a big day’s travel would be a bit much. Better to get back on Thursday, have a quiet night, then hit it hard with a day’s rest under the belt.”

Which was the response I’d expected. I’d already decided Thursday would be the optimum option.

“In that case, working back from Thursday would give us Wednesday night somewhere around Rocky. That’d be an easy day’s drive for the last day. Which brings us to where we’re planning to spend Tuesday night. Now, from what I can gather, Bright Eyes, your folks aren’t exactly skipping with joy at the news of your recent career decisions.”

“That’s putting it mildly. *Severely pissed off* would be closer, but still a bit short of the mark.”

“Regardless, if they thought you were near they’d be even more pissed off if you didn’t want to spend the night at home on Tuesday.”

“True.”

“So we want to spend the night somewhere around the Gold Coast or Byron Bay...”

“The casino on the Coast would be perfectly acceptable,” Jeffrey suggested.

“What I was going to suggest. That’s gives us an hour and a half to two hours to get from there to your folks, Bright Eyes, so we’d only be able to stay an hour at most if we were going to lob into Rocky before nightfall.”

“Sounds better all the time,” was Bright Eyes’ verdict as we came to what I was likely to prove the crux of the matter.

“So if we’re on the Gold Coast on Tuesday night, we need an excuse for not continuing onto Brisbane, don’t we? Which means we want Tuesday to be such a big drive day it wouldn’t be reasonable to ask Bright Eyes to carry on for the extra hour.”

“Right,” was the almost simultaneous reaction.

The pieces were falling into place nicely.

“At the same time Sydney to Surfers would still be a bit *too* much for a day’s drive. On the other hand if we spent Monday night somewhere a bit north of here, so we could cut two or three hours off the next day’s journey, that’d still be long enough to get us out of going the extra bit into Brisbane, wouldn’t it?”

This time the response wasn’t quite so definite.

“So if, say, we were to head off today, we could spend the afternoon in the Hunter Valley, do a bit of wine tasting on Monday and head north reasonably early Tuesday morning. What do you reckon?”

Bright Eyes’ response was immediate.

“*Uh uh*, There's no way I’m driving anywhere today. It’s OK for you to sock it away the way you have for the past couple of days. I need a break today, and there’s no way I’m up for a big night tonight either, thank you very much.”

This expression of dissent was not entirely unexpected.

“But,” I suggested, “there might be someone who, say, works at this hotel, has the day off and wouldn’t mind a day behind the wheel of a red Mercedes if we made it worth his while. Sling him a couple of hundred and the train fare home and...”

Both parties expressed doubts this was a possibility.

I conveniently neglected to mention that hotel staff in reception were already researching this possibility, after an earlier phone call and a visit to Reception on the way into breakfast.

“Anyway, if we stop off at Reception to ask, we might be able to pick up a bit of literature to check out while they’re seeing whether there’s a suitable substitute in the Chauffeur Department.”

“Can’t do much harm,” was Jeffrey’s conclusion. “They said this place has a late checkout time, so we’ve got an hour or so to see what they can come up with.”

At Reception, I made a few enquiries, collected a suitable reference book and guide to the Hunter Valley, and headed upstairs in anticipation of a phone call from whoever they were able to come up with as a substitute for Bright Eyes in the Chauffeur Stakes.

A note passed to me during those negotiations indicated Reception had found someone willing to undertake the task, and the individual in question was only waiting for confirmation before beginning the journey to join our expedition. Once upstairs, I started on Stage Two of *Operation Win Them Over*.

“Anyway,” I said as the conference reconvened in my room, “since we set that area in the restaurant at home for a wine cellar, we’re going to have to stock it. There’s limited of space in the boot, but if we find something that’s acceptable we can always arrange for them to ship it north for us.”

“That’s all very well for you pair,” Bright Eyes pointed out. “You can drink all you like but what do you want me to do while you’re sipping away? Stand around looking stunning? Yes, well I could, but I wouldn’t want to be cramping your style along the way.”

“No way that’s going to be a problem. All you need to do is get us from place to place and then collect us from each place once we’ve finished trying their range. Look at this bloody guide,” I replied.

I waved the booklet I’d been perusing between my return to the room and the reconvening of the conference to reinforce the coming point.

“There are more art galleries, gift shops and places like that than you can point a stick at. There’s a great wing of the bastards. You won’t have any problem filling in time while we’re in the tasting rooms. We’ll get them to call your mobile when we’re ready to head on. Now where do we want to base ourselves? Somewhere in the guts might be the way to go.”

Taking the map from the middle of the book, I spread it on the table.

At that moment, the phone rang.

“Yes,” I answered, “this is Mr Herston. Yes, we need someone to drive our car from here to the Hunter Valley. Our regular driver’s come down with some bug or other and the medication she’s on rules out driving long distances today. With a bit of luck, she’ll be better tomorrow.”

This minor departure from the facts produced a snort from one direction and a giggle from the other.

“So, yes, Thanks for the offer Russell. Five hundred? Not a problem. Fares for the way back? Really? You’re sure? I see. So you’ll be able to stop with your folks for the night in Cessnock? Wonderful! Catch you shortly. Bye.”

Putting the phone down, I turned to the others.

“In a couple of minutes it’ll be time to pack up your tidy boxes, boys and girls. No big hurry, Russell reckons it’ll take the best part of three-quarters of an hour to get here, so we’ll just make the late checkout time. Now where were we? Ah, yes, the map. Looking at this, somewhere along Broke Road would be the G.O.” I suggested. “I’ll just give one of them a call and tell ‘em I want a room or two. We’ll need a two bedroom unit and a single for Bright Eyes.”

News that her level of consumption would be considerably less than what would be our bounden duty to reach had a soothing effect on Bright Eyes.

While I was ringing around for somewhere to base ourselves, a glance at the booklet and the range of attractions removed the last reservations, though she did need a substantial dose of vitamin B before we departed. A further call to the kitchen sufficed to arrange a hamper of picnic delicacies for lunch

Forty-five minutes later the three of us were in the lobby gazing towards the front door. There was a tinkling sound followed by an unfamiliar voice behind me.

“Mr Herston?” the voice asked.

I turned.

The voice belonged to a slim individual of the questionable-male persuasion. He was someone you would picture in a bell boy’s outfit even if he wasn’t wearing a bell, which he obviously was.

He was not to put too fine a point on it, as camp as a row of tents.

“Russell?” I guessed. “Meet Mr Jeffrey and our regular chauffeur, the lovely Bright Eyes. Now, if we can just extricate the chariot from the Valet Parking we can be on our merry way.”

“I can attend to that,” our new acquaintance lisped. “The valet parking boys are *very* good friends of mine.”

“I think,” Jeffrey remarked as the figure receded into the distance, “we’ll be lucky if he can get the chariot out of Valet Parking’s tender care without getting rear-ended.”

“At least,” I replied, “his shirt seemed firmly tucked in. Hopefully it’ll stay that way, and we can get out of here *tout suite* as they’d say in France.”

“You pair!” was Bright Eyes’ contribution to the ongoing discussion. “I thought he was perfectly charming. I’m sure we’ll have a lovely time on the drive north.”

“All I’m saying is I hope he won’t be spreading his charm in the direction of the Valet Parking crew; otherwise we’ll still be here in an hour’s time. You’ve got

the seat in the front, by the way. Correct, Herston? While we're on the subject, we're going to need an esky for the back seat. No way I'll survive the next couple of hours without something to drink. I thought I'd be OK, but the prattle coming from the front seat will be enough to drive a man to drink."

"There's bound," I suggested, "to be an esky for sale in one of those service centres along the freeway. Should be able to get some ice from there too, Of course, the beer supply could be a problem."

"Not," Jeffrey responded, "if we get it from here."

"How," Bright Eyes wondered, "will you be able to keep it cold? That's why you're going to need the esky isn't it?"

"Where there's a will," Jeffrey pointed out, "there's a way. Watch."

He headed purposefully towards Reception.

"I don't suppose," I heard him ask, "we'd be able to trouble you for a six pack of Fosters and another of Bluetongue. That'd be your preference, Herston? At the bar? Fine. We'll also need a cardboard box, a couple of green garbage bags and access to the ice machine."

"You look after that side of things," I suggested, "I'll get the piss while Bright Eyes keeps an eye out for Russell."

Ten minutes later the luggage had been stowed, and the three of us were seated in the convertible. The space in front of the back seat contained a couple of wine cartons, several garbage bags, a six-pack of Fosters, another of Bluetongue and bags containing a substantial quantity of ice.

"The secret in this kind of situation," Jeffrey pointed out as we waited for a red light to change, "is to get the right blend of stability and insulation without getting the cardboard wet and creating a helluva mess all over the back seat."

After checking the wine cartons, he took the largest and placed it inside one of the garbage bags.

"With a bit of luck that," he remarked as the light changed and the car moved forward, "should keep the water off the back seat."

As we continued towards the Harbour Bridge, he took another garbage bag and placed it carefully inside the wine carton.

He placed a second wine carton inside the structure and started removing the flaps around the top as we ground to another temporary halt.

“With another garbage bag, we should have enough layers of plastic to keep the melt-water safely inside,” he went on.

I could see our metro-sexual temporary chauffeur had temporarily suspended conversation with Bright Eyes to watch proceedings in the rear vision mirror,

“It’s amazing,” I pointed out, “how many ways you can improvise something to keep beer cold. You mightn’t believe it, but a washing machine does the job just as well as your common or garden esky.”

The lights changed, and we resumed our journey as Jeffrey placed a garbage bag inside the first.

“As I said, that should be enough, but it’s just as well to be on the safe side. So if we take the bags with ice in ‘em, and stick them in there, it’s a simple matter of taking the piss and burrowing each bottle or tin safely down into the ice and, hey presto, problem solved. We’ll still need an esky, and when we buy one we’ll get a fresh supply of ice. Once that happens, we can tip this load out onto a handy patch of grass and chuck the rest into a recycling bin.”

“After we’ve liberated the beer, of course,” I felt obliged to point out.

“And Bob’s your uncle. Not that any of us have an uncle named Robert, mind you, but that’s the way things go.”

“Incredible,” was the comment from the driver. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like that.”

“No,” remarked Jeffrey. “I don’t suppose you have. Care for one, Herston?”

“Give it a few minutes to get the chill back, if you don’t mind. As I was saying before if you find yourself with an unplanned party in the back yard and no esky handy, the washing machine makes a perfectly adequate substitute. Remarkably well insulated, your average washing machine. Needs to be a top loader though.

Try it with a front loader and you'll end up with some poor bugger slipping on the floor.”

“I'll bear it in mind,” Russell remarked. I suspected his social milieu was hardly an environment where you'd be needing to improvise an esky.

Once we'd obtained an esky and a further supply of ice I allowed myself a beer on the basis that chilling out in the back seat on a sunny Sunday afternoon as the countryside slipped by was best done with a chilled something in hand.

The day was pleasant, picnic supplies first class, and traffic flow moderate, and we found our way to Newcastle in reasonable time, before making the turn off the expressway towards the vineyards.

A second beer and the overall ambience ensured the latter part of the journey passed largely unnoticed as I meditated on the makeup of the wine cellar.

My meditations reached a depth that required a poke in the ribs and a question about whether I wanted to stop in at the Visitor Information Centre on the way to the accommodation.

The size of the wine operation in the area meant there was no chance we would be able to visit more than a handful of wineries, so I thought it best to gather as much information as possible.

Once we'd pulled into the car park I left Jeffrey in the tasting area and set about gathering pamphlets and other material, taking care to arrange everything in alphabetical order.

From there it was straight to the accommodation, which was right at the very epicentre of the Valley's activity with a number of tasting and shopping options within walking (or staggering) distance.

Once we'd checked in, bade farewell to Russell and put the chariot to bed for the day we had a couple of hours to kill before the wineries closed.

Since our rooms looked out over the vines and he had a well-stocked esky to look after, Jeffrey decided he'd be happy to take a spell and enjoy the view, leaving Bright Eyes and I free to make our way towards the nearby shops.

Apart from my thoughts on the makeup of our cellar I'd realised if we wanted an enthusiastic and compliant chauffeur the following morning it was advisable to give her retail therapy in the afternoon.

I dropped her in the first suitable location and set out towards the tasting room via a book store, where I stocked up on reference material.

When five o'clock rolled around I returned to base, reported on proceedings and settled down to map out an itinerary, directing my attention towards places with the highest ratings that seemed to have something interesting on offer.

Seven-thirty saw the party assembling for a quiet dinner in the restaurant, with wines by the glass rather than the bottle as the preferred option. Afterwards, Bright Eyes decided to call it a day while Jeffrey and I discussed the itinerary for the next day's tasting over a few quiet beers.

Monday morning saw Bright Eyes back behind the wheel as we ranged far and wide, and as we moved from place to place, it seemed we were being greeted with increasing hospitality at each stop.

"Did you get the impression they knew we were on the way?" I asked as we headed off from another establishment. "Everywhere else we wandered into the cellar door, someone wanders over, asks if we're there for a tasting and checks how many glasses. But in that place."

Jeffrey agreed. "Soon as we were in the door there were two glasses ready to go. They pointed Bright Eyes towards the antiques and the boutique. They knew we were coming, all right."

"Which begs the question of whether we're going to find the same thing at the next place. It's the last one I've pencilled in before lunch. There's an art gallery on the premises, so if we find the same thing, should be the next turn on the left Bright Eyes. If we find the same thing when we wander in here, we'll definitely know something is going on. Not that I'm objecting. Just one thought, though. No one mentions where we're going from here, right?"

“I think you’ll find the only one who knows where we’re going is you, Herston. Unless Jeffrey can remember the finer points of what you two were babbling about at ten o’clock last night.”

“I am Sergeant Schultz,” Jeffrey pointed out, “*I know nothing.*”

Sure enough, once the car was parked as we reached the front door it opened, seemingly of its own volition. The reception committee were ready to steer Bright Eyes towards the art gallery while the winemaker was ready to guide us through the range.

Once we’d ordered a couple of dozen bottles, three whites in the drink now mould, a semillon which would start to reach its peak in about ten years, an aged chardonnay and three dozen reds, there was no need to maintain security.

We were being ushered into the restaurant when the winemaker asked whether, since lunch would take us about three-quarters of an hour, we’d like him to call the next place we planned to visit so they would be prepared for our arrival.

“Why?” I asked. “Did someone ring you with a warning we were on the way?”

“Not specifically. Through the morning, there have been calls wanting to know if we’d spotted two cashed-up blokes and a blonde who should be in the centrefold in a red convertible. You’re not exactly inconspicuous.”

“In that case,” Jeffrey suggested as we took our seats at the table, “we might as well keep them guessing, hadn’t we? Give them something to look forward to.”

“On the other hand,” I pointed out, “we could ask where you’d be going if you were in our shoes.”

When he rattled off the names of three establishments, I was impressed. I had half a dozen possible stops for the afternoon, depending on how we were going for time, and he’d mentioned two of them along with one we’d already visited.

Doing my best to be noncommittal I indicated we’d be keeping the advice in mind as I turned my attention to the menu.

Once the orders had been taken, Bright Eyes turned to me.

“Well, apart from the place we’d already visited, how close was he to the rest of the itinerary.”

“Remarkably accurate. One’s our next stop and the other’s Number Three for the afternoon. I think we’ll be getting to both.”

By the time we’d finished there were about forty dozen bottles earmarked for delivery to Denison. After a rest it was time for a quiet dinner with a couple of glasses from wineries we’d been unable to visit.

After that, since tomorrow was a travelling day, it was early to bed.

In the morning, Jeffrey had announced there was a limit to the number of days on which wine was the alcoholic staple needed to hold himself together, and as a result, had ensured the esky in the back seat was well stocked with blue cans.

I had ensured there was a fair supply of Bluetongue as well (it helps to be passing the relevant brewery on your way out of the area), but decided to stick to the occasional ale as I took in the scenery.

We rolled into the casino around five-thirty.

Once check-in was complete, and we’d been ushered to our rooms there was the minor problem of ways to fill in the interval between check-in and dinner. Given the fact there was a gaming establishment at the bottom of the garden, the answer was a no-brainer.

Bright Eyes announced she wasn’t going anywhere before she’d indulged in a long soaking bath, and I was inclined towards a shower and a change of clothing before I ventured downstairs.

“So,” I suggested, “how about we rendezvous at the bar closest to the Casino entrance at seven?”

The suggestion brought a groan and a roll of the eyes from Ms Carter.

‘Honestly. You guys are incorrigible. Can’t you choose somewhere other than a bar as a rendezvous?’

“Where else would you suggest? Been here before? Know the ground well, do we? Suggest somewhere else if you like, it’s all the same to me. All I know is Jeffrey will be down there in five minutes, I’ll be there about twenty minutes later, and you’ll be waltzing into view around seven if that’s the time we agree to meet up. Fire away. I’m all ears. Nobody’s perfect.”

“All I was saying, was we don’t have to meet in a bar. There are other options.”

“Such as? All I know is that there’s bound to be a bar near the entrance to the casino. If there isn’t one straight outside, there’ll be one when you walk through the door.”

“If there’s more than one entrance?”

“You choose the one that’s closest to Reception.”

“Anyway, despite any suggestions to the contrary, I’m off,” Jeffrey remarked. “See you at seven at the bar outside the entrance that’s closest to Reception. Works for me.”

I took my time in the shower, and it was around six-thirty when I found myself strolling around the gambling options before adjourning to the bar and a pile of *keno* tickets. I was about to place a small investment when Bright Eyes appeared.

“See? Logical choice. No trouble finding it and, if I’m not mistaken, there are still five minutes before rendezvous time. You could have had another few minutes to soak in that bath and still be on time.”

“So,” Bright Eyes asked, attempting to change the subject, “what about Jeffrey? Sighted him in your travels?”

I was about to mention that he’d been nowhere in sight during my lap around the tables when he appeared in the doorway from the gaming area supervised by a brace of security personnel with a third looming in case he should be required to lend further assistance.

As I moved towards the developing *contretemps*, I heard the words *a guest at this place goddamn-it* followed by a reply that this temporary arrangement was now voided.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” I started, “what seems to be the problem?”

“No problem,” was the reply from the largest of the three, “unless you’re tied up with this asshole. In which case you’ll need alternative accommodation.”

That was that. Ten minutes later the car was outside the door with our luggage being placed in the boot.

The bevy of security personnel in the area indicated the path to reconciliation was unlikely to be open at any time in the immediate future.

“Right,” I remarked to Bright Eyes, “and once we’re out of here we’re after the first place that looks reasonable and has the *Vacancy* sign lit up.”

“No problem,” Bright Eyes responded. Predictably, Jeffrey felt the need for the last word.

As the car started to move, he unsteadily rose to his feet.

"Arsehole, eh? Well, I'll tell you what. I'm a better class of fucking arsehole than you arseholes will ever be."

He concluded the last sentence as Bright Eyes foot hit the accelerator and she swung into the stream of traffic. The result was an undignified collapse.

Fortunately we were able to find a reasonable motel without further disaster and once the luggage had been stowed we were out looking for nourishment. There was no need to make the process a dry argument since there was a bar within a minute’s walk offering counter meals, frequented by backpackers and their ilk.

“Beauty,” Jeffrey remarked as we surveyed the menu board, “back to the real world. That four star restaurant thing is all very well, but there’s not much in this world that can top a good honest T-bone steak and chips. That’s for me.”

It was T-bones and chips all round, a welcome change from variations on *haute cuisine* towers of tucker tastefully arranged in little mounds surrounded by splashes of brightly-coloured liquids. Once the meals had been demolished, there seemed little choice, as far as I could see, but to sit back with a couple of cool drinks watch the antics of the assembled miniature United Nations.

That was not going to be enough for Jeffrey.

We'd been back in the country for four nights, and had been in transit from New Orleans for a couple of days before that, whereas while we were abroad scarcely a night had passed without a broad if you catch my drift.

When he returned with a round of drinks, and indicated that he was off for a look around I guessed that he was embarking on a quest for a partner willing to participate in a little horizontal *mambo*.

Within half an hour, he had established contact with a well-developed female of English extraction, and after pausing to introduce her to us, departed towards the motel with mischief in mind.

After that Bright Eyes and I watched the backpackers frolics until a thought struck me.

“Bright Eyes,” I began, “there’s one slight matter that’s troubling me.”

“Something to do with well-endowed English backpackers, by any chance?”

“I was wondering how things are likely to go when we get to your folks’ place tomorrow. They do know you’re coming? They’re expecting us as well? You said that they weren’t overjoyed about.”

“My taking the next couple of years off? No, they’re not. They weren’t as you might recall, overjoyed when Carole and I managed to wangle appointments in Denison instead of staying in Brisbane either. They got over those things, and I’m sure that they’ll get over this as well.”

“Well, I knew all that, and that’s none of my business, really. I just thought that if Jeffrey and I are hanging around the premises things might get a little thorny.”

“They will, but not as thorny as they’d be if you weren’t there, in case you’re thinking of asking me to drop you off at the nearest pub and collect you when I’ve picked up the stuff I need to collect. If you’re standing around on the footpath, I’ll be able to go in, collect three boxes and get back out again in about ten minutes, max.”

“Whereas if we weren’t there.”

“They’ll be asking me to sit down and have a cup of tea and ask me whether I’m sure I’m doing the right thing, and have I thought about the alternatives and...”

“In the end Jeffrey and I will be totally pissed before you get back,” I suggested with a grin.

“Quite possibly. I moved away from home to escape the third degree. If you two are standing around I have the excuse that I’d be keeping you waiting. In any case, they’ll want to get you out of the way before the neighbours notice and start asking questions. You know, *what was that red convertible doing in the driveway? What is Jonelle doing with her life? Who were those two evil degenerates?* You can imagine the sort of thing.”

“I can indeed. Finished? In that case, I think we’ve given Jeffrey long enough to lure his little playmate indoors so we won’t be cramping his style when we turn up on our respective doorsteps. Coming?”

As we made our way off the premises, I noticed a vaguely familiar figure in transit between the main entrance and the Ladies.

Apparently Bright Eyes noticed the same figure since when we were outside she turned to me and asked “Did you see what I saw?”

“Dunno. Depends on what you saw. I did see a female form that looked vaguely familiar. Looked a lot like someone we’d been introduced to rather briefly earlier in the piece.”

“In which case, it’s hardly likely we’ll be cramping anybody’s style, will we? Mind you, she could be an identical twin or something...”

“True. There’s every possibility here’s a pair of identical backpacking twins whose warped sense of humour extends to wandering around in public wearing identical outfits and trying to persuade poor innocent drunks that they’re seeing double. On the other hand.”

The figure that we found in front of us as we turned into the lobby bore, at first glance, a remarkable resemblance to a former Prime Minister who allegedly found himself in a Memphis motel lobby clad in shirt, jocks and acute embarrassment.

Not that there was any sign of embarrassment from the figure in front of us, who was informing the desk that he didn't *give a flying continental fuck how long it took the coppers to get here*. He wanted them here right now so they could set out in pursuit of the *rotten Pommy bitch who stole me tweeds*.

Behind the desk, the night manager was trying to contact the constabulary. Movement in his peripheral vision caused him to look up as we approached. His hand went over the mouthpiece of the telephone.

“Your friend,” the night manager said, “appears to be having a spot of bother.”

“What's up?” I asked, though it was clear what the problem was.

“Rotten bitch stole me trousers when my back was turned, didn't she?” was the answer I expected.

Bright Eyes moved towards the door. “I think, if you're after your wallet back.”

“That's not the problem. Though there was a billfold in that pair of daks, it was the one I flash around when I need to convince some bastard that I'm stony broke. You know the one, Herston?”

I did.

It contained a five dollar note, authentic-looking though not quite legitimate identification and not much else. Such cash as he usually carried was invariably loose in his pocket, and if you were looking to relieve him of his credit cards you needed to be looking inside the covers of the address book that went everywhere with him.

“So, in other words,” I guessed, “this happened after what the police would be inclined to call the alleged incident.”

“Nothing alleged about it. Gave her one good and proper and when I was reaching into the fridge for some refreshment before the bell to start Round Two.”

“She bolted with your strides. Same as that hooker in New Orleans...”

“That bitch just took the billfold. This Pommy piece of shit took the strides as well. I’m not worried about the billfold or the fake ID - got another dozen in the suitcase if I need ‘em. It’s the strides that are the issue here. You remember we went into that place in L.A.”

“Ah,” I answered as the cartoon light bulb appeared over my head, “those pants. Remember ‘em well. Cost two hundred to have them tailor made at that place in Hollywood. Sorry, mate, didn’t notice you were wearing the bastards. Must have been the shirt out look.”

“She wasn’t carrying anything when she disappeared into the Ladies at the pub,” Bright Eyes pointed out as she started to move towards the door, “which means somewhere between the door to your room and the pub there’s a pair of trousers.”

At this point, the night manager interrupted to inquire whether the police were still required since he’d been informed that they had a number of other cases to deal with.

“Naah, stuff it,” was Jeffrey’s reply. “Give the bitch a chance to think she got away with one.”

“So, just to see if I’ve got the facts right, after you’d done the deed the subject of payment came up. You waved the billfold around to show her you’re skint, so while you were getting a beer she grabbed the strides and the billfold and made for the door. The address book.”

“Is under the mattress as usual, as is most of the cash I was carrying tonight. She took herself into the pisser before we got down to it.”

“Which gave you the time to rearrange things so that you’d be broke when the subject reared its ugly head.” I was familiar with the *modus operandi*.

At that point, with the night manager asking if we’d be needing assistance from the police, Bright Eyes appeared, brandishing a pair of highly embroidered western-style jeans.

“You’ll never guess where I found these,” was her opening line.

“In the back seat of a certain red convertible?” I guessed.

Turning to the night manager I went on.

“Now that the strides in question are back here I guess that things are sorted out. Thank the constable or desk sergeant or whoever for his time, if you don’t mind, but since the most valuable items involved have been recovered I’m sure they have more pressing matters to attend to.”

I turned to my companions.

“Something in a nightcap?”

Travelling North

With a game plan involving an early departure I was expecting activity when I emerged from my room just before seven, but I wasn't prepared for the extent of activity undertaken before I appeared on the scene.

Bright Eyes had been up or a while, unable to sleep before the ordeal.

I was greeted with news she'd been about to knock on two doors to announce our imminent departure.

"What about the stuff we talked about last night? That's going to take at least half an hour."

"All done. And it *did* take more than half an hour. I was up before five and went for a walk around five-thirty. There's a Seven-Eleven down the road and I was able to pick up most of the stuff we worked out last night."

"Soft eskies?"

"Check."

"Bread rolls and salad stuff?"

"Check."

"Soft drinks, mineral water and ice?"

"Got the drinks. Still need ice. I pinched enough to keep things cool for the time being from the ice machine here, but we'll need another bag when we fuel up on the way to Brisbane."

"Salad rolls made?"

"Check. Wrapped and ready to go."

"Beer relocated into soft eskies?"

“Check. The little eskies are safely out of sight behind my suitcase in the boot. Good morning Mr Jeffrey. I hope you’re not looking for a hair of the dog.”

Jeffrey indicated that this was not the case as he added his suitcase to the boot.

“Got the piss in there? Good. These early starts don’t do a man much good you know.”

It was a theme he expanded on the car was pointed in towards our rendezvous with the Carters.

“We’re going to have to watch ourselves when we get back to base. That’s the lesson from last night’s debacle. Things that worked when we were sitting at the corner bar at the Palace aren’t going to work once we’re back at The Crossroads.”

From the front seat, Bright Eyes indicated further detail was required.

“When I was working there wasn’t time for a drink till knockoff time, which was after three, so you could drink on steady-steady till closing time without much trouble. On weekends, you don’t start till midday and there’ll probably be enough messages to keep things under control till dinner time.”

“The *you* in question being you, rather than me?” Bright Eyes inquired. “I don’t recall starting drinking around lunch time too often.”

“Correct. The point is, yesterday we started drinking around ten, right? Though Herston decided to rest his eyes a couple of times, I was on the turps right through the day. Which may have had something to do with little problems we had towards the end”

“Surely you’d have had the same problems while you were away overseas?” Bright Eyes suggested.

“While we were overseas, the day started around lunchtime, and we were doing something in the afternoon before we started. Once we get back we’re going to have to.”

“*You’re* going to have to. I’ll have plenty to keep me occupied during the day, but I can see your point. You’re probably going to have to find something to keep

you occupied until late afternoon if you're not going to be permanently paralytic. What are you going to do about that Herston?"

Discussion of stratagems that would keep us occupied during working hours lasted until it was time to turn off the freeway and head into the suburb that housed the Carter residence.

"Remember that when we pull up there the name of the game is to get back out again as quick as possible. I don't think that you're going to be able to sit in the back seat and stay out of the way. You're probably going to be invited inside, but don't get carried away. They'll want to avoid giving the neighbours anything to talk about, so they won't want you two on display in the front yard."

The prediction proved correct as we arrived in the driveway of the two-storey home.

We'd been told it was a two-car household with a double garage, but we hadn't anticipated one car would have been moved into the other driveway.

As we pulled into the driveway, a garage door started to swing upward of its own volition, and Mr Carter emerged from the gazebo in the front yard indicating that the vehicle should proceed into the space.

Once we'd come to a halt, Mrs Carter emerged from the interior and suggested Jeffrey and I might be comfortable in the downstairs lounge while Bright Eyes was busy upstairs.

As we waited, we could hear discussion without being able to follow the ebb and flow of debate.

Discussion was interrupted every few minutes as Bright Eyes appeared with a box, resuming when she returned upstairs. Once the transfer was complete the Carters had little choice but to abandon attempts to dissuade their daughter from her chosen course as the boxes were stowed.

As space was found for them, we attempted to exchange pleasantries.

Our chauffeur had changed her uniform for something demure. Jeffrey and I had several doses of breath freshener before our departure from the Gold Coast.

Without the telltale aroma of stale booze and the liquid supplies stowed out of sight in the boot, despite all precautions, the atmosphere remained strained.

Could it have been the esky's location athwart the rear seat?

Suggestions we needed somewhere to store lunch were met with disbelief, even after I opened the esky to grab one of the bottles of mineral water stacked under the cling-wrapped salad rolls.

The coolness undoubtedly resulted from disbelief in their daughter's claims she intended to use the next couple of years to upgrade her qualifications. In any case, regardless of the cause, Mr Bright Eyes Senior had an attitude which suggested that his daughter was placing herself in a position of threatened moral turpitude.

For our part, we knew that her virtue was safe with us.

Any thoughts we might have had about our curvaceous chauffeur had been quickly eroded by the realisation that:

(1) We had found the perfect chauffeur for our little community, and

(2) There was no way that any of us would be likely to be able to worm our way into her knickers.

So in view of point (1) above, there was no point in trying.

When it came to turpitude, we knew that, although she was fond of a cool drink on a hot day, she was careful not to overindulge in the turps.

Experience to date indicated that while she was quite capable of socking plenty away, Bright Eyes was happy to change to soft drink, engage in polite conversation or work off a few kilojoules through frenetic gyrations on the dance floor until her passengers were ready to decant themselves from the bar.

She was fulfilling a function which neither of her passengers would have been capable of performing without a lengthy drying out period, but there are some things that it is not possible to discuss with a concerned parent, and this was one of them.

Suggestions that Bright Eyes *could handle the piss, knows when to stop before she's too stonkered to drive and wasn't interested in rooting anything older than twenty-five* would do nothing to ease the tension.

It was better to remain silent.

Her parents, however, appeared dubious about their daughter's chosen path as the Mercedes pulled away from that quiet suburban *cul-de-sac* around eleven.

As we found our way back onto the arterial roads, Jeffrey ventured the opinion that Bright Eyes' parents appeared to be nice people.

Aware of the value of tact when discussing anyone's relatives, I agreed.

Bright Eyes replied that, *yes, that was the impression that most people got from a first encounter*, but when you got to know them better they were comfortably to the right of Attila the Hun in their politics and eternally eager to do anything in their power to prevent anyone, regardless of race, colour, creed, religious affiliation or filial relationship from having anything remotely resembling a good time.

The remarks explained her desire to avoid returning to Brisbane and suggested the motivation behind previously noted child bride grooming activities.

Coming from that background, she was obviously making up for lost time.

As we rolled towards the freeway, a random thought crossed my mind.

“Just checking, but we haven't been in touch with Sandy and Hopalong since we got back into the country. No? Thought not. In that case maybe we should just give Hopalong a quick bell to make sure they know we're on the way.”

The mobile phone removed the need to find a Superman booth, so it wasn't long before the phone was ringing in a certain ex-motel.

After thirty seconds, I had the privilege of talking to Mr Cassidy.

“Where are you bastards, anyway? Inquiring minds need to know.”

Once I'd explained our position and anticipated itinerary, I was able to get in few questions of my own, and learned that there were a stack of parcels waiting in the office but to date there was no sign of wine consignments.

“Not that they’re likely to lob before Thursday or Friday at the earliest. Most of them wouldn’t have left the Hunter till yesterday morning at the very earliest. Anything else I need to know? No? Well, then, catch you tomorrow arvo. Yeah, probably about five. Four at the absolute earliest. Bye.”

With those arrangements bedded down, a stop at Burpengary to refuel allowed Bright Eyes to exchange her demure outfit for the chauffeur’s uniform. While she did that, we were able to rearrange the esky’s contents.

The soft eskies appeared from the boot, their contents went into the big one, and the salad rolls were assigned alternative accommodation. Once Bright Eyes had reemerged, and we were on our way out of the roadhouse, Jeffrey turned to look over his shoulder and suggest *if that was Burpengary, where the fuck are Fartengary and Belchengary?*

We were passing the Nambour turnoff when a police car settled itself in our wake. We were sure Bright Eyes had been within the speed limit, but the presence was disconcerting.

After a few kilometres, the car moved up and signalled Bright Eyes to pull over.

A brief interview, scrutiny of her driving credentials, a breathalyser sample and inquiries about our movements followed, before, with some reluctance, the police officers returned to their vehicle, indicating we were free to continue our journey.

The same thing happened on the outskirts of Gympie.

Things were getting a little out of hand.

A third delay near Maryborough was stretching things beyond the bounds of friendship, and when we were pulled over south of Childers it was time for a change of plan.

Between the three of us, we’d been up and down the highway many times and neither could remember having been stopped by the police, and many journeys had passed without sightings of police cars or uniforms.

Yet after Nambour, our arrival on the outskirts of any community large enough to have a police station was the signal for the car to be waved over and inspected

for roadworthiness. After that, Bright Eyes was asked to provide a breath sample, usually being encouraged to take deep breaths by someone with a more than a passing interest in her mammary development.

As we rolled over the kilometres we concluded this inordinate interest in Bright Eyes' sobriety was almost certainly the result of bored police stationed in country towns.

As far as we could figure out, their duties would probably consist of pulling up the odd motorist for speeding or some minor offence. Any red-blooded officer would, of course, prefer to be doing his bit and playing a leading role in the fight against organized crime. Instead, with nothing to do apart from writing out the odd ticket, day to day life would become mundane.

They needed a bit of excitement here and there, and the opportunity to check out a red convertible being driven by a well-endowed blonde in a chauffeur's outfit that left little to the imagination did not arise every day.

At each stop, we had indicated that our route was going to take us along the highway with a plan to stop in Rockhampton, but it seemed that the plan would be subject to frequent interruptions.

As we sat on the outskirts of Childers waiting for the latest interview to end, I turned to Jeffrey.

“This'll never do. We're losing ten to fifteen minutes every time these bastards pull us over, and if it keeps up we'll be flat out getting into Rocky before midnight. Where's that road map? Maybe there's some alternate route we could take.”

A glance at the map indicated a road linking Bundaberg to the main highway at Miriam Vale, and so, we turned off the highway at Apple Tree Creek, headed through Bundaberg, paused for a brief visit to the distillery, and then resumed the journey along a quieter road.

As we rejoined the highway at Miriam Vale, I noted a police car beside the road to the south. It seemed we had managed to avoid an interception, but I wasn't sure our luck would hold.

I turned my attention back to the map.

Likely delays at Benaraby, Calliope and points on the way to Rockhampton would mean our arrival there was unlikely to occur before night had well and truly fallen. We were about a dozen kilometres north of Miriam Vale, when a roadside sign pointed out the presence of a conveniently located motel to the left of the highway.

“Pull over for a minute, if you don’t mind, Bright Eyes. Let’s just take a minute to weigh up the options.”

She did, and I continued.

“If you take a gander at the map you’ll see that we’re about ten kilometres out of Bororen, and there’s probably a cop shop there. If they’re keeping an eye on the road we can expect to be pulled over, and we’ll be back where we were before we took our diversion through Bundy.”

“So?” asked Jeffrey.

“So what say we turn off at this motel that’s about a kilometre up the road? If they’ve got three rooms free, and a parking spot you can’t see from the highway we’ve got a chance to go to ground for a while. Grab a feed, crash early and get up around sparrow fart and we can be in Rocky before the coppers are awake. If we’re through Rocky early enough, there’s a good chance we’ll be able to get most of the way home without too many more interruptions. What do you reckon?”

“Sounds good to me,” Bright Eyes remarked. “As you may have gathered I didn’t get a whole lot of sleep last night.”

“If that’s the way the driver’s going, that’s where I’m headed,” was Jeffrey’s take on the matter. “Seems like we don’t have too much choice in the matter.”

About a minute later we’d sighted the *Vacancy* sign and were turning off to check whether there were three rooms at the inn and a parking space that could not be seen from the road.

The answers were affirmative all round.

We could order meals through room service, so we placed orders, paid and then retreated to our rooms, planning to rise before dawn and resume our journey when the constabulary on the road to Rockhampton would be pushing up zeds rather than keeping an eye for red convertibles on the highway.

That was the way things panned out in the morning.

Leaving the motel in the predawn gloom, we found ourselves passing through Rockhampton without sighting a trace of a police car.

An hour later our journey was interrupted near Marlborough.

Luckily the landscape was sparsely populated, and lack of police stations *en route* meant that the number of delays could be kept to a minimum.

It seemed advisable, once we reached Sarina, to detour off the highway, much as we had done the day before. Attention from the Highway Patrol and requests to pull over on the outskirts of every major settlement would result in a somewhat lengthier journey

Having diverted through the back roads of the Pioneer Valley, we rejoined the highway just north of Mount Ossa, and realised that the detour had been a wise move.

Requests to pull over resumed at Bloomsbury.

As we passed the turnoff to the airport south of Proserpine, I noticed another police car on the side of the road. Predictably, it sprang into action when we'd gone past.

Once we'd pulled over, we sat waiting for the officer to make his way to the driver's side door. There seemed to be something familiar about the approaching figure. As he reached the side of the car, he looked in my direction.

“Herston, you old goat, what the hell are you doing in the back seat of a red Mercedes convertible? Looks like we'll have to check the stolen vehicles registry.” It took a second for the penny to drop.

When it did I realised the inquiry came from a former schoolboy fast bowler.

“Feral Errol. Fancy meeting you here. Someone told me you’d joined the police force. Good to see you. When they shift you to Prossie?”

If I’d been seated on the right hand side of the vehicle I’d have extended my hand in ritual greeting, but I wasn’t, so I couldn’t.

His appointment to Proserpine was, I learned, a recent development.

“Tell me, mate, this is the tenth time we’ve been pulled over between Brisbane and here. Now as far as I can remember cars I’ve been a passenger in have never been pulled over in twenty years before this trip. On that basis, ten times in two days is a bit over the odds. Strange coincidence? Has someone been passing info about a red convertible along the line.”

“Well, we’re always in touch with the next car to the north and south when we’re on the highway.”

“Figures. So the boys at Bloomsbury let you know we were coming?”

“Right on,” my former opening bowler replied. “Had your arrival time at the turnoff back there just about spot on. Reckoned you might be heading into Airlie for lunch, so they’ve passed the word on to Cannonvale as well, so there’s every chance if the Cannonvale boys do catch up with you, there’ll be someone from Prossie or Denison on the highway as well.”

“Nice,” was the muttered interjection from the gentleman on my right. “Is this harassment, or what?”

I ignored the interjection.

“So we can expect further delays if we were to include lunch in Airlie on the itinerary?” I asked.

“Not necessarily, but you can expect the boys be on the lookout. I’ll be nice to you, though. If you’re not going into Airlie, I won’t be telling them you aren’t. Still, I’d better do things by the book. Mind handing me your licence, Miss?”

As the document in question was handed over, he gave it a quick glance before handing it back.

“There you go, Miss Carter. Sorry I didn’t recognize you earlier. I don’t recall you turning up at Denison High in outfits like that when I was in Year Twelve. Catch you later, Herston,” he said as he turned back towards the prowler car.

“Actually, mate, I’m rather hoping that you don’t. Not till well after we’ve made it back home, anyway.”

“Bastards,” was Jeffrey’s comment as we moved off.

“So,” I asked the others. “Considering that bit of info, what do you reckon? Lunch in Airlie or do we head straight home and put the convertible to bed for a while?”

The decision was predictably unanimous.

“What about the copper? How do we know he won’t be onto the cars further up the highway?”

“We don’t. But unless he’s changed since I knew him, he’ll do what he said he would. If the cops in Cannonvale ask, he’ll tell them what he said he was going to tell them.”

“If they don’t?”

“My bet is he won’t. It seems like they’re only passing the info on to the next car along the line, so there’s a fair chance that we’re going to have a clear run if we head straight back.”

Which was the way things panned out over the next fifty minutes, and much as we enjoyed the wind in our hair as we headed north, it seemed if we were going to be making extended journeys along the highway, it might be an idea to use a less conspicuous vehicle.

As we approached the outer limits of Denison, it seemed we had managed to give the boys in blue the slip, and those circumstances continued unaltered until we’d sighted the new sign outside a certain refurbished motel and turned into the car park around one o’clock in the afternoon.

The car park was empty, apart from Bright Eyes’ regular vehicle.

“No bugger home,” Jeffrey observed.

“What you’d expect,” I replied. “Sandy’s at work. When I talked to Hopalong on the way back to the freeway yesterday morning I told him we’d be stopping overnight in Rocky and expected to be back in town between four and five after we’d had lunch in Airlie.”

“So where would you like me to park the chariot? Somewhere near the rooms? That’ll be closer if you’re looking at getting your luggage back to your room.”

“Dunno about anyone else,” I replied, “but the contents of my suitcase have an appointment with the washing machine. Once they’re loitering in the laundry the suitcase will be so light that distance isn’t going to be a problem.”

I turned to Jeffrey.

“You’d be in the same boat?”

With the suitcases consigned to the laundry, Bright Eyes parked the Mercedes where it wouldn’t be visible from the road, and we set out on a quick circuit of the premises. Bright Eyes had been in residence before she departed for Sydney, and was able to point out finishing touches added during our absence. We ended up in front of Reception.

“What now? Lunch? If you feel like fish and chips, ring the fish shop. I’ll pick them up when I’ve had a chance to change. This outfit’s been the focus of enough attention over the past couple of days.”

In the wake of the decision to skip lunch in Airlie that seemed like a reasonable suggestion, so as I unlocked the office door, Bright Eyes headed off towards the change rooms while Jeffrey retrieved the esky from the back seat.

Inside, I found a pile of parcels and other mail on the desk, a substantial pile addressed to me, much of it addressed in my own handwriting, a smaller pile awaiting Jeffrey’s attention, and a couple of items for Bright Eyes.

One of them appeared to emanate from a tertiary institution, so I had a fair idea what Bright Eyes would be up to for the next couple of days.

I started opening parcels while Jeffrey assigned the remaining contents of the esky to the fridge, emptied out the ice and stowed the item in question in storage. He returned with the predictable blue can in his hand.

I indicated the pile of mail and raised an eyebrow.

“Stuff ‘em. I’ll take a glance at ‘em tomorrow if they’re lucky. You need a beer?”

“Since Bright Eyes is in transit between the fish shop and here, I think a white wine might be the way to go. There’s a couple of Polish Hill Rivers in there if my memory serves me well.”

As I set off to verify my recollections (Jeffrey cast an eye over the contents of the parcels I’d opened so far.

“Enough there to keep you busy for a while, so I guess you’ll be sorting that stuff out for most of the afternoon. First go at the washing machine? No? I’ll chuck some of my stuff in there then. Give me a chance to have a nap after lunch.”

I’d finished opening the mail when Bright Eyes appeared with lunch. Politeness indicated that I should ask her whether she felt like a glass with lunch.

Unfortunately, as I asked she was opening the envelope which I’d identified as likely to contain course work.

“No,” was the response. “Thanks, but there’s an assignment due in Brisbane next Friday. I haven’t started yet. I know what I’ll be doing this weekend.”

With lunch out of the way Jeffrey headed off to check progress in the laundry.

I could have resealed the Riesling, replaced it in the refrigeration and roamed room-wards with the pile of goodies I’d unwrapped. On the other hand, almost half the bottle was gone, so the process of emptying it might as well continue to its inevitable conclusion.

It took a couple of trips to ferry accumulated odds and ends down to the other end of the premises. As I headed off with the last items I was informed Jeffrey’s

laundry had reached a successful conclusion and both machines were available, so it was a while before I was finally ensconced in my living quarters.

Once I'd stowed the luggage, placed the few clean items in the wardrobe and poured myself another glass it was time to stand back and consider the schedule for the next couple of days.

Tomorrow was Friday, and Saturday follows Friday as surely as a monstrous hangover follows a big night at the Palace.

Saturday was bound to see action of some sort on the punting front, followed by another night at the Palace.

Sunday would probably see most of us into recovery mode. If I was going to get my living quarters sorted out I had two choices.

Either start now and get as much as possible done over the next three or four hours, or wait till Monday. The process was going to be a lengthy one, so I decided an immediate start was the way to go.

Most of the others had completed those arrangements when they'd moved into their sections of the building. In some cases, the process was a matter of minutes.

Jeffrey preferred to travel light, so with his clothes in the wardrobe moving in was complete. There was no need to make modifications to the interior of the room.

Once Hopalong completed the same process and added his stereo, TV and video recorder to the existing setup he was finished as well. He'd have to move again once his charming and talented bride-to-be joined the throng, but whatever else was needed then could be bought in consultation with the Lovely Liz.

Sandy, predictably, arrived with a quantity of work-related material on top of his personal possessions, as had Bright Eyes, and there were a few modifications to the interiors of their rooms which needed to be done to turn them into viable work or study spaces.

On the other hand, I had a large quantity of music in assorted formats, as well as a substantial library and the living room furniture Hopalong had put together back when he was inflicting himself on us while we completed Lotto research.

The furniture wouldn't fill both rooms, so when we retrieved it from storage I placed what we had in the most appropriate spots and commissioned Hopalong to fill in the spaces. That would be difficult to do while someone was living in the area, so the task had been postponed until after we left for overseas.

So as I stood in the internal doorway between the two spaces and surveyed the result, I was looking at virgin territory that needed to be filled. Most of the items that were going to fill the array of shelving and display space were packed in boxes in the vacant room next door.

Of the two rooms I'd claimed as my personal domain, the one on the extreme end of the premises had been a family room, and was obviously best suited as my living quarters.

The room next door would house the music library and stereo. Once the stereo had been installed, wires were run to speakers that would blast out over the pool and outdoor entertainment area while a second set of speakers ensured I had a suitable soundtrack for my day-to-day existence.

Once the disks from one of the CD box sets I'd unwrapped were in the five disk changer, and I'd ensured that the speakers were in internal mode I pressed *Play* and started placing things in what I thought were likely to be the appropriate spaces.

Although the purchases had been substantial, in the wider perspective their presence merely magnified the size of the remaining space, so it was time to start shifting the contents of the room next door so I could start to fill in the yawning gaps that confronted me.

Having unlocked the door and glanced at the pile of boxes it was obvious the process was going to take longer than a single afternoon, so I wandered down to check progress in the laundry and decided on a three stage plan for the rest of the afternoon.

Stage One would entail shifting boxes until spin cycles on washing machines had reached the height of their passion.

Stage Two involved hanging the contents of the now-quiet machines on the clothes line.

Stage Three, shelving the stuff I'd shifted would last until I was interrupted or inveigled into some form of alcoholic excess. There was still a glass of Riesling on hand, and that would do for the time being.

By three, I'd finished the washing and was safely tucked away enjoying classic New Orleans Jazz, emptying boxes, placing the contents on the shelves and storing empty containers in the spare bathroom, unaware of activity on the other side of the door.

Once the Riesling was gone, since there'd be some form of celebration later in the afternoon there was no need to leave the room for a refill. The contents of the boxes I'd moved had done something to fill the shelves, and while I hadn't quite emptied all of them, a glance at the clock radio in the sleeping quarters indicated that the time had crept past four thirty.

In that case, since we were in the time frame I'd indicated as our likely ETA there was every likelihood that Sandy would be in transit somewhere between the High School and home and that Hopalong had probably returned from wherever he'd been hiding.

In other words, the time had come to catch up with the rest of the community.

If no one was there, a spell in the spa would pass the time until some company arrived. Having shoved the remaining boxes somewhere less conspicuous than the middle of the floor I gave the shelves a quick check, more a review of what had been completed and an estimate of what remained to be done than anything else, changed into a pair of togs, selected a T-shirt and opened the bedroom door.

From the area around the pool the sound of voices suggested the welcome home party was already in progress. It would need music, so I ducked back inside, changed the contents of the CD changer, switched the speakers to *blast across the countryside* mode and wandered out to investigate.

Welcome Home

As I walked towards the pool I cast my eyes over the scene in front of me. It was obvious Hopalong had returned from wherever he had been hiding. I could see his car in the parking area and he was standing beside the pool gate.

Standing beside the well-known scoffer, Sandy was back from work.

From the murmur of voices from behind the shrubbery around the pool they were not alone. As I reached the gate, Sandy's right hand extended itself towards me.

"Herston," was the greeting, followed by a nod towards a nearby speaker. "Heard you were back. A little warning might be handy next time. A couple of them," and this time the nod was in the opposite direction towards the pool, "nearly jumped out of their skins when the music started. Still, Jeffrey's obviously planning on a couple of them jumping out of other things after dark."

As I followed his pool-ward glance, I saw Jeffrey, reclining on a banana lounge, holding forth to an audience of nubile wenches with an average age somewhere around twenty. As I took in the scene, he looked up in my direction.

"Herston! A moment of your valuable time! I was just telling everyone about that night at Tipitinas. Who were that mob we were checking out? The mob with the four trombones?"

"Bonerama? By coincidence, their CD is right beside the stereo. Be back in a moment."

Ducking back into the control room, it only took a few seconds to place the disk in the player.

With that accomplished a stroll down to the bar to grab a beer and a bottle of something white before I rejoined the assembled multitude seemed like a good idea.

It was obvious someone would have a glass that needed refilling, and so I grabbed a beer, selected a bottle from the fridge and headed towards the pool.

Arriving, I found Jeffrey, ever-present tin in hand, describing the details of our time in Los Angeles and New Orleans. His use of the truth in these stories was, however, sparing.

He has never been one to allow the truth to get in the way of a good story, and while it is possible some of the incidents he was describing occurred while I was unconscious (suffering from nervous exhaustion), genuinely asleep, distracted by something or other, or hunkered down in my own room, the present recount was the first I'd actually heard of some of the deeds that were described over the next hour.

Given frequent mornings where hours of investigation had been necessary for Jeffrey to piece together the previous evening's events, I concluded many incidents he was describing were wholly fictitious.

The stories, while they might not have been accurate in historical detail, were delivered with a verve and gusto matching that matched anything achieved by the best theatrical raconteurs. To keep him going, it was important to ensure empty tins were replenished with the utmost rapidity. This also allowed the remainder of the assembled drinkers to benefit from the shuttle service Sandy and Hopalong were providing from pool side to the bar and back.

Once a couple of glasses had been refilled, I joined them on the periphery of the party.

“So,” I started, keeping an ear on the proceedings, “what’s been happening while we were away? More specifically, where did this mob spring from?”

My bottle-in-hand circuit of the group had given the chance to identify the members of his audience, which seemed to comprise many of the town's off-duty nurses, checkout operators, waitresses and pharmaceutical attendants.

It was I recalled, Thursday night, and shopping outlets were inclined to employ high school students when late night shopping was scheduled.

I'd been greeted by assorted husbands, boyfriends, partners and associated hangers-on my way through the bar, and while there was evidence of eskies in both locations and the bar fridges seemed to be fairly well stocked with brands that didn't usually find favour with our regular circle it seemed hospitality was going to put a substantial dent in the budget over the next few weeks.

"You'll be interested to learn," Sandy began, "precise details of your travel plans have been highly sought-after items of information."

"Every time we've popped into the Palace for a couple," Hopalong chipped in, "we've had someone asking when you were coming back. A couple of questions here and there at first, but by the middle of last week when the story first hit the paper..."

"Over the past few weeks," Sandy took up the narrative, "we've had frequent visits from Clark Kent."

Clark Kent was as readers may recall the ace cub reporter from the *Sleepy Hollow Sausage Wrapper*, the biweekly newspaper that traded under the name of the *Denison Argus*.

"At first," Sandy went on, "he was happy to shout us a drink or two."

"An offer which the two of you would have felt bound to accept," I suggested.

"Correct. Anyway, over the first couple of weeks it was a case of *Feel like a beer, boys? What are those two mad bastards up to?* We knew that when the notebook came out last Wednesday week that there was something in the offing."

"Which turned out to be a report in the social column of last Friday's paper. You know the one - *Scene and Heard Around Town* - about (and I quote) *Well known local identities David Herston and Gordon Jeffrey and their overseas adventures.*"

"Which was," Hopalong contributed, "a basic outline of where you'd been along with the news that you'd be back in town in the not-too-distant future."

"That prompted a significant upsurge in interest. At the Palace last Friday every bugger seemed to be suggesting that we needed a *Welcome Home* surprise party."

“Which you were only too happy to provide,” I suggested.

“Correct,” Sandy indicated. “We thought that it was a good idea to be on the inside of the surprise so that we knew what was going on and had a bit of control over how things unfolded.”

“Which was fine,” Hopalong added, “until yesterday. The paper came out with a note in the *Gleanings* about your ETA and a reminder *the premises operating under the title of Moderation are not licensed and visitors to the area can expect that nearby roads are likely to be attracting significant attention* from Mr Plod over the next few weeks. Put the cat among the pigeons, I can tell you.”

“So when we lobbed at the Palace last night,” Sandy took up the narrative, “we were inundated with people wanting to score an invite to the party. We reckoned we’d invited enough people over the previous couple of days, and, luckily Hopalong had written down a list and checked that the most likely suspects were on it...”

“So Sandy made an executive decision that we’d run out of printed invites and that, unfortunately, only people whose names were already on the list were going to be allowed in. If you take a wander out the front, you’ll notice the security guard I went out and hired this morning just to make sure...”

“We gave him Hopalong’s list and told him not to let anyone past unless they’re on the list or in a car driven by Hopalong, Bright Eyes or me. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Looks like stiff shit if I do.”

As I spoke Bright Eyes’ car arrived, disgorging further attendees including, I noted, the Terrible Twins from the *Sausage Wrapper*’s newsroom, two girls with a reputation for hard living and serious partying.

“So when we got home about one this arvo you were out and about getting things organized,”

“Right on,” Hopalong agreed. “I came back about then and was about to turn in when Bright Eyes drove out.”

“On her way to the fish shop.”

“Right again. Shit, you’re quick on the uptake. So I followed her, filled her in on the details, swore her to secrecy and headed down to the Palace to figure out a change of plans. I’d asked Bright Eyes to phone me there once she knew what you pair were going to do for the rest of the afternoon.”

“We’d already suggested that anyone coming to the party should roll up at the Palace, and we’d get them from there,” Sandy explained. “I went straight down there after work, but they didn’t really start rolling up much before four. Between the three of us we managed to sneak the early arrivals in before Jeffrey woke up and you decided to emerge from the cave, and so, here we are.”

So, for the next couple of hours, there we were.

The numbers swelled, Jeffrey held court, I exchanged news with an assortment of local identities, drinks were drunk, nibbles nibbled, and a good time seemed to be being had by all.

Five disks in a disk player take a couple of hours to run through, and it was around nine-thirty when a sudden decrease in the noise level suggested that the changer needed re-stacking.

When silence descended I was chatting to a couple of apprentice hairdressers.

One of them, *The Lovely Bernelle*, identified on her birth certificate as Bernelle Butler, had been a pupil of mine in Townsville. The second, Gloria Steinway was variously known, due to a particularly bright set of teeth, as *Keys*, *Baby Grand* or *Eighty-eight*, with the latter tag, of course, being the number of keys on a piano. Both worked for Denison’s supreme arbiter of ladies’ and gentlemen’s tonsorial and sartorial fashions.

Bernelle lived with her mother, a Nordic blonde who had moved to Denison, initially without her daughter, in the wake of a messy divorce from a prominent Townsville real estate agent.

Since I'd been recounting overseas musical interludes when the silence cut in, it was inevitable, once I announced I was heading indoors to remedy the situation Bernelle and Gloria announced that they'd come along to keep me company.

"I think," I remarked as we headed towards the music room, "nine-thirty might be the right time to drop the volume down a notch or two. Something a little more laid back, I think. The first Boz Scaggs and some Van Morrison might be the go."

I was thinking out loud rather than trying to start a dialogue, but the responses suggested Bernelle was reasonably open-minded where music was concerned, but Gloria's tastes were anchored firmly in the middle of the road.

Once we were inside, there was a volley of requests for people I'd vaguely heard of but had no interest in investigating while I located copies of **Boz Scaggs**, **Tupelo Honey** and **Harvest Moon**, placed them in the changer and hit the shuffle button.

"Neil Young. Cool. My mum's got that album," was Bernelle's reaction when she caught sight of the cover of **Harvest Moon** while Gloria examined the disk in her hand. It was one of the disks I'd just removed from the changer.

"*Buckwheat Zydeco and the Ils Sont Partis Band*. What on earth is *that*? Don't you buy normal music?"

"Normally, no. But if you noticed a guy playing accordion party music from time to time over the past couple of hours that was probably Buckwheat. If you did French at school you'd probably be able to translate *ils sont partis* as *they're gone*.

"I think I heard what you're talking about," Bernelle remarked.

Given the volume level it would have been remarkable if she hadn't, but I filed the remark alongside other frequent *episodes of blonde* that had been scattered through a certain student's Year Five career. When she followed that remark with the observation that *actually it didn't sound too bad*, my estimation of the girl's musical taste moved up by about the same number of notches as the volume level moved down as Boz Scaggs asked the world to loan him a dime.

“That doesn’t sound too bad either,” Bernelle went on. “I think I like this kind of stuff.”

Her colleague’s reaction suggested that the opinion was not universally held.

As we headed outside, it seemed the interval between musical interludes had been interpreted as signalling the end of the evening’s proceedings. Various people were contacting the taxi service by mobile phone, and assorted eskies were being rounded up.

It seemed Captain Headrush and his colleagues were in for a busy hour.

Remembering it would be at least ten minutes before there was any activity on the taxi front I decided this might be time to answer the call of nature.

A hospitable host should be on hand to farewell guests and you do have to go some time.

Figuring sooner rather than later seemed the safest option I indicated to the girls that I was heading inside for a minute, and I’d rejoin them shortly and headed back towards my living quarters.

I was more than a little surprised when they decided to accompany me.

Turning to the book case, I grabbed something to flick through, explained I might be some time, and that, after last night’s substantial repast, there was a threat of significant atmospheric pollution.

Flicking through the pages while seated on the throne, I was encouraged to hear the sound of voices begin to fade. After waiting five minutes, I depressed the button, adjusted my clothing, used the hand basin and wandered outside to find that the lack of conversation was because the girls were flicking through the music collection.

Still, it was possible to see lack of adverse commentary as an encouraging sign.

Once we were outside the crowd gradually dwindled. Cabs arrived. Partygoers departed.

Sandy emerged from the entertainment area, said good night to the remaining stayers, and faced with the prospect of facing Year Ten English in the morning, headed indoors to rest up before the ordeal.

Hearing the phone ringing in Reception, Hopalong headed off to answer it. When he failed to return, I concluded the call must have come from Liz.

Eventually there were a hard core partygoers left, and while many of them were noted for their liking for all-night parties and disco activities, several decided to rest their eyes and ears for a while on deck chairs conveniently placed beside the pool.

Some time after one, Jeffrey disappeared towards his room accompanied by the Terrible Twins, mumbling something about *etchings* and *discussing the first thing that comes up*. I found myself beside the pool, with Bernelle and Gloria.

The possibility of taking them indoors had, predictably, crossed my mind, but I still had scruples about ex-pupils sitting on top of my desire to be left alone.

Another course of action seemed necessary.

Despite suggestions about the taxi service, Bernelle and Gloria were reluctant to leave. Conversation continued sporadically until I could hatch a scheme that would allow me to retreat to the cave, roll the rock across the door, and hibernate. Lack of sleep, coupled with the aftereffects of the evening's indulgence would be likely to leave me like a bear with a sore head.

Having heard nothing from the direction in which Jeffrey and his playmates had disappeared, I thought I *might head across and see what they're up to*.

My companions had no intention of letting me out of their sights.

As I headed towards the room I had Bernelle on my left and Gloria on my right. We arrived to find the door ajar. Peeping around the corner we beheld the entire party passed out on various beds, all of them fully clothed.

Snores of a less than elegant nature were issuing from the girls while Jeffrey was mumbling something in his sleep about going to dig out the canal.

Wondering whether he was running true to form, I crossed the room and reached for the Fosters tin on the bedside table.

Sure enough, it was full.

Inquisitiveness satisfied, but my hopes of sneaking indoors dashed, the three of us returned to the pool. My companions were disinclined to head for home.

Suggestions they avail themselves of one of the rooms produced no reaction.

I suspected the only way I was going to be able to find my way to bed would be to outlast the rest of the participants in the Wakefulness Stakes.

As luck would have it, in the afternoon I had been considering a spell in the spa, and dressed appropriately, so it was only a matter of removing the shirt, and flicking a switch before I was reclining in the foam.

The water would refresh me enough to outlast the company and it would only be a matter of time before they nodded off and I would be able to head to bed.

While there might have been circumstances under which the plan would have worked, the effect of alcohol had left weaknesses you could drive a semitrailer through. In the small hours, with no one else around, there were possibilities I had not dreamt of, let alone considered.

It should be remembered this was one in a lengthy series of solid sessions, and a retreat to bed was of the utmost importance. Lack of sleep had addled my mind.

In hindsight, what happened next should probably come as no surprise.

Bernelle inquired how the spa was. I replied with a little too much enjoyment in my voice. Suggestions that the water at this time of the year was likely to be too cold could possibly have been answered without revealing that there were heating elements involved.

With my mind preoccupied, I went on to suggest it was a pity they were not able to try the soothing waters themselves.

The observation prompted them to begin shedding clothing to join me.

I felt a stirring in my loins as my resolve wavered.

Their bodies entered the water, and I was pondering my next move when the cavalry arrived with the sound of footsteps coming from the car park.

Absence of clothing ensured Bernelle and Gloria were going to remain in the water until they knew who was approaching. While I investigated the intrusion they would have to remain where they were.

As I reached the edge of the light, a figure emerged from the darkness. Pedro was a local small businessman, looking for his daughter. She was one of those who had crashed beside the pool, so she was easy enough to locate.

Since she had been one of the first to rest their eyes, genetics had obviously not passed on her father's capacity for grog.

Pedro surveyed the scene with the critical eye of one who would have liked to have been involved in the festivities but had been precluded from attending through restrictions placed on his midweek activities.

“Little bit of a party, eh? Where's everybody else?”

I explained that the remainder of the revellers had succumbed to the pressure and crashed, with a sweeping gesture to indicate that some, including his daughter, had weakened pretty well on the spot.

“She's got to run the shop tomorrow. The missus and I are off to Townsville for the day. Give us a hand and we'll get 'er to the car. She can sleep it off in there when we get home. No point in tryin' to carry 'er upstairs.”

Pedro had always been a thoughtful parent with the well-being of his offspring utmost in his mind.

Taking an arm each, we carried the comatose form to the car park, where I found Pedro had thoughtfully brought his work ute, which had a mattress in the back, probably a leftover from a camping trip. We proceeded to *throw 'er in the back, too much hassle to get 'er in the front.*

Mission accomplished, Pedro made a remarkably quiet departure.

As a concerned parent, he obviously did not want to wake the sleeping beauty on the mattress. As the ute headed off down the road, here was the opportunity I had been waiting for.

I paused for a second or two, planning my movements. Precision timing and economy of distance covered was of the essence.

Keeping to the shadows, I moved to my room, checking there were a couple of vacant rooms with unlocked doors in the area, opened the door and continued to the wardrobe, where I found three towels.

I took a minute to dry myself, knowing I wouldn't have time to perform the act later. I grabbed the lullaby I thought was indicated, inserted it in the bedside CD player, laid out the headphones ready for action and pressed the play button.

As the music started I was already half way through the door, heading for the pool with the two spare towels in my hand, hoping the occupants of the pool were still using the water to preserve what remained of their modesty.

As I reached the pool, two heads turned.

They were still in the water.

It took a second to throw the towels towards the pool, turn on my heel and head for my room, suggesting Bernelle and Gloria should use one of the unoccupied rooms to crash in.

Inside, high and dry though almost dripping with relief, I shed the togs, dived for the bed, grabbed the headphones and crawled under the covers with the sound of John Fahey's guitar ringing softly in my ears.

Was it my imagination, or could I hear the sounds of knocking somewhere in the distance?



Things Get Complicated

Carries the narrative on on from the point where Herston and Jeffrey return from an overseas jaunt to the stage where complicated matters are in desperate need of resolution. Complications revolve around The Old Flame, her daughter, and two refugees from the Mafia.

Friday Morning Coming Down

Another Friday Night

The Thick Plotten

And So It Goes

But Where It's Going

No One Knows

Further Complications

Wednesday Morning 6 A.M.

Fez, Please!

Thursday

Inclining Towards Fine Dining

Friday Morning On The Road

Friday Morning Coming Down

It was about ten when I surfaced and, after a shower, stumbled to the kitchen in search of something substantial for breakfast.

Amid the excitement of the night before I had forgotten to eat.

When I arrived, I found Bright Eyes preparing her own breakfast.

The manoeuvres over the stove demanded concentration and restricted opportunities to conduct a conversation. She pointed to the note Sandy had attached to the fridge door on his way to work.

The text read:

Good morning you bastards,

I hope the morning finds you well.

Two young ladies said to thank Herston for his hospitality before I took them home on the way to work.

The pool area was interestingly clear of both survivors and dead bodies.

Hopalong and I have cleared the dead marines.

I presume we are convening at the Palace this evening. Please advise via the staff room phone if this is not the case.

I'll get out of your way now,

Sandy

On the breakfast front, Bright Eyes may have beaten me to the punch, but her preparation of bacon and eggs was almost complete and when it was I would be free to do whatever I liked in the cooking department.

While I waited for her to finish, there was time to rummage through the pantry and fridge, building up the requisites necessary to redefine the hearty breakfast. There was also time to ponder the implications of Sandy's note.

Presumably Bernelle and Gloria had sheltered and possibly showered in the room they had found for the night. The fact they had remained on the premises rather than departing in high, medium or low dudgeon meant something, but I wasn't sure what it was.

Having become aware of unoccupied rooms there was a possibility that one or both would want to move in. Would that be a development to be encouraged?

A conference with Jeffrey was indicated, but of him there was no sign.

My thoughts returned to Bernelle and Gloria. Sandy had delivered them home on his way to work. Would they, in turn, be heading to work?

If they did, it was likely they would be engaged in tasks involving the delicate manipulation of scissors or other sharp implements.

If they were, and something nasty happened, could the liability for any damage to the customer be attributed to us? Was our third-party insurance comprehensive enough to cover such circumstances?

So many thorny questions, so few remaining brain cells...

As I continued gathering breakfast ingredients, I asked "And no sign of Jeffrey so far?"

"None at all," was Bright Eyes reply. "Someone rang looking for him just after eight, and I went down to see if he was up and about."

The thought crossed my mind that while he might well be up, there was little certainty as to exactly what he was about.

"The door was closed. I was about to check the handle when I heard voices, so I thought it was best to leave whoever was in there undisturbed."

“A wise move. *Discretion is the better part of Valerie, though all of her is nice.* So there was no one else left around the pool? There were a few sleeping beauties when I wandered off to bed.”

“None at all,” Bright Eyes replied between mouthfuls. “Sandy and Hopalong were up before I was.”

“Sandy’s note,” I pointed out, “indicates that there was no one left around the pool this morning, so I guess that they made their way home under their own steam somehow.”

These were matters that would need to be investigated, but first there was breakfast to be prepared. Those familiar with the works of Hunter S. Thompson would be familiar with the statement that *anyone with a terminally jangled lifestyle needs at least one psychic anchor every 24 hours, and mine is breakfast.*

My recent lifestyle, even if it wasn’t *terminally jangled*, certainly needed some sort of anchor.

Although I was missing some of Hunter’s preferred ingredients (it was too early to be indulging in Bloody Marys or margaritas and there was an absolute dearth of cocaine), sausages, a small steak, bacon and scrambled eggs washed down with a pot of coffee and a jug of Tabasco-laced tomato juice would be an acceptable substitute. I thought of adding grapefruit and decided against it.

There were half a dozen in the fridge, since Sandy’s other passion in life apart from Tabasco sauce and beer was the consumption of citrus.

He was obviously living in permanent fear of coming down with scurvy.

As I assembled the ingredients, sounds of footsteps outside the door signalled Jeffrey’s arrival, closely followed by the Terrible Twins. I was surprised to see them until I remembered both of them worked for the local paper and, with the second and last edition for the week produced and in circulation, the paper’s jills-of-all-trades were not going to be required on a Friday morning.

“Morning Jeffrey,” was my greeting as the party wandered in. “Morning Char. Morning Jools. Something for breakfast I assume? The stove will be in use for the next few minutes if you don’t mind waiting.”

“For me, I think,” Jeffrey suggested, “a cup of warm dripping for starters.”

The suggestion sent his companions hurtling outside.

Sounds of regurgitation filtered back.

I made a mental note to check the whereabouts of the deposits, so I could, if necessary, remove them with the hose. There was only a slight possibility that Sandy would be wanting fertiliser and anything being deposited outside would be rather acidic.

I made a further mental note to undertake a bit of research on the matter. The information was likely to be useful, since there was a fair likelihood of frequent tiger-parking in the greenery.

Shortly thereafter, the pair returned, looking marginally healthier.

Jeffrey remarked it was *probably better out than in*, a remark that almost sent them outside for a repeat performance. He took my place in the kitchen as I moved to the nearest table plate in hand.

While I hoed into the mountain before me, Jeffrey continued to do his best to cause the Terrible Twins to add further nutrients to the vegetation.

Eventually, with his culinary pursuits having reached their conclusion, the three of them joined me at the table.

The Twins refused all offers of solid nutrition, settling for frequent doses of black coffee.

Demand for coffee had been rather heavy that morning, We were according to Bright Eyes, on our fourth brew for the day. Of the Twins the taller, who travelled under the name of Charlene Sullivan, had gained some notoriety around town as *Charlene the Chardonnay Queen*, though requests for *Another Char for Char* indicated a need for another glass rather than another bottle.

“So,” I suggested, “that last call for *another bottle of Char for Char* may not have been the greatest idea in the history of Western civilization. The fourth bottle is rarely a sound concept.”

“It was five, actually,” Julie-Ann remarked. “I slipped in to pick up an extra to get us through the small hours while you were distracted by the two hairdressers.”

“In which case it might be just as well to check the supply level. I’m not sure how long it’ll be before reinforcements arrive from the Hunter, and it wouldn’t do to run out.”

Pleasantries flew back and forth until breakfast had been completed and Bright Eyes suggested that the Twins might be in need of a lift back into town.

Once they’d gone it was time to disperse the products of repeated distress, and with that out of the way, the next stage of the recuperative process was a retreat towards the bedroom. I planned to rise around noon, in time for a visit to town to buy the form guides, but the best laid plans of mice and men are inclined to go astray, as Burns so aptly put it.

I had barely put my head down when a barrage hit the door, followed by the dulcet tones of our janitor.

“Herston!” was the opening volley of the blast. “You awake? You’ll be wanting your room done?”

From further down the building Jeffrey added to the tumult.

“What’s going on out there? Is this a hog-calling competition or what? If it is a hog-calling competition, would you mind giving thought to shifting somewhere on the seaward side of Tierra del Fuego?”

By this stage, I’d reached the door. I had no option but to usher the hog-caller inside and conduct further negotiations indoors.

From the time when negotiations to buy our headquarters had started, I’d been aware the size of the premises, and the number of rooms involved would mean we’d be finding ourselves losing significant chunks of time if we decided to do the cleaning ourselves.

A cynic might be inclined to ascribe this conclusion to inherent laziness, but I was more concerned with relative efficiency. A professional would work quicker and smarter than an amateur.

One afternoon we'd been discussing the question at the Palace when we'd been joined by Daphne, the upstairs chambermaid. She was characteristically to the point.

"They tell me you pair are buying that motel out at The Crossroads. That's a big place, and it'll need a lot of cleaning."

I'd suggested since we'd only be using about half the rooms we'd probably only be needing someone to come in about once a week to clean the communal areas if we couldn't come up with some sort of roster involving the residents.

"Won't work," was Daphne's blunt assessment of the notion. "There'll be someone not pulling their weight and next thing you know there'll be arguments and all sorts of stuff. No, you want to get someone in to do it."

"Someone such as yourself?" I suggested.

"I could," was Daphne's response. "But there are issues."

"Usually are," was Jeffrey's observation on the matter.

"I mean if I work any more than one or two extra hours a week I'm up in the next tax bracket and I'll end up worse off. On the other hand, if I took payment in kind."

"It would depend on what kind of kind, you're talking about," Jeffrey pointed out. "I'm sure you'll find my rates quite reasonable." The remark was delivered with what can only be described as an evil leer.

"I'm not talking about that kind of kind," Daphne replied. "I could do it, or rather Marguerite and I could look after it."

Marguerite was her twenty-year-old daughter who'd been a surprise nonstarter at last night's party.

“Neither of us would mind looking after Marguerite once or twice a week. Right, Herston?”

While young Marguerite was exceedingly easy on the eye, I thought it was best to refrain from commenting. Daphne chose to ignore the suggestion.

“No,” she went on, “you could pay me in books. Sociology books.”

Daphne, after the departure of her husband with a much younger tomato-picking floozy had become bitter. She had, in the process of exorcising inner demons and reasserting the womanhood called into question by the elopement, fallen under the influence of the women’s movement.

A broadcast on Radio National discussing the sociological aspects of marital breakups involving older partners absconding with younger playmates of either sex had led her on a course of inquiry that ended with an enrolment at one of the nation’s universities as a mature-age correspondence student studying sociology.

Over the past few years, she had got her teeth into the subject.

She was now capable of sitting down and discussing the writings of C. Wright Mills, Marcuse and *the alienation inherent in postindustrial capitalist society* with the best of them.

So, after further negotiations, the matter was settled.

Daphne and Marguerite would pop by three times a week and do what needed to be done in the cleaning department. Marguerite would be paid in cash at the hourly rate and Daphne would present us with a list of sociological treatises every couple of months.

Having ushered Daphne indoors, I thought a little casual conversation would help bring the noise level down to a more suitable number of decibels.

“So,” I commented. “Didn’t spot you last night. Or Marguerite, for that matter. Pity. Could have saved you the trip...”

“No,” Daphne replied. “We were both home. We’re moving this weekend, and we had to stay at home since there were people coming around to look at buying the furniture.”

This willingness to redistribute the contents of her house every time Daphne moved had been widely remarked on. She seemed to feel, as a matter of principle, that a new address required a fresh set of furnishings, as the new address invariably had a different colour scheme to the previous abode.

This habit was, much appreciated by furniture showrooms who greeted Daphne with open arms whenever she walked in announcing that it was time to relocate from her current home.

Of course, new furniture could not be bought unless the old had been disposed of, so a change of residence on Daphne's part was music to the ears of those who needed items to finish outfitting their home. The frequency of relocations meant such items came into the *very slightly used* category.

Jeffrey, as I recall, needing a table for his room at the Palace had once bought a kitchen table off her for sixty dollars and a head job. The price of a lounge suite, I had often thought, was something best left to the imagination.

Once I'd pointed out that any cleaning in my living quarters would be best left until I'd finished filling the shelves and I expected the process to last until Monday, or Wednesday at the latest, Daphne's interest turned to the sociological questions associated with our travels.

Questioning concerning the relative status of racial groups in Los Angeles, or any evidence of a rise in the socio-economic status of Afro-Americans in the Deep South (remembering New Orleans was a more liberal area than, say the heartland of Alabama or Mississippi) showed her sociological enquiries had not ground to a halt in our absence.

A lengthy discussion ensued, and, eventually when it seemed the questions had been covered in sufficient depth I indicated I still needed a couple of hours' rest.

“So you won't be needing me?”

“Not in here, at any rate. Not until Monday, maybe Wednesday. If you wouldn't mind hosing down the area around the pool and giving the restaurant a quick once-over...”

“Shouldn’t even take an hour,” Daphne pointed out. “So that’d be all?”

The small matter of important business that would need to be conducted before the morning flashed across my mind.

“Pretty much. Unless you wouldn’t mind popping into town and calling in to Richie at the newsagent to pick up the papers. That would be helpful.”

Apart from the latest issue of the *Sleepy Hollow Sausage Wrapper* such a journey would bring back the form guides which I knew were going to be needed for Saturday’s punting activities.

“Travelling time to and from at the regular hourly rate?” Daphne was an experienced negotiator who invariably drove a hard bargain.

“Of course,” was my response. “It saddens me that you felt it necessary to ask.”

“Done,” Daphne replied as she headed in the general direction of the hose.

“You certainly have been,” was my parting thought as I closed the door and turned towards the bed.

Another Friday Night

Once I'd returned to the cot the next few hours passed without incident. It was slightly after three-thirty when I managed to resurface, considerably freshened, and more or less ready for action. I found copies of all the form guides available at the newsagency propped against the door, and took a preliminary skim through the fields.

A shower added further freshness to the frame, then I sat down and took a more thorough look. About four thirty Jeffrey arrived on the scene, intimating Sandy was back from work, Hopalong was in the process of hurling himself at the shower, and it was almost time for a visit to the Palace.

A quarter of an hour later, Bright Eyes was at the wheel of the red chariot, and we were reversing out of the car park.

It was around ten to five when we entered the premises to find our favoured spot boasted a sign indicating the space was *Reserved. Herston/Jeffrey Gentlemen's Club and Guests.*

Directly in front of the sign, there were four bar stools, each sporting an item of headgear to indicate they were not available for use by the public. I recognized one of my old cricket caps, a beret used by Jeffrey during his dishwashing career, a stylish Panama that had frequently been sighted on Sandy's scalp and a cardboard cowboy hat.

“Nice touch, isn't it?” remarked Sandy. “When His Lordship asked me to grab things to put on the seats we couldn't find anything for this bloke, but I thought the cowboy hat would go with the name, so I headed to the toy shop and bought one.”

The cricket cap adorned the barstool closest to the Quick Service railing, my preferred position since it provided sight lines covering the entrance to the public bar and the door through which we had entered.

Seated there, I'd be able to monitor all entrances, an ability which experience had shown to be useful.

There was the added benefit of being able to chat to those using the Quick Service area, although once the attention was directed that way the doors were no longer in the eye line.

As soon as we were seated, His Lordship hove into view, descending from the living quarters. I had the impression he'd been scanning the horizon for distinctive vehicles.

"Herston, Jeffrey, Good to see you back," was the greeting.

"By way of a *Welcome back* it's my shout for the first round. The usual all round?"

The greeting had obviously aroused Jeffrey's cynical streak, and as the landlord departed to deliver the preferred potables, Jeffrey addressed the gathering.

"From which we can presume that the takings have been down over the past few weeks. Correct?"

His Lordship had considerable expenses to meet in the process of maintaining his children in the style to which they had become accustomed. There was also the matter of The Duchess and associated extravagant tastes.

"At first, yes," Sandy replied. "Once you pair headed off, things certainly seemed quieter. Not that I've had the opportunity to check the books, mind you. It certainly seemed quieter."

"On the other hand," Hopalong stated, "things have picked up over the past couple of Fridays. Not that it's likely to have anything to do with you bastards, of course. The farms have started picking, the parents have paid the back-to-school expenses, Easter's out of the way so you'd be expecting things to pick up around now."

His Lordship had, by this stage, returned to the area, bearing three brimming beakers of beer and a distinctive blue tin. I thanked him for the beer, and for the foresight in reserving the area for us.

“I won’t be able to do it every day, of course. Even on a Friday there’s a chance there’ll be someone here at lunch time who decides to stay for the afternoon. Won’t happen that often, but I’ll make sure once the area’s clear after lunch the hats go on the stools and the sign goes on the bar. Betty’s started a pasta night on Wednesdays, so if you’re planning to roll up for that...”

“Sounds good to me,” I replied. “What do you fellas reckon?”

There was general agreement Wednesday nights would find us partaking of the pasta.

“If we’re not likely to lob for some reason, a phone call to indicate the change of plans would give you a chance to rearrange things. If we’re on our way down some other day, we can call ahead.”

“Not a problem.”

The arrangements would do something to allay any concerns His Lordship might have had about his cash flow.

“Hopalong tells us,” I went on, “that business has been on the up since the end of The Slack. An accurate assessment, or evidence that excessive scoffing has clouded the bastard’s judgement?”

“Well,” His Lordship started, adopting his most diplomatic tone, “The Slack certainly has been worse than usual this year.”

The Slack is the couple of months between New Year’s Day and Easter when the town’s economy was affected by inactivity in the horticultural sector, a period that coincides with the start of the school year and the arrival of the biannual rate notice from the council, so business activity tends to be slow until Easter.

“Easter was late this year, so people who use that as a yardstick for when they can start spending again would’ve been affected by that, but things have picked up

over the last fortnight or so. More or less since the news that you pair were on your way back.”

“Which the well-known scoffer has been inclined to dismiss as contributing to the economic upturn.”

“As he would. On the other hand, he hadn't been fielding the number of questions I've been asked about *when those two mad bastards were likely to be on their way home* and what was likely to be happening at The Crossroads. I pointed most of them in his direction, but since he's been living out there rather than just down the road he's only been dropping in a couple of times a week, and when he has turned up, there've been plenty of people pumping him and Sandy for information.”

“The people who've been asking?” Jeffrey inquired. “They've been.”

“Largely female, unattached and interested in your long-term plans. Most got the standard response. As far as I knew you were going to be using the motel as a home rather than operating it as a business, and if they wanted to know more than that they'd need to be directing their questions towards the people who were doing the renovations and the landscaping. The ones who seemed interested in pursuing the matter seemed to be thinking about ways they can benefit from your.”

“Largesse,” I suggested. “Tell me about it. There were a great wing of 'em at the Welcome Home Surprise Party last night.”

“Some of the discussions while they were waiting for someone to take them out to your place were interesting. It might look like it's an out-of-the-way spot for a quiet drink and a discreet conversation, but when the wind's blowing in the right direction, which it was yesterday afternoon, if you're sitting in the office you can hear every word that's uttered in that corner.”

He indicated a spot to our left favoured by those with a disinclination to have conversations monitored. Jeffrey suggested the phenomenon had as much to do with the idiosyncrasies of the building's structure as it did with the prevailing breeze, and there had been times when he'd been able to use his observations to advantage.

“You know what it’s like. You’re sitting here, and you see someone tilt the head in your direction while they’re talking. You get the impression that they’re talking about you, and you’re wondering what they’re saying? Well, if they’re over there...”

A nod of the head indicated the area under discussion, next to a passageway leading to the kitchen, the cold-rooms and the back way to the door that provided access to the accommodation upstairs.

“They probably reckon they can see if there’s anyone coming, so if you don’t want to be overheard, you’d expect that’d be the spot for a discreet conversation. Right?”

There was general agreement this would have been a reasonable conclusion.

“They can’t see anyone coming and going from the office either. Not unless they’re heading towards the kitchen or coming through here. On the other hand if you’ve got an excuse to go ‘round the public bar and wander into the office that way.”

“You can hear every word they’re saying,” His Lordship pointed out.

“And the relevant discussions yesterday afternoon?” I asked.

“Were concerned with whether either or both of you were likely to settle down and whether...”

“I get the picture. You don’t need to go any further. On the other hand, if you wouldn’t mind giving us a quiet word when someone who’s been thinking that way starts getting too close.”

“I know which side my bread’s buttered on. Anyway, how was the trip?”

By this stage, jaded by the need to repeat the details to every acquaintance we met, I had the details reduced to about a minute of solid information. Once those had been glossed over I was able to ask about developments on the local front.

A series of snorts and peacock calls behind me warned me of the approach of the Fringed Warbler, another former colleague, who had entered the building

through the tradesman's entrance, passing through the area we'd been discussing as the preferred option for seemingly secure discreet discussions.

The Warbler had been involved with setting up the challenge match on our new field between the local representative team and a group of assorted cricketing lunatics sponsored by a prominent Townsville accommodation facility.

Before I arrived in Denison I'd been involved with this outfit, which comprised players from Townsville whose club loyalties prevented them from playing together in the regular season, but combined to participate in charity matches and social events in the off season.

A loose sponsorship with the accommodation facility gave them access to a courtesy bus and sponsored playing shirts. The playing roster varied, based on work commitments, matrimonial obligations, the state of the player's liver and who was talking to who at the time when the team list was being assembled.

Their excursions were legendary, alcohol-fuelled affairs that went into overdrive when they boarded the bus, continued apace through the cricket, golf, fishing or other drink-friendly activities and only scaled down when the bus finally dropped individual players home on the Sunday.

On one excursion, I had been looking after the score book when someone in the vicinity remarked the boys *obviously liked a drop or three on a hot day*. I'd replied they were to a man, *one of the most dedicated collections of dipsomaniacs that it had been my good fortune to meet*.

I made the remark within earshot of one whose status as the team drunk in a collection of noted drinkers had never been in question.

I was scarcely finished before he was demanding to know what *dipsomaniac* meant. Over the next few months references to *that big word that Herston called us* had become so common the term had been adopted as the unofficial team nickname, used on a range of touring shirts, though sponsorship and access to the courtesy bus meant that Dipsomaniacs never became the official name.

The Warbler reported the Dipsos had been in contact, and arrangements were well under way. Michael Brooks, captain of the local team, a noted dipsomaniac

himself, had been looking after the playing side of things while the Warbler set up the accommodation and catering arrangements.

The need to liaise with His Lordship and The Duchess accounted for his use of the tradesman's entrance.

The Duchess's ideas about catering belong to the days when Lords of the Realm roasted whole bullocks on spits and guests rode in by the battalion with spurs on as villagers danced on the green beside the duck pond while wine seeped out through the windows and collected in colourful puddles in the gutters.

His Lordship could hardly be described as niggardly, but, at the same time, he was no feudal aristocrat and in our absence takings had been down considerably.

His Lordship assured me this would not be a problem since he'd undertaken to provide liquid requirements. At \$2 per tin, if that price wasn't enough to cover the cost of the catering, everyone involved might as well join the Temperance League.

"In any case, the boys are camping in the old movie theatre next door. The same arrangement as we use for the Crustaceans Classic at the start of the football season, so we've already got mattresses and that sort of stuff. They'll be doing most of their drinking here, and from their reputation."

Knowing the size of their collective thirsts I was forced to agree that he was probably right.

"On top of that I'm thinking of a perpetual trophy and an annual home and away challenge."

"They're not too keen on the home side of things. An annual grudge match down here should be a nice little earner for you, though. I'd hold my horses until I had a better idea of what I was in for before I committed myself to any long-term arrangements if I were you."

His Lordship's suggestion that after dealing with the Crustaceans in full play mode, anything else was going to be a cakewalk suggested he was in for a surprise.

"You're saying that these Dipsomaniacs are worse than the Crustaceans in party mode?"

Raised eyebrows all around suggested a degree of scepticism.

“Well, maybe not *worse*. But different. Definitely different.”

As the Warbler headed off to an appointment with the fish shop, the side door opened and Michael Brooks vaulted in, full of complimentary remarks about the attractiveness of the bar staff and enquiries about liquid refreshment.

With that attended to, he turned to Jeffrey and I, with questions about attempts to assuage the lusts of the flesh. Not that enquiries were worded so diplomatically.

He looked me straight in the eye, raised an interrogatory eyebrow and asked, “Any *rooting* on the trip?”

It was a question I had anticipated.

“A little,” was my response. “Though I suspect you’d be inclined to call it a lot.”

On meeting Mr Brooks, there is only one tactic to adopt, which could be fairly described as *Sledge, sledge and sledge again*, since you can expect that he’ll be applying the same principle towards anybody, present or not, whom he considers a worthy target.

An evening on the grog with Brooksy is an interesting intellectual exercise, with participants on their toes as they attempt to get a shot in at any available target while maintaining a strong defensive position.

He turned towards Jeffrey. “And yourself, Mr Jeffrey? Got a shot or two away I presume? A lady of the night here and there?”

“Well,” I interposed, “maybe not the *night*. But *definitely* the late afternoon.”

“No doubt. And how were they, those big black barefoot mamas with looby lips, and hairy armpits? Average weight a humping hundred and fifty kilos and counting?”

“Fine,” Jeffrey replied. “They said to send you their regards, and hope that the shots turned out OK. Betty Lou, in particular, asked to be remembered to you. Said to tell you that the course of injections did the trick and hoped that the spots had cleared up nicely.”

“Actually,” I cut in, “they didn’t quite fit into the demographic you described.”

“You mean that they weren’t big black barefoot mamas with looby lips and hairy armpits? Wonders will never cease!”

“You were right on the money in most regards,” I suggested, “except for one minor detail.”

“Which was?”

“Most of them,” Jeffrey pointed out, “were wearing shoes.”

As the bar filled, with many of the previous night's participants fronting for a return bout with the demon drink it was obvious we were in for a session.

Friday night is also raffle night for the nation's football clubs, and sponsorship arrangements His Lordship had with the rugby team granted the Crustaceans the right to conduct raffles on the premises.

Six thirty saw start of the happy hour and the emergence of the Crustaceans' ticket sellers led by the treasurer and the captain, Mad Mick. As they approached, Sandy and Hopalong suggested it might be wise to invest heavily since there were meat and seafood trays on offer, the freezer at home was empty, and success in the raffle would negate the need to visit the butcher and fish monger on Saturday morning.

With the sellers gone, Brooksy resumed his account of the latest developments on the cricket front and the makeup of the eleven to take on the Dipsomaniacs.

I listened, keeping an eye on both doors, and sighting Bernelle and Gloria as they entered after a hard day’s hairdressing.

The crowd around us meant that they were forced to seek the Quick Service area first, and, drinks in hand, work their way into the crowd.

By the time the Crustaceans were about to draw the goose club, Bernelle had succeeded in infiltrating her way to my side.

One by one, prizes were drawn, and though there were the occasional shouts of jubilation from the side bar, most of the prizes went to the public bar, where an

uncanny and disproportionate number went to members of the Crustaceans First XV.

As the board listing the winners entered the side bar, held up by Satellite, the line-out expert almost permanently in outer space, I noticed that, although there were a dozen names on the board, certain names were noticeably absent, despite the substantial investment we had made.

Noting our lack of success, I suggested that since the Lotto I seemed to have been unable to win a thing. It was an exaggeration, of course. I'd made a number of successful investments in the meantime, but present company would have been unaware of them, and the line seemed to fit.

“You've won me,” came a voice beside me. “Doesn't that count as something?”

I was surprised, to say the least, at this unexpected development.

On an adjacent stool, Hopalong was equally surprised.

“This, would be a recent development? What can inquiring minds ascribe the situation to? His wit? His charming urbanity? His...”

“Musical taste, for a start. Ever since I was in Year Five I've thought that Mr Herston was one of the coolest people around, and now...”

There was a pause while Bernelle regained her composure in the wake of a Hopalong Cassidy beer-splutter. She turned in my direction as much to shield herself from further flying spray as to continue the conversation.

“You remember, back in Year Five when you used to go across the road from school at lunchtime and come back with a couple of records?”

I nodded.

The electrical store across the road boasted a music department run by one of the few attractive female Music Freaks I've met, and her musical development was more than matched in physical dimensions. Not that I was likely to be pointing that out in present company, you understand.

“You remember that every time you came back through the gate there were a couple of us wanting to know what you’d bought this time?”

I nodded, though the recollection was nothing more than an extremely hazy memory.

“I think it was Sharon who noticed that just about everything you bought had got rave reviews in her brother’s music magazines.”

Sharon Graham was one of Bernelle’s classmates whose brother frequented the places where I bought most of my music. He was an avid reader of music papers on offer in Townsville’s premier niche newsagent.

“Really?”

I wasn’t surprised but the fact that the recollection endured was unexpected.

“Yes, After you’d shown us one of those new disks, Sharon was at home flicking through this magazine, she didn’t like her brother’s music or anything, she was just looking at it for something to do while she was waiting for dinner, and there it was. *Cult album of the week*, or something. Of course, when she told us about it none of us would believe it, so she had to bring the magazine to school.”

I recalled wondering what a ten-year-old girl was doing with a copy of ***New Musical Express*** at school.

“After that, whenever you showed us what you’d just bought we’d go around to Sharon’s on the way home and check it out. They always got rave reviews.”

“You mean,” Hopalong interjected, “that you were in this bastard’s class at school? Strange. I thought you looked relatively normal, not someone who’s been scarred for life...”

“He was a cool teacher, Always telling jokes and stuff. Remember when I was in Year Seven and Miss Clarkson had us writing staff profiles for the Year Seven magazine? Remember all the kids who came up to you for information?”

“Vaguely,” I admitted. “It was a while ago.”

“Well,” she turned towards Hopalong, “we were asking the usual stuff, you know, favourite colour, last record you bought, favourite band. There must have been twenty of us. Went up to him on playground duty with the clipboard like good little reporters. When we sat down and compared his answers, every one of them was different. We thought it was so cool”

By eight-thirty, the session was in full swing as His Lordship's consort appeared on the staircase leading upstairs. The appearance was staged with an extravagance which was perhaps more appropriate to Hollywood than to Denison.

The conclusion of her supervision of the kitchen after last meal orders had been taken at seven-thirty would have been the signal for an escape via the back stairs into her conjugal apartment, a quick shower and the selection of a suitable ensemble before her emergence at the top of the stairs.

As she descended guests were greeted, enquiries made as to the suitability and quantity of their meals, and opinions about outfits worn by the ladies expressed. At no time during the descent were Jeffrey and I mentioned, though as she crossed the floor towards the bar, The Duchess was moving in our direction.

Once she had received her favoured *little glass of bubbles* from her consort, she turned in our direction inquired whether all was well with the two of us, and asked how the trip had been.

He'd had enough opportunities to polish his repertoire and find which stories provoked the best reactions, so Jeffrey delivered his version of events, with élan.

As one anecdote followed another, the narrator was regarded with the sort of haughty disdain usually associated with something unsavoury that has been found on the underside of one's shoe.

Once the report had been delivered, His Lordship was directed to refill the glasses all round, and The Duchess moved off to chat to those members of the community who rated higher on the social scale than we did. As she moved away, Bernelle and I were wedged into the intersection of the bar and the Quick Service railing beside the cash register.

Early in my career, I realized the importance of obtaining and holding a good position at the bar. Personal experience proves there are definite areas where it is difficult to get a drink on Friday nights. On the other hand, seated beside the cash register, remove the empty from its holder, place it label outwards on the bar, and the bar staff have no difficulty knowing when further refreshment is required.

The proximity of the cash register to the Quick Service area meant one of the bar staff is always likely to be on hand when you require a refill.

The location has the added attraction that it provides a view across most of the public bar, much of the private bar, both television sets and most entrances to the building. Many a session had been spent there watching a combination of the races and the cricket, or the races and the football on a Saturday afternoon.

On a Friday night, as I knew from experience, this was the spot to be to keep an overall eye on developments.

Bernelle was filling in details of her old classmates' current activities. Hopalong was listening, intrigued by the turn events had taken.

There were interruptions from the Quick Service area as some acquaintance negotiated a refill, but I was content to give Bernelle a free run with the narrative, adding a comment or reminiscence here and there and surveying the scene.

Sandy, on the edge of the circle, was conversing with a couple of colleagues and their partners.

Jeffrey was chatting up the Terrible Twins.

Although you couldn't hear the whole of the conversation, with some effort it was possible to pick the odd word out of the hubbub. His back was to the door, he was obviously getting on very well with the Twins, and a betting man might have taken very short odds that a little *menage a trois* was a distinct possibility, even as a short term arrangement.

Jeffrey's position meant he couldn't see anyone coming through the door, which opened and a shortish blonde in her early to middle forties entered.

Although the face was unfamiliar, the fact she was obviously in search of somebody meant I kept my eye on her. Most people who'd walked in through the door had been at least vaguely familiar. I wondered who the stranger was looking for.

The Thick Plotten

As usual for a Friday evening at the Palace, with the bar packed, anyone arriving would have had difficulty picking an individual out of the crowd milling around the bar. Unless, of course, they had a height advantage.

As she stood just inside the door, the new arrival was looking for someone.

Whoever she was looking for was likely to be in the area we were occupying since the public bar and the area running through to the Dining Room received scant attention. There was an appearance of concern on her face. Then, it seemed she spied the back of Jeffrey's head since she immediately started to move towards him. From my vantage point, I could see everything.

After all, I had a height advantage.

It was obvious, from the evil glint in his eyes that Jeffrey's negotiations with the Terrible Twins were about to develop into some little excursion into the realms of kinky sex. Suddenly he was interrupted by a tap on the right shoulder.

As he turned a look of horror crossed his face.

He recognized the newcomer just before her arms went around his neck in a greeting which suggested great affection coupled with gratitude at being reunited after a long separation.

The Twins did not appear to be amused.

Bernelle had her back to the door, unaware of what was happening.

As I smiled, watching the dismay on Jeffrey's face, and the resentment from the Twins as competition emerged on the horizon, she asked what I found amusing.

You can imagine my reaction when, after I had described the interloper, she suggested, "Oh, that's Mum. She's OK."

I looked around in search of a feather with which someone could knock me down.

So the scene was set, and as the night went on, under the influence of alcohol scruples associated with my former profession were going to have to go. I was in a situation where an attractive female over the age of consent was thrusting herself in my direction.

She seemed to have one thing on her mind, and that seemed to be establishing a physical relationship at the earliest possible opportunity.

Every time I raised my left arm to lift my drink, my forearm had occasion to brush against Bernelle's ample frontal endowment. Not that she seemed to mind in the least. When I realized what was happening and changed to the other hand, she seemed put out.

Or at least perfectly prepared to put out.

As the liquids flowed, and the crowd began to thin, some degree of movement became possible. Bernelle, having spent a couple of hours demolishing those brightly coloured alcopops that seem to be all the rage with the younger female, needed to visit the Ladies'.

She checked I was not going anywhere in a hurry, and promised to be back as soon as possible.

As she headed away a familiar voice behind me expressed a view that things were not heading in an appropriate direction, and I turned to find Jeffrey in for a Quick Service.

Mother and daughter had departed in the same direction.

With a fresh tin, he moved into the spot recently vacated, advising me as to the current state of play. Bernelle's mother, whose name was Olga, was of eastern European extraction. She was someone with whom he'd enjoyed a brief encounter just before I arrived in town.

Reading between the lines, there had been a relationship developing, but before an arrangement had been formalised, Olga had attempted to reshape Jeffrey into something approaching the suburban family man.

A single suggestion along those lines would have brought the relationship to an abrupt end.

As Bernelle emerged from the Ladies, I checked to see if he was aware of the relationship between her and Olga. The news caused a raised eyebrow and a suggestion that developments were *very interesting*.

“But not funny,” I added, quoting the old ***Laugh In*** line.

Jeffrey weaved his way back into the crowd as Bernelle resumed her position. It might have been my imagination, but despite the thinning of the crowd she seemed to be moving even closer.

Absence had, it seemed, made the heart grow fonder.

There were, however, questions to be asked and details which needed to be filled in.

When she had been in my class in Townsville, her parents were separating.

I recalled something about it, although it had not been of particular concern at the time, since the kid did not seem to be overly traumatised by the process.

That may have had something to do with the fact that Dad, a prominent real estate salesman, was affluent and indulgent with it. Given the fact there had been no visible impact on school work or behaviour, I probably figured the details were no business of mine.

Following the split, Olga had moved to Denison, in an attempt to establish a new relationship, and stayed after it folded.

By mutual agreement Bernelle remained in Townsville in her father’s custody since a change of residence would have an adverse effect on her schooling, and she *was doing so well with Mr Herston*. Those arrangements continued until Dad had met up with someone who did not fancy acquiring a ready-made daughter.

Once that happened Bernelle had been shipped off to Mum in Denison.

That brought her into town a year or two after me. I had remarked at the time that there was a kid around town who bore a striking resemblance to a past pupil and subsequently discovered it was the same kid.

Her arrival came after Jeffrey's brief encounter with Olga.

As closing time approached, we were forced to consider the options for the rest of the night.

One possibility involved moving to a cocktail bar where some singer/guitarist would be serenading the masses with a selection of songs that neither rocked nor possessed anything approaching balls.

The venue's location on the other side of the town was a disadvantage.

Transport was going to be a problem since there seemed to be about twenty people in the party around us. Bright Eyes was going to be a busy girl.

Apart from the question of transport and the lack of anything reasonable in the way of music, the venue was smaller than the side bar at the Palace and would almost certainly be packed wall to wall. Several of the crowd planned to move there and asked whether my plans involved heading in that direction, probably hoping to bludge a lift when the time came.

The other possibility was to head home, but we'd need to shed Olga if Jeffrey's intentions were going to reach sexual fruition. At least if we were to move across town, there'd be opportunities to break the crowd up.

We were about to call Bright Eyes to start the ferry service when His Lordship announced that he had negotiated an extension of trading hours.

There was, therefore, no immediate need to either panic or leave the premises since the extension would keep the Palace doors open for another two hours.

Since His Lordship liked a good night's sleep before his punting activities on Saturday, he usually felt no need to keep his doors open past ten o'clock.

The extension was obviously intended to maximise opportunities for friends to catch up with us. The arrangement would have nothing to do with any decline in profits during our absence.

While it gave us time to manoeuvre, the change still left us with the problem of what to do afterwards, and where to do it. It was obvious most of the people around us planned to party on. Rule the cross town venue out of contention and there was no other viable option which would accommodate the people who were with us, and seemingly planning to stay that way.

A little party at The Crossroads was inevitable, but it would have been rude to have departed too far ahead of the revised *Last Drinks*.

There was one fly in the ointment.

While His Lordship had made arrangements with the appropriate authorities, he'd neglected to advise a curvaceous chauffeur, who'd spent the previous four hours working on an assignment, of the changed arrangements.

Bright Eyes strolled in, obviously expecting to collect assorted degenerates *en route* to wherever they were going, just after ten.

At that point, under normal circumstances, the bar would have already closed. While she was willing to accept a soft drink to fill in the time needed to finish the current round, beyond that point it was a choice of using her services or letting her head back to base and joining the queue for a taxi.

Given the fact that there was a queue waiting for cabs, it was a no-brainer.

There were at least a dozen people around us looking to head to wherever the party was continuing, so it seemed logical that Sandy, Hopalong and a couple of others would head back to get things moving, then Bright Eyes could gradually move the rest of the crew in the same direction.

While His Lordship would not have been happy to see the crowd break up it wasn't going to come to an immediate stop.

Half a dozen cartons of beer, assorted bottles of spirits and several bags of ice would take the edge off his disappointment.

Sandy and Hopalong collected the replenishments for home supplies, which had been seriously depleted, placed them in the boot of the chariot and prepared to depart once the ice had been handed over.

Acknowledged masters of esky-stacking, they needed to be in the first carload.

Fortunately, the departure of vehicles parked outside the front door left space for Bright Eyes, so the supplies did not have far to go. Sandy climbed into the front seat while Hopalong climbed into the back, and all that remained before the first shipment headed off was the small matter of packing three or four more people into the back.

I planned to go in the second group since once the eskies had been restocked, someone would have to start the music, and that was my department.

With Hopalong, Dagwood and Blondie in the back seat there was a space that no one seemed inclined to fill. Executive decisions needed to be made.

“Change of plans,” I said to Bernelle. “Since there’s a space here I’ll head back and crank the stereo up. You can come in the next lot.”

Someone was less than impressed.

Once I’d made my way into the back seat I found her squeezing in. A place on the seat was out of the question, so she solved the problem by sitting on my lap.

As Bernelle’s *derriere* found its location, my right arm was trapped underneath it. The movement coincided with the vehicle’s departure from the kerb, so I felt obliged to relocate the arm, a matter that possessed a degree of difficulty in the gold medal range,

Matters were complicated by the minor fact that the arm’s position was not bringing serious discomfort, although the need to maintain a flow of blood to the fingers meant that I was obliged to rotate the wrist slightly as we sped towards base, which could have been a factor contributing to evident reluctance to allow the arm to be relocated.

After we'd decanted ourselves from the chariot back at base, I stood flexing the wrist to restore the circulation while Sandy and Hopalong unloaded the boot and took care of the stacking of the eskies.

The bags of ice we'd obtained from His Lordship were never going to be enough to chill the entire stock. Sandy and Hopalong made up the shortfall from the ice machine on the premises. Buying ice from the Palace had been a matter of politeness rather than necessity, and with esky-stacking under way, it was time to crank the sound system into overdrive.

I headed towards the sound system with Bernelle who seemed interested in learning the finer details of my musical tastes and establishing through and through familiarity with some of the ins and outs of anatomy along the way.

After a brief grapple, we remembered the reason we were in the room.

A selection of discs was placed in the CD changer. The volume went up to a level that should satisfy partygoers as they filtered onto the premises.

The volume level had the advantage of being loud enough drown out the noise of events unfolding in my quarters, and so, my responsibilities fulfilled, we settled in for a very interesting grope session.

We had, I figured, thirty minutes before the transfer of the crowd waiting at the Palace would be anywhere near complete.

There was every possibility that, given the nature of the ferrying process, the absence of a couple of people might pass unnoticed.

I had thought of indicating we did not want to be disturbed, but decided against it. A sign on the door, even if it didn't explicitly advertise events, would at least attract attention.

The disks in the changer should keep the party going for a couple of hours, so with the preliminaries over, we were ready for the main bout, and the real business at hand was about to start.

We were poised over the bed, hands engaged in a preliminary examination of each other's salient points with a slight push needed to tip the pair of us over the brink into an abyss of sexual degeneracy when the door opened.

Just as it was getting interesting.

One of nature's gentlemen, Sandy would have found the situation extremely embarrassing.

He explained he'd been looking for me with news I might find amusing.

Since I had been seen heading this way he'd been knocking on the music room's door. Having received no reply he thought he'd check my living quarters before looking elsewhere.

I might, after all, have crashed.

The explanation seemed reasonable.

Recent form suggested the fixture had been deferred rather than cancelled, so a minor interruption was forgivable.

Bernelle excused herself, moving towards the bathroom.

Sandy, once he'd apologized, went on to relate a tale of great interest.

The second load from the Palace had included Jeffrey, the Terrible Twins and Olga.

“Which would have created an interesting atmosphere on the journey out.”

I'd picked up enough of the pre-Olga conversation at the pub to have a fair idea of Jeffrey's intentions as far as the Twins were concerned. I wondered whether those intentions would be flexible enough to include a fourth player.

If that was the case, would Olga be inclined to share nicely?

No, I thought to myself, *she's going to want a monopoly.*

It wasn't an unexpected turn of events, but I failed to see how it warranted the interruption.

“But wait,” Sandy pointed out. “There's more.”

The suspicion that *more* might well concern details of her mother's behaviour a daughter might prefer not to know about may have prompted Bernelle's departure for the bathroom.

"Anyway, there you are. Each new load of passengers from the Palace adds a few more players in the background, but they're just the backdrop to the unfolding tug-of-war. Jeffrey's obviously got one thing on his mind.."

"Which would involve a certain room's king-size bed, but would not entail sleeping?" I guessed.

"Entail? Nice word, that. Definitely a bit of tail on his mind. The question is whose tail it's going to be."

"The Twins seem capable of working together for their mutual benefit. Would I be right in suggesting that Olga would be more interested in sole possession?"

"That's the way it looks. On the other hand, Olga seems to be indulging in an interesting variation on the old *Induce Jealousy* strategy. You know, the one where they attempt to attract your attention by flirting outrageously with someone else. She seems to be trying to attract Jeffrey's attention by playing up to Hopalong."

In the bathroom, I heard a flushing toilet.

"Anyway," Sandy concluded, "I thought that you needed to be kept abreast of developments. I didn't expect you to be otherwise occupied..."

As Bernelle emerged, Sandy turned to go.

"We'll be out shortly and won't be needing further updates unless something really drastic happens."

I was already making mental notes to ensure doors were locked and chained as soon as humanly possible.

"Updates on what?" Bernelle asked as Sandy disappeared.

"Your mother seems to be harbouring certain intentions as far as Mr Jeffrey is concerned."

“They had something going a couple of years back,” Bernelle pointed out.
“You know that.”

“Indeed, and it seems like she’s decided to make up for lost time. Unfortunately, Jeffrey’s intentions are directed towards the other two. Tell me, do you think your mother would be into foursomes? You know, one bloke and three women?”

“I doubt it. She’s pretty straight when it comes to things like that.”

“Which is what I figured. So according to Sandy she’s attempting to reestablish her territorial rights by flirting outrageously with Hopalong Cassidy.”

“I don’t believe you. I’d better go out and have a look to make sure that she’s all right, though.”

Once she’d decided things needed to be investigated plans to ensure all doors in the vicinity were locked found themselves shelved.

Whether this was a temporary or indefinite deferment remained to be seen.

Outside it was obvious things were as Sandy had suggested. It was clear Jeffrey wanted to elope with the Twins. Familiarity with the gentleman and his expressed proclivities suggested he had dreamt up a number of gymnastic possibilities for trios which he was keen to explore. Olga, on the other hand, seemed determined to resume the interrupted relationship.

The Twins were making *Let's go* noises, Jeffrey seemed poised to fly to the coop and Olga, from what I could see, was doing her best to delay the departure.

Hopalong, whose inebriation had presumably inflated his ambitions, along with other areas of his anatomy seemed to be suggesting Olga would be better served by looking in other directions.

Peyton Place, I thought, *had very little on this.*

The hour was late and the quantity of beer I had consumed meant as far as I was concerned there was no alternative but to head straight towards the red.

As we stood on the edge of the party, I’d suggested the possibility.

The response suggested that *a glass of white wine might be nice, perhaps in a tall glass with lots of ice and maybe just a little bit of lemonade.*

I shuddered.

There was no way I was going to subject the contents of any decent bottle to treatment like that, but there was a cask of white in the fridge with *Riesling* on the exterior.

That would do for the moment, though serious tastebud adjustments would have to be made if Bernelle planned on becoming a permanent fixture on the premises.

Once I had prepared the concoction and returned, I settled back to watch.

The Twins had apparently decided to play a waiting game, figuring they could outlast the competition. Having watched them in action, I suspected they'd be odds on to outlast any but the hardest party animal.

They'd switched to glasses of soda water while they waited for the competition to fold.

The competition had decided to throw herself down the path of conspicuous alcoholic consumption while simultaneously doing her best to engage Jeffrey and Hopalong in conversation. I'd brought the bottle of red outside with me, and when Bernelle finished the glass of concoction I offered to prepare another.

The suggestion produced a response that I *didn't put in enough lemonade last time*, so someone *might go inside and make one for myself*. I suggested mixing the ingredients in a jug might cut out the need to travel back and forth.

As Bernelle headed inside Sandy and I analysed the situation.

Machiavellian intrigues are apt to come unstuck in their own intricacies and so it was in this case.

Hopalong was putting in plenty of work, and Olga's reactions to the attention, while intended to arouse Jeffrey's jealousy, merely allowed him the opportunity to establish eye contact with the Twins.

While her attention was distracted and Bernelle was out of the way, subtle hand signals followed by a thumbs up resulted in the Twins moving off, bidding the company goodnight, allegedly intending to crash in Room Ten.

A few minutes later, the discovery that his tin was empty gave Jeffrey an excuse to disappear for a refill.

His absence resulted in a marked decrease in Olga's flirtation with Mr Cassidy. He appeared put out when she suggested it might be *about time for you to hop along to bed*, but hop along he did.

Once he was gone, confident that she had outstayed the opposition, Olga sat back awaiting an event which, predictably, failed to happen.

I glimpsed a furtive figure as it moved out of the bar towards Room Four. When the figure arrived at the door, it opened, as if by magic, and closed silently.

It took several minutes for Olga to realise what had occurred.

Although Bernelle had returned, it was obviously not a good idea to suggest it was time to head off since that would result in Olga's premature departure in search of Jeffrey.

Eventually, Olga was forced to ask whether Bernelle had sighted Jeffrey during her travels. The answer was negative.

"In that case," Olga slurred, "it might be best if I went to have a look. Maybe he's fallen over. By the way, which is his room?"

I waved in the general direction of the accommodation.

"It's that one over there," I announced, careful to avoid precise details such as numbers or sequential details. As the figure headed away, I turned to Bernelle.

"Most of the mob's gone," I suggested, waving to point out the relative lack of other partygoers. "We might as well become went ourselves."

"In a minute. There's a little bit left in the jug here. I want to make sure that Mum is all right."

At that moment pounding on a door suggested Jeffrey's ruse had been detected, his whereabouts established, and the discovery had been the cause of considerable displeasure.

That displeasure was hardly mollified by a voice suggesting that Olga should piss off. If she was a good girl, her request might be favourably considered at some time in the future.

Possibly as soon as the umpty-first of October.

Bernelle extracted a mobile phone from her purse. "I'd better go. She's had a bit to drink and she might have a problem getting into the house safely."

Eventually, a car horn outside the entrance brought their departure.

Although there were regretful glances in my direction on the way out, it was obvious that Bernelle would not be returning.

I moved off towards my room. Hopalong's alcohol-induced efforts had been in vain, but any disappointment on his part was no great matter for concern.

Hopalong had his beautiful, talented and extremely dangerous fiancée, even if she was on the other side of the world.

A short while before I had been on the verge of a night of lust.

Now, through no fault of my own other than failure to ensure that doors are locked, I was going to have to sleep alone. I reflected, as I headed for my cave, that Jeffrey was probably rooting himself into oblivion, while, thanks to his success, I was missing out.

Justice, it seemed, was an optional extra.

And So It Goes

The following morning saw all of our community rise late. When the inevitable couldn't be delayed any longer, I staggered towards the bathroom. On the way, I looked in the mirror. The figure I sighted caused me to reflect that it was fortunate that I had woken up alone.

I recalled Hunter S. Thompson's ***The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved***. Hunter knew his drunkenness and degeneracy.

At the end of several days of terminal drunkenness, he described a *puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature... Like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album.*

The face Hunter S. had sighted was, predictably, his own.

If it had been worse than mine, I thought, it would more than likely prompt the reaction portrayed by Edvard Munch in ***The Scream***. Some lines from the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band sprang to mind. *What should I tell my wife? Darling I've been beaten up again. Let's face it, she'd have to be credulous as hell.*

I was obviously hallucinating.

Still, there was no use going back to bed. As I tottered out of the bathroom the thought of returning to the cot did, momentarily, cross my mind. The sight of my face had done something to wake me up, and it was time to consider the day's agenda.

It is a well-known fact Saturday mornings follow Friday nights as surely as blood follows a punch on the nose.

The way I felt was a familiar Saturday morning feeling, like having been smashed across the back of the skull with a large hop-flavoured brick.

Saturday afternoons inevitably follow Saturday mornings, and over the years have come to mean one thing: a session on the punt.

There were other things to consider. It was one of the few Saturdays through the year when the Denison Turf Club was permitted to hold a meeting, so the first consideration was strategic.

Spend the afternoon at the track or watch the races on TV at the Palace and use the phone account for punting purposes?

There were advantages and disadvantages with each option, and I thought it would be wise to defer that decision until a chance to canvas a variety of opinions presented itself. A glance at the clock showed the time approaching nine-thirty.

There were investments to be made, money to be won and lost.

Damn the torpedoes, there was no choice but to *telegraph full speed ahead and consider the consequences some time on Sunday*. That thought swung me out of what remained of my stupor.

Shortly thereafter, showered, and somewhat refreshed, I headed for the kitchen with my mind bent on repeating the previous morning's gastronomic excesses. There was no sign of life as I moved towards the catering department, a wad of form guides and other material in hand.

The kitchen area was deserted, so I gathered the breakfast ingredients, poured myself about half a litre of tomato juice, fortified it with Tabasco, Worcestershire and raw egg and downed it as quickly as I could manage. The kick start it gave the system produced a burst of activity as the chops and bacon went under the grill, the ingredients for a batch of mushroom scrambled eggs were ready to go and a flurry of phone calls in between other tasks accessed the latest information.

A further batch of tomato, Tabasco and Worcestershire kept me going.

Once the Late Mail and other selections had been recorded it was time to turn to more substantial sustenance. The chops and bacon were ready, and once the eggs and mushrooms had been scrambled I took the accumulated plateful to the table and sat down to eat, flicking through the pages of the form guide as I ate.

Breakfast finished, the dishes, pots and pans placed in the dishwasher, I was about to resume form study when the door of the room opened.

A haggard Jeffrey shambled in, obviously the worse for wear. Overindulgence in amber fluids and gymnastics tends to do that to you.

He glanced at the publications scattered across the table.

“Found anything?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it. Should have something within an hour.”

“Right, then, I’ll grab something for breakfast and then we can figure out where we’re going.”

True to his word, within the half hour he’d grabbed a form guide and seated himself on the opposite side of the table.

Working on the principle that two heads are better than one, even if, as a result of the events of the preceding twenty-four hours, they bore a greater resemblance to sheep's heads than to anything human we discussed the prospects of various runners.

Lurking at the bottom of the field for the last in Sydney was a nag that, from its name, belonged to Waddles. The form guide summary was a straightforward *No*. Surely if it was on the owner would have called to let us know. We hadn’t heard from him, so the attention quickly headed in other directions.

Comments flew back and forth, with observations on the state of the various tracks, the prospects of certain starters, and enquiries about last starts and factors which might have affected recent runs.

Having been out of the country, these were largely speculative, but we’d gained some perspective from Waddles a week ago, and we could consult the form guide when we needed detailed data. By twelve fifteen, once the selections had been made, the other residents were summoned to a conference.

“Right,” I started. “First decision. Who’s going to join us for a little afternoon on the punt?”

Much to my surprise, Bright Eyes indicated an interest. Sandy and Hopalong abstained.

“So, the next decision is the venue. Do we spend the arvo at the Palace or head out to the track?”

“I’m easy,” Jeffrey replied, ignoring remarks that this was common knowledge.

“Bright Eyes? The pub or the track?”

“I’d like to go to the track. It might be interesting to see how it compares to Randwick.”

“Since we’re going to the track,” I inquired, “are you two bastards interested in joining the party. Only for a drink, you understand. There’s plenty of space at the bar.”

“A change is as good as a holiday,” Sandy suggested, “and since it’s been a while since the holidays it might be time I had a change.”

Hopalong indicated a variation in venue fitted in comfortably with nonexistent plans and decided to join the party.

“Right,” I announced once consensus had been achieved. “Rendezvous in the car park in ten minutes.”

It was more like twelve before I arrived at the point in question and when I did I found Jeffrey rearing and ready to go. The rearing had something to do with the arrival of the Twins who had, after advice from Dagwood and Blondie, selected suitable attire for a visit to the races.

“There is one minor detail that needs to be attended to,” I announced as we prepared for departure. “We need to slip into town so I can visit the hole in the wall. If we call here on the way back we can check whether anyone else has lobbed in the meantime. If not there’s room for Sandy and Hopalong. Be a bit crowded, but there’s room. If there’s anyone else joining us it’ll mean two trips. What do you reckon?”

Unanimity prevailed, and so I sat in the front passenger’s seat, leaving the back seat to Jeffrey and his playmates.

“And what,” I asked as the vehicle headed towards the ATM in the main street, “are we planning to do at the races? I know what Jeffrey and I will be doing, of course. But ladies?”

“We’re here for the beer,” Julie Ann replied. “We figure that there won’t be any char for Char, and definitely no jewels for Jools, so we’re along for the party. Maybe a smidgen of bubbly after you guys have had a big win, but otherwise beer will be fine.”

“For starters,” Charlene emphasised.

“If we’re into celebration mode at the end of the day, we might have to go with a *blanc de blancs*,” I suggested.

Blanc de blancs, the *white from white* champagne made from white grapes, would be largely Chardonnay. Lack of response suggested that the remark had gone straight over the audience’s heads and was probably to be found nestled among the assorted detritus that had collected in the gutter beside the road.

“So,” I turned in Bright Eyes’ direction. “Have we got an investment strategy in mind? Or are we going to try to wing it like we did last Saturday?”

“Lightning doesn’t strike in the same place twice, so I don’t see much point in trying the same approach as last week.”

“Wise move,” Jeffrey observed.

“So I thought I’d hang around and see what you guys were up to and have a bet or two if I saw something that sounded interesting. I’ve got a hundred dollars to play with. What are you guys up to?”

I explained I was going to withdraw a thousand from the ATM and had eight conveyances I liked.

“Once I’ve been to the hole in the wall, I’ll stash eight hundred in the left hand pocket, and that’ll be a hundred to put on each of ‘em. The other two hundred goes in the right hand pocket. That’s the drinking pocket.”

“And if you win?” Bright Eyes asked.

“Half the return goes in each pocket. As soon as you’ve had a collect it gives you leeway to have a go at a few others. Alternatively you can have more than the hundred on some of the later ones.”

“Sounds good,” Bright Eyes suggested as we pulled up outside the bank. “I might try something similar.”

Once the transaction was complete, and we were headed back out towards headquarters a thought crossed my mind.

“Bright Eyes,” I suggested, “you do have a hundred to play with, don’t you?”

She agreed that this was the case.

“As the designated driver,” I went on, “you’re not going to be needing all that much in the drinking pocket, are you? You’ll need to save a tenner for the odd soft drink, but it’s not like you’re going to be shouting too often.”

“I don’t know about that. You never know. I might have a big win.”

A voice came from my right.

“Do not compute the totality of the poultry population until all manifestations of incubation have been entirely completed.”

“Precisely,” Charlene observed. “Now what the hell does it mean?”

Jeffrey repeated the sentence. There was silence until the penny finally dropped.

“I guess,” suggested Julie Ann, “that you don’t count your chickens...”

"Until all manifestations of incubation have been entirely completed."

“In other words, they’ve hatched,” Charlene concluded. “Right on. Though I think I’ll be sticking with my original game plan.”

“Which was?”

“Drink, drink and drink again.”

We pulled in to The Crossroads Sandy and Hopalong climbed into the back seat while I raced inside and placed the cash card in a secure location.

If I needed more than a couple of hundred to cover expenses I'd be able to put it on the tab at the Palace. If, on the other hand, the day turned out successfully, it was wise to avoid carrying anything that could be misplaced.

With the preliminaries out of the way, we set out to the Royal and Ancient Denison Turf Club, with its 1800 metre circuit. We arrived just after one.

Faced with two-year-old races we had discarded as betting mediums, and a need to quench the thirst built up through the effort of walking through the car park, there was nothing for it but to retreat to the bar.

We needed an area large enough to entertain our guests, and most of them would be more likely to be interested in the bar than the bookmakers.

Experience suggested the rules which applied to the side bar at the Palace also applied at the Denison races. A position beside the till was vitally important if an adequate supply of liquid refreshments was going to find its way into our hands and down our respective gullets.

Such positions need to be grabbed early and jealously guarded because the bar inevitably becomes crowded as successful and unsuccessful punters wind up their activities, the one to celebrate their winnings, the other to use their whatever they've saved from the financial wreckage or their colleagues' generosity to drown their sorrows.

The smart operator arrived early, avoided the early races, grabbed a strategic position and waited for reinforcements to arrive before mounting expeditions into the betting ring.

Immediately on entering the bar, we saw the best position had already been snaffled, but a second glance revealed there was no major problem.

The occupant, drinking on his own, was the redoubtable Michael Brooks, wicket-keeper extraordinary and captain of the local cricket side.

When we met Brooksy the previous evening, conversation had been dedicated to putting shit on everything that moved. Saturday afternoons, on the other hand, were dedicated to the serious discussion of sport. Remembering that Mr Brooks'

network of acquaintances across the state provided a stream of information that made him one of Denison's more successful punters, it made sense to join him.

We settled down at the bar, and once seating arrangements had been sorted out the afternoon continued with regular forays to the betting ring.

Throughout the afternoon our selections came home at frequent intervals, and Jeffrey and I found it difficult to put a foot wrong.

Bright Eyes, flushed with previous success, attempted a repeat performance and made, a basic tactical mistake. Her first success had largely been due to total lack of knowledge about what she was doing, so the niceties of form study did not enter into calculations. This time, aided by a spare form guide, she approached the subject in a rational manner, considered form and subsequently failed.

Having moved beyond the beginner stage, beginner's luck no longer came into play. Still, she had experienced a rather healthier dose than most.

We were already well ahead when Bright Eyes, of all people, scanning the field for the last race in Sydney, pointed to a name at the bottom of the field.

“This one here, Le Ver Marin. That's one of Waddles' isn't it?”

“Should be. I don't think there's anyone else in Australia who names his horses after maggots. Why?”

“I think you'd gone to the toilet the other Friday, and Jeffrey was chatting up the barmaid. You remember he was quite active in that regard that afternoon.”

“He's quite active in that regard most afternoons.”

“Anyway, since the conversation had stopped I asked him if he had anything running on Saturday.”

“And?”

A light-bulb was starting to illuminate itself somewhere above my head.

“He told me he didn't have anything running that day, but that there was a chance he'd have a bit of a smokey running the following Saturday. What's *a bit of a smokey?*”

I had looked at this nag named Le Ver Marin, and guessed at its ownership.

A brief glance in the morning was enough to dismiss it from consideration since the form was, in a word, dire. One form guide had summed up its chances in a single two-letter word. **No.**

Given those factors, it was hardly surprising the horse had been dismissed from serious consideration. Bright Eyes' report cast matters in a different light.

Waddles had frequently referred to some unfortunate chaff-burner, who had buckled under the effort of carrying both Waddles impressive bulk and the impost assigned it by the handicapper, as *that maggot* (as in *dead as a*).

Once he started to build up his stable, Waddles had deemed it necessary to find some name that would distinguish his runners from the rest, and since *maggot* was an integral part of his vocabulary, he decided that would be the most appropriate label.

There was, however, a hurdle that would need to be overcome. There was no way known that an attempt to register a horse as Prince of Maggots was going to be successful.

Early in his career as an owner Waddles had been sitting in the side bar at the Palace, a sheaf of paperwork in his hand, trying to figure out a way to register a race horse with that name. The solution presented itself as D'Artagnan entered the establishment on the way to start his culinary duties. I caught his eye.

“D'Artagnan! A moment of your time! What is the French for maggot?”

“You mean the little white bastards I find in the bin? That maggot? You want some fink that you would use in polite society? Or something more vernacular?”

Informed that such was precisely the creature, and that we needed something that would satisfy the requirement of *those picky bastards who register the names of horses*, we were informed that it could be best to use the word for *fly*, *le ver*, because when they look it up in the French-English dictionary, they will see *the fly*. Straight forward, *n'est ce pas?*

So each time a new conveyance entered the Waddles stables, the paperwork to include it in the Maggot family was despatched to the racing authorities.

Prince of Maggots appeared in the form guide as *Le Ver Royal*. *Le Petite Ver* (*Little Maggot*) came next, followed by *Le Ver Enorme* (Huge Maggot) before Waddles' success on the punt and prize money the horses collected from time to time allowed him to start buying yearlings.

There had been one by Bureaucracy, named *Le Ver Bureaucratique*, another by The Pug which was christened *Le Ver Pugiliste*. A Voodoo Rhythm filly was named *Le Ver Haitien*, and a Western Symphony became *Le Ver Symphonique*.

This latest addition to the string, *Le Ver Marin*, was by Flotilla, so Waddles had little choice but to name it The Marine Maggot. I guessed he'd bought it as a tried horse since it had something like a dozen starts under its belt without showing much. The previous owners had probably decided enough was enough, but that left a perfectly valid question. Why had Waddles taken it off their hands?

Now, *Le Ver Marin* was in the forthcoming race.

Decisions needed to be made, imponderables pondered, speculations drawn to their logical conclusion. Should this thing be backed?

Further information was desirable, but where were we to obtain it in the twenty-five minutes before they jumped?

Surely, if it was a goer, Waddles would have had the manners to call us.

We had changed the phone number at The Crossroads because had no desire to field calls from people seeking accommodation. The new number was unlisted. The number at my old address lapsed when I moved out. Jeffrey had never had a listing in the White Pages.

If Waddles had tried to reach us with important information, his only option would have been to call the Palace. In the pre-Lotto days, such a call would have been assured of success since we would have been there for lunch before departing for the track.

If we hadn't called in at the Palace first, we would have expected to sight His Lordship and The Duchess at the track. Lord Edward was an avid punter and his consort would have found the swanning opportunities presented by a race meeting irresistible.

They were both absent, so the next step was to call the Palace since something had taken an afternoon at the track out of His Lordship's plans. Fortunately I knew the number by heart.

Three calls met with an engaged signal, so it was obvious His Lordship was conducting his investments over the phone.

So why not phone Waddles directly to gain the vital information?

Simple. I didn't have his mobile number, and he would be at the track.

Check with Hilda at home? Unlikely to meet with any success. She was more than likely also at the track. Without anything great in the way of expectations, I tried the after hours number on his business card. It was obvious that here was no one at home there. It was time to make up our minds.

To bet, or not to bet? That was the question.

I opened my copy of *The Sportsman* and turned to the relevant page.

All twelve of Le Ver Marin's starts were listed, the last four in detail.

Then I glanced at the details at the top of the entry, in the unlikely event that someone else might own the nag. The owner was listed as Ms H. Watson, rather than T. Waddington, or Mrs H. Waddington.

He'd registered it under Hilda's maiden name.

The trainer's name was there in black and white. Wayne Hart, better known as Captain Headrush.

I turned to a form guide that lay nearby. Who was riding the thing? There, sure as eggs, I found Waddles' regular jockey when he was based in Denison.

Wally Matthews had been apprenticed to a local trainer, and though Waddles had placed his horses with Captain Headrush, he'd usually been able to get Young Wally to ride whatever nag he had going round.

Now that he was out of his time Young Wally had relocated to further his riding career.

He'd been offered the rides on Waddles' horses since the Big Fella's experience with Sydney jockeys had left him with a jaundiced opinion of their honesty, but this was the first time he had wielded the whip in anger on a Sydney metropolitan track.

We already knew Captain Headrush had forsaken taxi driving and moved in the same direction, though he hadn't been spectacularly successful to date. I turned to Jeffrey. Once I had his attention, I pointed to the name in the form guide.

"This one has to be one of Waddles'. Trained by Captain Headrush. Young Wally's riding it and it's registered in Hilda's name. The paper's got it at a hundred and fifty to one. The form's awful. What do you reckon he's up to?" I asked.

We moved away to ponder the question.

"What do you reckon? We don't know anything for sure, but there's something fishy about this. We're comfortably up on the day, so it's not like we can't afford to have a go."

"Do it." Jeffrey had made up his mind.

"Tell the others? What if we're barking up the wrong tree?"

Looking back to the circle we had left, it was obvious most were there for the party rather than the punt. Apart from Bright Eyes and Brooksy, none, as far as I could recall, had ventured out for a bet.

Brooksy was in the betting ring and could be informed later.

Being responsible citizens, there was no other possible conclusion.

We were about to engage on a highly speculative venture.

There was nothing to suggest Le Ver Marin would finish anywhere other than at the tail of the field, and the investment was prompted by a chance remark to Bright Eyes. It would be foolish to advise anyone else to invest on such a dubious conveyance.

Informing our friends that we would be back in five, we headed towards the ring.

The innate conservatism of the Denison bookies meant we knew that we would only be able to put fifty each way on at a time.

Regardless of the hundred and fifty to one in the paper, the best price I could see was eighty to one, which lasted as long as it took me to claim fifty dollars each way. Across the ring, Jeffrey was able to invest another fifty each way at fifty to one.

From there the two of us worked our way around the ring, Jeffrey moving north to south while I did the circuit in the opposite direction.

By the time we'd finished, there was no one in the ring offering odds over five to one, but I had tickets for \$4000 to 50 each way, 1500 to 50 each way, two of 1000 to 50 each way and finally one for 500 to 50 each way to finish off, so I hadn't gone too badly.

I saw Jeffrey pushing his way through the crowd, and waited near the tote.

A quick comparison of notes revealed that Jeffrey had tickets that matched mine almost note for note, and we had, all up something like \$16,000 to \$500 each way., about as much as the betting ring could handle.

The tote was a different kettle of fish. We had deliberately hit the bookies first since an investment on the tote might have breached security.

With the larger betting pool, our investment would have only a slight effect on the dividend, so we put five hundred each way on the tote for good measure. This caused the operator to take notice. We explained that it was a bit of a hunch, which was enough to persuade her to have a little on it herself.

Our business completed, we rejoined the group at the bar.

Waddles would find it amusing, if our investment proved successful, to learn the local bookies had been taken to the cleaners through one of his nags without realising whose it was. He had never been able to get a price about one of them here, a fact which prompted his move to the big smoke.

Five minutes before the race, the fluctuations came over and revealed that Le Ver Marin had shortened considerably on the NSW tote, coming in from 50s to 15s. This information, confirming our earlier suspicions, was enough to cause Brooksy to take notice.

It looked like the cat was out of the bag.

I told him we thought it might belong to Waddles, and had already backed it. Brooks departed to get on, prompting a huge plunge as he proceeded, his money safely on, to tell everyone he saw on the way back from the ring that it was on.

Five minutes later, we were leading the cheering as Le Ver Marin romped home down the outside, swamping the other runners in the last two hundred. Looking at the replay, someone ventured the opinion that there would more than likely be a positive swab result at some point in the future, but what the hell, we'd be able to collect in the meantime.

After correct weight, we wandered out to collect.

Having done that, eyes shining and pockets bulging, we retired to the bar.

The plunge had been so large the local bookies did not have enough cash to pay out, and were forced to write cheques for the last to collect. As far as Denison was concerned, the meeting effectively stopped. In any case, everyone seemed to be too busy celebrating to want to give any of it back.

Waddles would certainly have been amused.

The crowd gradually dispersed. Jeffrey put the motion that victory celebrations adjourn to the Palace, and, predictably, it was carried unanimously.

Circumstances indicated that various members of the party needed to relieve themselves, so while Bright Eyes transported the first load to the Palace, others could attend to the calls of nature.

In Hopalong's case, the call was about to turn into a scream, and since Sandy volunteered to remain behind, Jeffrey, the Twins and I piled into the convertible.

On our arrival at the Palace, we found His Lordship behind the bar.

He greeted us with an even bigger smile than he had been wearing the previous evening, and inquired whether we had been to the races, and, if so, how we had gone.

We replied that we had come out ahead, but neglected to mention that the *ahead* was somewhere to the tune of \$20,000. We, in turn, inquired whether he'd had a bet since we hadn't seen him at the track.

His Lordship is quite adept when it comes to pouring beer, but, like most of his peers prefers to leave that activity to underlings he hires to perform such menial tasks.

If he stopped to give us an account of his afternoon, he would be acting the friendly host, would prevent us from escaping, and would have a perfect excuse to defer the task of maintaining the beer supply to Magpie, She had arrived on the scene around five, and unless the demand for service escalated and there was no one else on hand who could be called on to assist he should be right for the next little while.

So the saga started.

First up, the bar attendant rostered for duty that afternoon had phoned in sick.

Unable to get anyone else at short notice, His Lordship had been forced to look after the bar himself. While this was a blow to someone who would rather drink beer than pour it, he could follow the races on Sky Channel and bet through his phone account.

He was hardly likely to be rushed off his feet. Most of his Saturday afternoon crowd would be at the races, and he would have no trouble looking after the bar, and would save himself the expense of paying an underutilised bar attendant.

Around eleven, a call from her mother had diverted The Duchess towards Airlie Beach. D'Artagnan would be quite capable of handling the lunchtime trade without supervision, so she had departed around midday.

Around the same time, Waddles had phoned to let his friends at the Palace know Le Ver Marin had been set for a big win and he was planning a substantial plunge. The minor fact that there were local races in Denison and his friends would be at the track was so insignificant as to escape notice.

“I told him,” His Lordship pointed out, “that while you'd usually be in here around lunchtime, you hadn't lobbed yet and I suspected you'd gone straight out to the track.”

“Which we had,” I agreed.

“So he pointed out that I could let you know when Betty and I got to the track...”

“Which, of course, you couldn't because The Duchess was off to Airlie for lunch and you were stuck in the bar. But never mind, we managed to sniff it out for ourselves.”

His Lordship, of course, had no choice but to remain at the Palace, and passed the tip on to the two men and a dog in the public bar before returning to his usual Saturday afternoon activities, with occasional interruptions to serve beer.

His Lordship likes to attack almost every race, taking one selection as a stand-out, with saver bets on assorted others, as well as a string of quinellas and trifectas. While he manages quite a few collects, the incoming funds do not always balance the expenditure.

During the afternoon, he succeeded in wiping out the balance of his account before Le Ver Marin's race, but with The Duchess in Airlie Beach, he thought there was no way he was going to be able to put some more in the account.

The cavalry arrived five minutes before they jumped. D'Artagnan had decided to present himself for work early.

More than likely he suspected The Duchess's excursion for lunch would render her unable to assist with the evening trade. When asked, he agreed that he could watch the bar for five minutes, so His Lordship departed TAB-wards in the pub truck just as The Duchess was pulling up outside the front door in her mother's Volvo.

He'd stayed away just long enough to back the horse. Diplomacy suggested it would be wise to do that twice, once for himself and once for his spouse.

Having done that, he was able to pass on the tip to anyone who was interested, and listen to the race at the agency before returning to base

Being the possessor of animal cunning above and beyond the usual allowance, when he knew the result, he dived into the truck with two successful betting tickets in his hand, roared around to the Palace, arrived in a swirl of dust and vaulted into the bar enquiring what had won the last in Sydney, claiming that a problem with the radio in the car meant he'd been unable to hear the call.

He was informed, by a railway worker who had just finished his shift, and was unaware of developments earlier in the afternoon, that it had been Le Ver Marin.

His Lordship, of course, knew the result, but feigned high jubilation, informed The Duchess he had backed it for her, and asked whether she would mind going up to the TAB to collect on *these two tickets*. He had, of course, taken Le Ver Marin with the field for the quinella and managed to sneak in the trifecta, but carefully neglected to mention these minor facts and kept those tickets in his pocket. They would be cashed in later.

The Duchess, figuring most of the town's punters would be at the track, gave proceedings there enough time to finish before heading to collect and remained on the premises long enough to receive congratulations on her investment, pocket the return from her ticket and snip off a substantial amount of His Lordship's before returning in a self-congratulatory mood.

She arrived back at base just after His Lordship's recount of the afternoon's events finished.

The manner of her arrival, throwing her arms around His Lordship's neck and declaring that he was *such a sweetie* for backing the horse for her, indicated she might be more than receptive to amorous advances later that evening.

Having won on the day, with a substantial collect to be made next week, and faced with the prospect of getting a shot away later that evening, it was no wonder His Lordship was quietly jubilant.

We had great difficulty persuading him to accept a small financial donation in return for the brimming glasses he set before us.

As night fell, he was moved to suggest that nourishment was indicated, and that we might feel inclined to join The Duchess and himself for a meal.

He bought the first bottle of wine and with a party of eight seated at the table, frequent replenishments would be required. Fortunately, table service and the boss's table meant that such replenishments were made with the minimum of fuss, while His Lordship was able to steer our attention towards the upper end of the price range, with enquiries whether we had tried the.....

After dinner, it was time to discuss possibilities for the rest of the evening.

Most of the assembled party voted for an early night, but Jeffrey was inclined towards a little action.

The only question was where such action was going to occur.

Remembering our friends felt like a quiet night, I suggested two parties at the motel on successive nights were enough for the moment and that there should be a change of venue.

Since Bright Eyes also felt the need of a quiet night, once she had transported us to wherever we were going it would be churlish to expect her to collect us.

“So where,” I inquired, “are we headed? Personally I'm quite happy to stay here. Apart from the other pubs around town, there's only one option I know of that's likely to be open.”

“The Swamp,” Jeffrey agreed. “So that's where we're headed.”

Located on the highway south of town, the Coral Coast Cabaret was generally known as The Swamp, due to the belt of mangroves between the premises and the coast. It opened three nights a week to cater for the mating rituals of the younger set whose musical preferences ran in the general direction of rap with and without the addition of a C at the start of the word.

Under normal circumstances, we would have dismissed the notion because it was too far out of town, too noisy, and too young.

When Jeffrey turned to enquire if the Twins would be joining us the exact words they used to decline the invitation were *too far out of town, too noisy, too young, and you're too pissed.*

Since their accommodation was within staggering distance, the Twins departed for a restful night at home, threatening to establish contact in the morning.

Once they had gone, there was nothing to do but bid our hosts farewell and pile into the chariot. Ten minutes later, the vehicle glided to a stop in front of the Swamp, creating only a slight stir among the town's younger set, approximately half of whom I had met in my previous occupation.

As we alighted, Bright Eyes told us all we need to do when we wanted to leave was ring, since she intended to spend the night on the first draft of her assignment. The car sped off, and we turned to the entrance, acknowledging the greetings of former pupils gathered outside the door who regarded an entrance before ten as being distinctly uncool.

Needing liquid refreshment, we were unconcerned about coolness, or lack of it, but once through the door, the wall of sound hit us. As Jeffrey signalled he was heading for the bar, I turned to look for a table, preferably close to the bar, with a strategic view of the entrance, a panoramic view of the room and the dance floor. From previous visits, I knew where the best position was, but the table was already occupied by three women, who had their backs to me.

But the table next door was vacant. I signalled to Jeffrey to indicate where I was going.

As I sat down, a glance across revealed one of the three neighbouring females was a certain former neighbour known as Mangoes and with her was teaching partner, Melanie Maynard. The third member of the party was Sharon Quayle, another former colleague. Mangoes was allegedly keen on Malcolm, bar manager at the Excelsior, but her passion was unreciprocated as the gentleman concerned had an unfavourable opinion of female schoolteachers and seemed unwilling to modify this opinion, regardless of how alluring the female in question might be.

Since the other two had regular partners, it was odd to see them out on the town without their better halves.

As all this ran through my mind, Mangoes looked across and greeted me like a long-lost cousin. Grabbing a chair that could slide into a spot between Melanie and Sharon that would provide the panoramic outlook I was after, I joined them.

Mangoes, seated furthest from me, was virtually incommunicado amid the sonic maelstrom, but the others informed me their night on the tiles stemmed from Mangoes' decision to end her infatuation with Malcolm.

He'd been found in the alley behind the Excelsior establishing relations with a waitress from the restaurant next door.

Mangoes had hoped that as long as Malcolm lacked a permanent partner, his attitude towards her might become more accommodating. Faced with the reality that some things were never meant to be had contacted her teaching partner in some distress.

Melanie believed Mangoes could be persuaded there were plenty more fish in the sea but, in her current state, should not head off into the flesh pots of Denison unaccompanied.

Working on the principle that there was safety in numbers Melanie had enlisted Sharon's assistance so if Mangoes had a change of luck, she'd have someone to talk to.

Having found seats with a panoramic view of a place like The Swamp, you need to maintain a degree of vigilance.

This is not, however, always possible.

The volume level made communication difficult, and we were forced into a huddle around the table. I was too involved in the explanation for this girls night out to pay much attention to what was going on around me, and looked up with a start when I heard an *Aha!* somewhere near my right ear.

It was Jeffrey, bearing rum and coke.

He had been heard to remark that there was an opening for a smart lad where Mangoes was concerned, and Jeffrey had always been a bit of a lad. He grabbed the seat beside hers and continued to lay on the charm in shovel loads.

For all his degenerate habits, when he decides to lay it on, Jeffrey can be quite the sophisticated gentleman. Within five minutes, he appeared to have Mangoes' mind off recent disappointments. As the pair of them seemed to be developing their own private huddle, I was immersed in conversation with the others and after a few minutes headed off to seek replenishments for all concerned.

When that round had been emptied, I sat, continuing the conversation and waiting for Jeffrey to do the right thing. At the moment, he seemed oblivious to the need to shout anything other than sweet nothings in Mangoes' shapely left ear. Melanie stood up and looked about to gather up the glasses scattered around the table.

With Jeffrey apparently disinclined to remedy the situation, I pointed out there was no way a few rounds of drinks, even at ridiculously inflated nightclub prices was going break us and was about to head for the bar when the music stopped.

In the momentary quiet, above the general background noise, I heard a cry of *Jeffrey!* coming from the general direction of the bar. I looked up. Jeffrey reacted the same way and immediately blanched.

There, across the room, was Olga.

Having attracted our attention, along with everyone else's, she reached for her waist and, watched by around two hundred pairs of eyes, exposed her ample and unconstrained bosoms in Jeffrey's direction, to the joy of the multitude, who made

it obvious that the presence of a well-endowed flasher was a development worthy of encouragement.

Behind her was Bernelle, carrying a tray of drinks. The pair started to move towards us, and as they approached, Mangoes, Melanie and Sharon retreated to the powder room.

Arriving at the table, Olga again displayed her ample mammary development.

While the initial incident met with general appreciation, repetition attracted the attention of the management. Almost before she managed to sit down, Olga was joined by one of the bouncers, who appeared to be asking what she thought she was doing. She nodded in our direction and seemed to be indicating that she was rejoining us after a visit to the bar.

Mangoes, Melanie and Sharon were powdering their noses, and, since there was no one to confirm our protestations that we were not associated with the flasher, our protests fell on deaf ears.

The Swamp may be a low dive, but Denison is a small pool and some forms of behaviour are frowned on.

Ironically, the bouncer who ejected us happened to be Jeffrey's twenty-seven year old son, Justin. As he shut the door, with the four of us outside, I could see him shaking his head.

Obviously, getting away from a venue where we were no longer welcome was the next step. There were no taxis in the car park, so it seemed there was nothing for it but to dial The Crossroads, disturb Bright Eyes' reading, and ask her to get us, but despite repeated attempts, the phone was engaged.

Hopalong, I guessed, was in the process of talking to the Lovely Liz.

After half a dozen attempts, feeling growing impatience beside me, I gave up.

As I was about to start trying the taxi service, I saw that I had been beaten to the punch.

A cab had pulled up, and once he had deposited his passengers, the driver had opened negotiations with Olga, who was only too happy to offer Jeffrey and I a lift home with Bernelle and herself.

I toyed with declining, giving the cab enough time to deliver the two of them to their place, then calling another car, but the plan had obvious flaws.

Supposing they didn't go straight home?

What if they decided to head us off at The Crossroads?

While I was considering these matters, Jeffrey, still smarting from the injustice of being ejected from the building by his own flesh and blood, spat his dummy. The toys flew out of the cot, and he announced that the rest of us could please ourselves, but he was going to walk.

Faced with a quick decision, I balanced the bonds of mateship against an awareness that an attempt to walk all the way back would cover considerably more ground than the shortest distance between two points,

As I watched Jeffrey's back heading in the general direction of town, accepted the offered lift.

At least, once I got to The Crossroads I would be able to save Jeffrey most of the walk by asking Bright Eyes to get him. Olga sat in the front seat, talking to the driver, so I joined Bernelle in the back. As soon as I climbed into the back seat, the cab sped off as I pondered my next move.

The best bet was to suggest that after the cab dropped me at the motel, she should drop her mother at home and come back.

Those deliberations proceeded well below optimum speed, and I was about to make the suggestion when the cab swerved, entered the motel car park, and screeched to a halt.

Before I had time to make any suggestion, or start getting out of the cab, Olga decided she had been invited in, handed over a twenty dollar note and was standing outside.

Presented with a *fait accompli*, I opened the door, mumbled thanks to the driver, and got out. Bernelle followed.

While Olga and Bernelle disappeared towards the toilet in the Restaurant I heard a door close on my left, and Bright Eyes emerging from her room, car keys in hand, with Sandy and Hopalong also heading towards the red chariot from somewhere around Sandy's room.

When the trio converged on where I was standing I was informed Hopalong had just received a call from England. The purpose of the call was to announce some fantastic news, but unfortunately, despite repeated pleas, she was unable to say anything apart from a suggestion that she might be joining him much earlier than expected.

This news was worth celebrating, so were on their way out to join us.

When they heard Jeffrey was in transit somewhere between the Swamp and home base they decided it was better if they didn't disturb Bernelle, Olga and I.

From their point of view, it was better if they continued on their present course while I would be better off staying where I was.

For some reason, this apparent concern for my well-being failed to move me.

The Mercedes receded into the distance, and I was left with Bernelle and Olga. Following recent traumas and indignities, I needed strong drink, and, accordingly, headed towards the rum dispenser.

It would have been extremely rude to ignore the guests, however unwelcome one of them might be.

Although she had been at our previous *soiree*, as I filled three beakers with ice, added a generous tot of rum to each and opened a fresh bottle of Coke, Olga was determined to have a guided tour of the premises, so we set off, glasses in hand, on a circuit of the complex.

Having requested the tour, Olga showed little interest in minor details. What she was interested in was the exact location of Jeffrey's *boudoir*.

Although she had attempted to break down the door the night before, short term memory loss required a refresher course in the local geography.

When we reached Four, Olga grabbed the handle, expressing an interest in the interior, but Jeffrey had become cagey in the recent past. Possibly as a result of the need for security on our overseas tour, for the first time in living memory, he had left home after locking the door behind him.

Having concluded the tour, the poolside area beckoned. Out to the table came the rum bottle, and a soft esky containing ice and bottles of Coke. Having settled the guests onto a couple of banana lounges, I headed indoors to do something about music.

Selection of the soundtrack was something I took my time over. I had a hunch that selecting the appropriate soundtrack was of supreme importance. I had just finished selecting the disks which would find their way into the CD player when I heard the door close.

“What are you putting on?” I heard Bernelle’s voice ask. “Don’t make it too loud, she’s asleep.”

It appeared that, under the influence of a combination of overabundant rum and under-abundant action, Olga had dozed off. As I went on inserting the disks into the player. Bernelle squatted down beside me.

It was obvious that she was feeling the pace.

As the sounds of *Moondance* wafted across the courtyard, I stood up and started to move from the music room to the living quarters. Bernelle followed, and as I sat on the edge of the bed she sat beside me. I lay back momentarily, and found that Bernelle’s arm had somehow found its way under my back.

I lifted myself to give it a chance to disengage itself only to find it closing around my neck.

From where I was, the temptation was too great. In between clinches, Bernelle explained that they had ventured to the Palace for lunch, thinking that Jeffrey and I would be there. Normally, we would have been.

Not being addicted to the punt, the significance of the local race meeting had escaped them. After lunch, they had sat around till three, then strolled home, where Southern Comfort and coke was followed by Chateau Cardboard Riesling. Olga, apparently, felt the need to drown her disappointment at not finding us at the Palace.

Bernelle, with the benefit of solid training, as well as the benefit of youth, had handled the pace, but Olga faded around six.

After resting her eyes, she had resurfaced at eight, announced that The Swamp was on the agenda and stated that Bernelle was going to accompany her.

According to Bernelle, she fortified herself for the ordeal while bathing and dressing, and managed a couple of quick scotches while waiting for a cab.

Now, it seemed Olga was out for the count.

Bernelle's apparent desire to use her lips for purposes other than speech was too much for me. Under the influence of alcohol and well stacked blondes whose appreciative comments on my musical preferences showed signs of conversion, common sense lengthened in the betting market as my remaining scruples flew out the window, closely followed by inhibition and propriety. In to replace them came sheer unbridled lust.

Rolling her over, so she now sat astride me, I reached behind and untucked her top from her jeans. Hands found their way to the edge of the garment and lifted it over the head. As it reached her neck, I found my face greeted by the unconfined cleavage.

Over on my right, the door of the music room opened.

Through the door that connected it to my living quarters burst an irate Jeffrey, demanding to know *what the fuck is that fucking bitch doing here, goddammit?*

In an instant, the intimacy present only seconds before vaporised.

Rolling sideways off me, Bernelle attempted to regain some degree of modesty, while Jeffrey's diatribe about *fucking bitches* and *evil sluts* continued unabated.

Her clothing rearranged, Bernelle, apparently believing the comments were aimed in her direction, fled. By the time I reached the door, she was waking her mother and announcing she wanted to go home.

When Jeffrey and I reached the area beside the pool, Olga was awake, though leaving was obviously the last thing on her mind.

Jeffrey, however, was distinctly inhospitable.

As Olga got the hint that her advances were likely to meet with complete and total rejection, Sandy appeared at my side.

“He’s a little upset,” Sandy intimated.

“So I fucking see,” I replied.

The trauma of recent minutes had removed any inhibitions in my speech.

I could still feel the lingering aftereffects of recent desire.

“Bright Eyes brought us back from the Swamp. We missed him on the way out, but we found the Twins outside the Swamp, wanting to know where he was, so we got them into the car and found him on the way back, He must have been having a piss behind a lamp post or something when we passed him on the way out. He’s got them in his room, but they were very upset that Olga is here.”

Olga’s continued presence, it was obvious, was getting in the way of Jeffrey’s cosy little *menage a trois*.

As he continued to communicate his displeasure, the unlikelihood of success on the sexual front dawned on her, and she yielded to her daughter’s insistence that they head towards the car park. As they departed, Jeffrey turned towards his room, vowing to attend to unfinished business.

As the crowd dispersed, I stood, wondering which way to turn.

Sandy headed indoors, and I was left alone. An attempt to entice Bernelle back towards my room seemed futile, but it had to be made.

I had just reached the car park when, as if on cue, a taxi pulled up.

By the time I reached it, Bernelle and Olga were inside, the door was slamming and I was left pondering the injustices of the world.

Through no fault of my own, after temptations a saint could have scarcely avoided, I had weakened and, moments short of fulfilment, had the object of my attention snatched away. I was devastated.

At moments like these, there is no substitute for strong drink.

The rum bottle was still on the table beside the pool. I turned my head in that direction, seeking solace.

But Where It's Going

I awoke with the morning sun in my eyes and Sandy and Hopalong nearby.

I had evidently fallen asleep beside the pool, and my friends were discussing the glass they were sniffing.

“At least,” Sandy commented, “Jeffrey only wastes one tin of Fosters at a time. This would have to be a triple. There’s got to be a good ten dollars worth of rum in there.”

Thoughts of the previous night’s events came flooding back.

“Don’t mention that asshole,” I muttered, gathering whatever dignity was available as I staggered towards my room.

Why, I thought as I headed inside, should people hang shit on me about what happened last night? What had I done to deserve this shit?

Sleep in a proper bed was on the agenda and would be forthcoming forthwith.

Safely in my room, I made sure that I wouldn’t be disturbed until I wanted to be disturbed. Hanging inside the wardrobe door were a pair of earmuffs liberated from an airport worker by a flat-mate from the distant past.

Log Boy’s unannounced departure, owing a fortnight’s rent, meant he had not been able to fit everything on the back of the motor bike.

Having given him twelve months to come good with the rent and make some arrangements for his remaining possessions to be shifted, anything of value had been liquidated at the pawn shop.

A few odds and ends escaped the clean out, and the earmuffs had proved handy in situations where a *Do Not Disturb* sign would have been ignored.

I was soon asleep, and stayed that way until the bladder needed to be emptied. The need was urgent, so I headed towards the bathroom. With that business concluded decided headphones and music were indicated.

The visit to the bathroom gave me enough time to ponder disks that would be, shall we say, *rest-friendly*, and I grabbed a substantial chunk of Miles Davis, a fair proportion of John Fahey's works and the four Nick Drake disks, picked Miles Davis' ***In A Silent Way*** out of the pile, inserted it in the bedside player and, pressed play.

I was about to lock the headphones into place when I was disturbed by shouted enquiries whether I would be joining an expedition to the pub.

I looked at the bedside clock. It was just after eleven.

I wasn't feeling sociable.

My liver and I were disinclined to engage in alcoholic activity, so I responded with a few well-chosen words.

I heard laughter filtering through the music as I attempted to drift into a totally justified snooze.

As I lay there. I became aware of a gnawing in the stomach, which reminded me I needed breakfast. As I pondered these matters, a further knock on the door was followed by Hopalong's advice that they were leaving in five minutes.

I enquired who was going.

The reply informed me I was the only one required to make a full suit.

Five minutes!

They could leave in five seconds for all I cared.

Some sort of ceasefire would be negotiated in the future, but it could wait.

If everyone went to the pub, I could have breakfast without being disturbed, spend a few hours pottering around, do the laundry and generally settle back into *home mode*.

When Sandy knocked on the door to announce they were going *now*, I replied that any attempt to wait for me would be fruitless, and they would be far better heading pub-wards immediately.

“I think he means it,” I heard Hopalong remark.

The voices receded. Silence followed.

I waited five minutes and continued to the bathroom.

Standing in front of the wash basin, I considered the situation. There was no sign of life outside, I turned the tap on splashed water over my face, turned off the tap and listened.

Silence.

A further couple of minutes passed undisturbed,.

Since the party had departed, it was safe to have a shower. I emerged from the cubicle somewhat refreshed, dressed, and headed towards the kitchen cautiously, in case there should be someone around the ridges to break the solitude.

My suspicions proved groundless, and I arrived without meeting a soul.

Checking out the car park on the way revealed the Mercedes was gone and in its absence, apart from the other residents' vehicles the area was deserted.

From that, I gathered, unless they'd arrived by taxi or shanks' pony, there were no visitors on the premises

Passing Reception I paused. Should I check in case there were any messages?

It took no more than a few seconds to decide if ignorance is bliss, a lack of awareness of communication, as in a message on the answering machine, would be close to ecstasy.

I turned into the kitchen. Everyone else had breakfasted recently. I could tell by the stack of plates around the sink rather than in the dishwasher.

A brief search revealed utensils needed to prepare breakfast were available, so as the ingredients passed through the microwave I showed my community spirit by filling the dishwasher.

By the time the dishwasher was humming contentedly to itself, my breakfast was ready, and I took it across to the table, where I found Bright Eyes, had been to collect the Sunday paper.

Turning to the sports pages, I settled down to breakfast.

In the distance, I could hear the phone ringing but ignored it.

If it was important there would be a message on the answering machine when someone got around to looking.

Breakfast finished and the sports pages digested, I turned towards my room.

I was enjoying the solitude. It was time for a bit of domesticity as a change from social and alcoholic engagements.

I grabbed a couple of bottles of mineral water to stave off dehydration and to assist with the recovery process, headed back, placed the mineral water in the fridge, found the laundry basket and lugged it to the laundry.

With assorted items in the machine it kicked into action.

Locking the door as a security precaution, I set about restoring order.

In the process of tidying the premises, I located underwear and socks which had separated themselves from their peers and appeared to be making a run for it.

The ability of socks to metamorphose is one of the great mysteries of life.

An inspection of the sock collection invariably involves the discovery that what had been a collection of matching pairs has mysteriously become an array out of which anything resembling a pair was difficult to isolate.

An attempt to sort out the jumble would be made after the laundry was dry.

Satisfied that the feral footwear had been rounded up, I grabbed the duster and gave the shelves and benches the once over before unaccustomed exertions took their toll.

Fortunately, there were other tasks that needed attention, some of which could be undertaken sitting down.

While they'd been placed on the shelves, the pile of assorted vinyl, CDs and DVDs I had accumulated in New Orleans had to be catalogued and filed, and there were still a couple of boxes of odds and ends in the room next door that needed to find their way onto the shelves.

After a breather and a beaker of mineral water, I ventured next door, ferried the remaining boxes into the music room and set about placing the contents on the appropriate shelves. Half an hour later, with the physical exertions finally out of the way I sat down to think things over.

The acquisitions needed to be added to the existing catalogue, so reaching for the card index and a biro, I grabbed a handful of disks from the shelves, slipped a vinyl LP onto the turntable, sat down and set to work.

Absorbed in the task of recording details of the recent additions, considering the possibilities of organizing *a better form of catalogue, perhaps in a computer database?* I paid no heed to what may have been a tap on the door of the living quarters.

Investigating the matter would involve revealing my presence to whoever might be outside and while the stereo meant anyone outside would have been aware I was there, as far as I was concerned ignorance of external presences was bliss, and I intended to stay, if possible, totally contented.

A glance at the clock a while later indicated that the time had rolled around to a quarter to one, so there was every possibility the mob would be back on the premises in the next half-hour or so.

If I wanted to remain undisturbed the washing machine needed to be emptied, clothes placed on the line, the door locked and the headphones back on without much further ado.

Remembering there might well be someone outside, I considered my options.

My quarters were at one end of the main wing, and the laundry, tucked behind Reception and the kitchen was at the other. If I moved sharply enough, I could dodge around the back of the building, make my way to the laundry, do what needed to be done and wend my way back without meeting anybody who wasn't right outside the front door.

I unlocked the door and prepared to turn left to head around the back of the building. Sitting on the edge of one of the planters occupying what had been the car park, was Bernelle, who looked up as I emerged.

An awkward silence ensued as I reviewed the options.

Sneaking around the back was no longer viable, so I started to turn to my right.

“Laundry day, Had to be done eventually. How’d you pull up this morning?” I enquired as I started moving in the appropriate direction.

Bernelle stood up and started moving in the same direction.

It was best to avoid any reference to the circumstances under which we had parted, at least for the time being.

“I was pretty good, I didn’t really drink that much. What about you?”

“A bit on the ordinary side of ordinary. I think it might have been something I didn’t eat”

We reached the laundry door.

The washing machine had reached the heat of its spin drying passion and was had now subsided quietly. Idle chat followed as Bernelle helped me hang out that load and pile the remaining contents of the basket into the machine.

The atmosphere was lightening all the time, and somehow, on the way back to the room, her hand slipped into mine.

Reaching the room, there appeared to be no alternative but to go inside. There was no one but us chickens on the premises, and there was something in the submissive manner in which someone entered the room that suggested a certain spring chicken was about to be plucked.

Placing the laundry basket on the floor beside the door, I turned towards her as her arms found their way around my neck. Reaching behind, I turned the lock on the door.

The way things appeared to be developing, this was not the time to be leaving doors unlocked. I had learned that lesson last night.

“I’m sorry about last night,” she murmured. “I shouldn’t have left like that.”

“Couldn’t be helped. I should have locked the door. Bloody silly of me not to.”

Her head half turned towards the door.

“Already done,” I reassured her as we settled down to unfinished business.

Things had reached an interesting situation when there was a knock on the door.

“Ignore it,” I told Bernelle. “They’ll get sick of it before we do.”

I slipped my hand under her top and found compliant flesh.

“Herston!” Sandy called. “Stop that! We ran across Boris at the Palace. We’re all going out his boat for a trip across to Gloucester. Are you coming?”

As Sandy finished the sentence, Bernelle extricated herself from my clutches.

“Some other time,” I replied. “I’ve still got a few things to do around the place.”

The statement met with a chuckle from the outside. Looking around, I could see Bernelle was a little put out.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I was supposed to ask you about it before they got here,” was the reply as she headed towards the bathroom. I unlocked the door and stuck my head outside.

I knew when I was beaten. Sandy had a grin on his face.

“We thought you needed a little cheering up,” he said. “We thought you’d be ready by now. Bernelle was supposed to get the message to you. Have you seen her?”

“She hadn’t mentioned it,” I replied. I thought it best to leave the question of her whereabouts unanswered.

“Five minutes,” retorted Sandy, turning towards the driveway. “Jeffrey and the Twins are already aboard. Hopalong and Bright Eyes are just making up a picnic basket. See you in the driveway.”

Sincee lust was rapidly getting the better of me, this suggestion was not one I particularly favoured. Turning back to Bernelle, who had finished adjusting her clothing, I saw that I was about to be overruled.

Murmuring that *a day on the water would be lovely* she started towards the door, so I had no choice but to follow. Outside, she had paused, and as I headed towards the car park her hand again found its way into mine.

Hopalong had positioned himself in the front beside Bright Eyes, while Sandy, Bernelle and I climbed into the back, and the Mercedes immediately sped off to the harbour, where Boris the Backdooring Bastard's family maintained the family yacht.

On the way, during the conversation that passed the time, I deduced Bernelle had wished to make it up to me after the previous night's fiasco, thought that I could be found at the Palace, and had directed her footsteps there.

At the Palace, she found Jeffrey, Sandy Bright Eyes and Hopalong with Boris and his charming companion, Ruth. Boris had dropped by on the way to carry out maintenance on the family yacht and was in the process of buying takeaways when he spotted Sandy and company seated at the bar and decided to be polite.

Boris lived next door when Sandy and I were in teacher accommodation and achieved considerable notoriety around the village due to amorous exploits, which usually involved the seduction of someone else's partner.

These arrangements seldom developed to a point where a new relationship was established.

He had, however, recently changed his spots after he'd met the lovely Ruth.

According to Jeffrey, a lack of sightings could be attributed to the likelihood that Denison's former backdooring champion was living in dread that he would end up being backdoored himself.

That hypothesis may have originated from Jeffrey's warped sense of humour rather than reality.

On the other hand, when they appeared in public it was obvious that Boris definitely became uncomfortable if anyone looked like they might be sniffing around his companion.

After graduating from university, Boris ended up in Denison where his family had property and business assets. Boris collected rents, supervised the family's commercial operations, undertook maintenance on the beach house south of town and looked after the yacht moored in the small boat harbour.

The family was fond of cruises around the Whitsundays, and Denison is within cooee of Hayman Island at the top of that well known archipelago.

Boris' position on the family payroll and the benefits that came with it enabled him to maintain himself in a relaxed and comfortable lifestyle, making his way from appointment to appointment in the sports car we'd christened The Vibrator since it was all-electric and made him feel good.

The house he had selected from the family's holdings underwent renovations, including a sauna beside the spa and swimming pool. According to popular belief, the house was chosen because proximity to the teachers' quarters would guarantee Boris access to a constantly changing array of potential partners.

It was also within convenient cooee of a certain water-hole.

Tall, dark and handsome, Boris wore the latest gentleman's fashions and held down a position on the wing of the Crustaceans, two factors with benefits when it came to pursuing the lusts of the flesh, which, as indicated, was a pastime he had only recently relinquished.

When Bernelle arrived at the Palace she assumed, since everyone else was there, I was somewhere nearby. She joined the group and would have been waiting for a long time, but Sandy had been gentleman enough to inform her I was *at home, sulking*.

By this time, the party had decided that after Boris had carried out the couple of maintenance tasks an afternoon jaunt around the bay was indicated.

Boris and Ruth moved off towards the Small Boat Harbour.

Bright Eyes offered to drop Bernelle at The Crossroads so she could entice me into joining the party, but, having driven as far as the pub and sat on a couple of soft drinks, the proposal was countered with the suggestion that Bernelle could make her own way back to The Crossroads.

Bright Eyes could ferry the rest of the party to the Yacht Club, where Boris would meet us.

Once she'd done that, Bright Eyes would divert to the supermarket to pick up supplies for the afternoon, head back to base to pack the picnic basket and collect Bernelle and I.

By the time we arrived at the Yacht Club at the end of this series of journeys Boris was bringing the vessel up to the pontoon, where Jeffrey, Sandy, Hopalong and the Twins were waiting for us. With the picnic basket stowed, the only task that remained was to buy a carton of beer and assorted wines and spirits. In the process, we were forced to have a quick rum or three while stocks of grog and ice were mustered.

An afternoon on the water, with Jimmy Buffet on the CD player is a pleasant way to pass the time.

Smoked salmon, olives, and cheese were consumed as the vessel performed an anticlockwise circuit of the bay. Reaching the resort opposite Denison, we tied up at the pontoon and wandered up to the bar for a couple.

An hour or so later, with the resort's launch inbound, we headed back.

Predictably, consumption continued unabated, and by the time we arrived at the pontoon everyone on board except Boris and Ruth was well and truly on the way.

As we were about to step onto the pontoon, I asked for suggestions about future movements. I had fairly strong expectations as to the most likely course, but thought that the suggestion might as well come from someone else.

“Stuffed if I know,” Jeffrey responded. “Might as well call into the Palace and think things over.”

“The Sunday arvo roast would take care of the dinner arrangements,” Sandy suggested.

In keeping with her view of herself as the lady of the manor, The Duchess had begun spit roasting quantities of beef each Sunday afternoon, weather permitting, which she distributed to the masses in return for a small financial donation.

The value for money on offer ensured that the Palace was well attended each Sunday evening, but it should have been early enough for us to obtain a table.

“Sascha and the Butch will be on in the beer garden. Wouldn’t mind giving them a listen. It’s been a while,” was my contribution to the developing theme.

“Really?” Bernelle interjected. “I certainly didn’t expect that.”

“Nobody,” I replied, “expects...”

“The Spanish Inquisition,”

Hopalong completed the Monty Python quote which sailed over Bernelle’s head and landed somewhere on the grass in front of the Yacht Club.

“That’s not what I meant,” she replied. “It’s just that I didn’t think you listened to normal music.”

“You should have noticed by now,” Hopalong suggested, “that the bastard doesn’t do *anything* normal.”

“Actually,” I pointed out, sensing the opportunity to slip in an obscure quote, “we’re all normal.”

The suggestion brought a scoffing snort from a predictable direction.

“It’s just that some of us want our freedom. Did you notice back there when we were out on the bay? When the Jimmy Buffet tape started? Did I say anything like turn that shit off? No. I don’t mind Jimmy Buffet. *Why Don’t We Get Drunk and Screw* is a great song, but do I own any of the albums? No way. If I want to hear Jimmy Buffet Hopalong’s got a couple of his CDs, right? If I’m going to buy ten disks, I’ll buy ten interesting ones that aren’t likely to be in every Tom, Dick and Harry’s collection.”

By this time, we'd reached the car park and decisions about transport arrangements needed to be made.

Bright Eyes had limited herself to two glasses of white and was, more than likely, under the limit, but a certain vehicle was likely to prove to be, in Jeffrey's words, *a copper stopper* and he questioned the wisdom of placing her behind the wheel.

Boris and Ruth, on the other hand, were *totally* and *more or less* sober, and, as a result, volunteered to attend to the driving duties.

So, once the vessel was safely moored, we decanted ourselves into the vehicles and headed to the Palace. Boris, for once, surrendered the Vibrator to Ruth, and suggested once he'd dropped us at the Palace he'd put the Mercedes to bed for the night, take over at the wheel of the Vibrator and return to the Palace.

As the vehicles sped off, we entered the beer garden, where The Duchess, who steered us towards a table, joined us. The spit roasting had been delegated to Porthos the assistant chef.

The beers continued to flow, and when Bernelle remarked favourably on the white wine she had enjoyed on the bay, The Duchess, with a *Darling! We've got much better whites than that!* and switched from beer to white, setting a pace Bernelle was forced to keep up with.

After a substantial roast meal, it was time to kick back and enjoy the music from the duo under the shade cloth. As Sascha and Butch worked their way through *Moondance*, *Brown Eyed Girl*, and their reworking of *Under the Boardwalk* we enjoyed several *digestifs*.

Sascha, known around town as the Purple Passion Prince had arrived a few years before when a Crustacean of Kiwi extraction mentioned he had a mate who had just graduated from Agricultural College, had been an All Blacks trialist, would fit nicely into the team at fly half, and was looking for suitable employment.

Since the Crustaceans had supporters in the farming community and ancillary services, it had been relatively easy to find Sascha employment, but several things became obvious.

First, he seemed to have difficulty finding a sustainable niche, and seemed to change jobs every few months, making his way around the circle of Crustacean supporters who could offer him work. Fortunately, his football skills were such that most agreed it was worth keeping him in town.

Once he had circumnavigated that group he moved into the wider community until he had, it seemed, tried every available source, without managing to find a suitable full-time sustained occupation.

Second, like most New Zealanders with family origins in the Pacific Islands, he had a pleasant tenor voice suited to reggae and rhythm & blues, considerable skill as a guitarist, and a relaxed and easy stage manner.

After a few of jam sessions, he linked up with the Butch, who played a rather good saxophone when he wasn't slicing rumps in his father's shop.

The Butch had started his musical career in the town brass band, and apart from playing sax he could work his way round a variety of instruments since he was currently responsible for the initial education of recruits to the band.

His versatility meant that the duo soon established themselves as the regular musical accompaniment for Sunday afternoon sessions at the Palace.

Sascha picked up solo work around the ridges, and the money he pulled in from casual bar work, the proceeds of the regular duo gig on Sundays and the odd show on the outside was enough to keep him going as long as the third factor worked to his advantage.

He'd found that the resemblance between himself and a certain musician who'd changed his stage name from a six-letter word to a squiggle ensured a steady stream of female admirers. Moving from one admirer to another he had no need for a permanent home.

Provided his income covered the cost of meals, clothing and alcohol, there was no need to seek permanent employment.

Each Sunday afternoon from around four Sascha and The Butch worked their way through an extensive repertoire. It was getting close to seven-thirty.

Although they hadn't run out of material, Sascha was ready for a break.

Shortly after we made our way into the beer garden, Carole Kensington and her companions from the night before had arrived.

Mangoes seemed to have recovered from recent heartache, and, by the look on her face was ready to offer Sascha refuge should he feel so inclined.

The look of would-be devotion I noticed had not, it seemed been picked up by Sascha. His attention was focused on our table, and from where I was sitting it looked like Sascha had intentions of adding Bernelle to his lengthy list of local conquests.

It was around the point when an invitation to *someone in the audience to sing a few* would give him a break, provide the Butch with an opportunity to experiment and allow Sascha to chat up a potential playmate.

Sandy, who had been known to strum the odd guitar, was seated on the other side of Bernelle when Sascha turned towards him and asked if he *felt like singing a few*.

Sandy, being the unassuming gentleman he is, declined, but, under pressure of popular acclaim relented and joined the duo on stage.

After a quick *Moondance* Sascha slipped away for a quiet couple of drinks. Once he'd visited the bar, he sat down on the seat recently vacated by Sandy.

As Sascha turned his charm in Bernelle's direction, I noticed that his advances were not being greeted with the attention they usually received. Two minutes later he was excusing himself to catch up with a few other people and headed towards the table where Mangoes and company were seated.

Looks of would-be devotion had evidently been noted.

As Sascha sat down on the other side of the beer garden, Sandy, glancing in my direction, announced that he had a few surprises for a few people.

Without further ado, he launched into the opening track of Love's ***Forever Changes***, which I had frequently claimed to be the greatest album in the history of recorded music.

There seemed to be a twinkle in his eye as he reached the chorus (*And I will be alone again tonight, my dear.*)

If that was a surprise, the next song was a revelation.

With a comment that here's a lovely (grin) song from the same album he went on to play a faultless *Andmoreagain*. Bernelle, along with everyone else who hadn't heard the track, was stunned by the stark beauty of the song.

For my part, I was stunned by the way Sandy navigated the instrumental break in the middle of the song. The boy had obviously been getting sserious practice in while we were away overseas.

The effect on the crowd was sensational.

The song finished to a wave of applause.

“What song was that?” Bernelle asked.

“An old one by a West Coast band called Love, Play you the original version when we get back.”

The reaction suggested the task of enticing her into my sleeping quarters would be accomplished without difficulty.

Sascha, aware that the reaction threatened to undermine his position as the star of the show, excused himself from Mangoes' table and was moving back towards the stage.

“Just one more,” said Sandy. With a big grin across his dial, Sandy looked directly at our table and said, “Here's one for my mates over there.”

Will there be any bartenders up there in heaven?

Will the pubs never close, will the glass never drain ...

As I recognized the song my jaw dropped.

It was Richard Thompson's *God Loves a Drunk*, well on the way to becoming the unofficial anthem of Moderation and a personal favourite ever since I'd bought ***Rumour and Sigh***. I looked over to Hopalong.

“How long has he been playing this?”

“Never heard him play it before, but he’s been shutting himself in his room a lot during the week, and I’ve heard it a few times on his stereo.”

When he had finished, Sandy handed the guitar back to Sascha, acknowledged the applause, and rejoined the table.

“Thirsty work, that,” he remarked as he sat down. “Whose shout?” Hopalong was despatched to the bar to remedy the temporary beer shortage.

“How long have you been playing those three?” I asked.

“I’ve been playing a few albums I borrowed from your collection quite a bit. Since I knew how much you liked those tracks I just thought I’d see if I could work out the chords since they might make a little welcome home surprise. So I waited until Hopalong wasn’t around and no one could hear me working on them and had a go. Took a bit of doing, but I got them eventually.”

“You got them, all right,” I commented as Hopalong returned with a fresh round. “Why the secrecy?”

“Well,” grinned Sandy, “I thought that if you and Jeffrey knew I was working on them, you’d put the weights on me to play them. I didn’t want to do that until I was sure I could play them properly. That instrumental break in *Andmoreagain* sounds easy, but it’s bloody tricky to get the timing right. I was able to work on that one while Hopalong was around because he’d never recognize it on its own.”

“Brilliant job,” I said, and I could see from Bernelle’s face that she seconded the emotion. “What’re you going to have a go at next?”

“That would be telling,” smiled Sandy with an admonishing finger wagged.

After those surprises, Sascha’s efforts fell a little flat.

Not that there was anything wrong with the songs they were playing. Sandy’s three great songs no one had heard him play before had left everyone stunned. Sandy, having satisfied his thirst, looked around the table.

“I’ve just about had enough for today, and I’ve got to teach tomorrow. I think I’ll call a cab. Anyone going to join me?”

The motion to adjourn was passed unanimously, despite The Duchess pointing out that there was still just over half a bottle of perfectly good unfinished Riesling. It was the second bottle opened since Bernelle had remarked on the quality of the previous white she had been partaking of.

As we were leaving Bernelle, who had not previously been on the receiving end of The Duchess’s generosity, thanked her for her wonderful hospitality.

In keeping with her role as Lady of the Manor, our hostess waved her hand, saying, “Take the bottle. I’ve had enough. Besides, I’ve got a little appointment with His Lordship tonight.”

She delivered the news in a tone that suggested the poor lad would be likely to find difficulty in walking tomorrow morning.

Arm in arm, Bernelle and I weaved our way to the entrance, where we found the rest of the party waiting. As the maxi taxi pulled up, we turned, waved farewell to our genial hosts, and directed our thoughts to the rest of the night.

Alighting at the motel, Sandy insisted on paying the fare, commenting that he *didn’t get to pay for enough round here.*

Despite protests that his performance earlier in the evening warranted someone else paying the fare, Sandy’s position in the seat beside the driver was difficult to argue with, so we left him to sort out the financial arrangements while the rest of us wended our way to our rooms.

There was no suggestion of further festivities and rest seemed to feature on most agendas.

Locking the door as I ushered Bernelle into the room had, by now, become a reflex action and I looked forward to the uninterrupted fulfilment of my less than honourable intentions.

Bernelle filled a glass and enquired about the origin of those two songs.

As I headed towards the collection to find the album, I ticked off the possible sources of disturbance that had been accounted for.

Jeffrey had safely ensconced himself with the Twins. It was highly unlikely he would be going anywhere.

Sandy, Hopalong and Bright Eyes all indicated that sleep was a high priority.

Earlier in the afternoon, when Jeffrey had expressed concern her mother might appear on the scene and disrupt proceedings, Bernelle informed him Olga was working all night in her regular role as cook at the all-night roadhouse.

Confident that we would not be disturbed, I slipped the CD from its jewel case, dimmed the lights, and went into seduction mode. There seemed no possible way that my intentions could be thwarted.

Half way through the album we had passed the stage we had reached the night before, and it was only a matter of time before the relationship was consummated.

Having been liberated from most of her clothing, I was about to resume the process when Bernelle placed the glass on the table.

“I don’t feel so well. Excuse me.”

She rose unsteadily to her feet and moved rapidly to the bathroom.

The sounds that issued from the bathroom thirty seconds later indicated that, while The Duchess was able to sock it away over an extended session, Bernelle had not developed the same degree of alcoholic staying power.

I waited until the sounds ceased, and ventured towards the bathroom to offer assistance and do whatever I could to restore the situation.

I was promptly told to make myself scarce.

Half an hour later a much-shaken Bernelle emerged, obviously still unwell and in no state to be receptive to any amorous advances.

I did what I could to make her comfortable and put her to bed with suitable medication and a jug of water conveniently placed within reach, then went to move into the other side of the bed.

From the reaction the move provoked, it was obvious my physical proximity was unlikely to prove comforting, so, heading for the couch, I did what I could to make myself comfortable and settled down for the night, wondering what turn of events the morning would bring.

The opportunity to complete unfinished business was unlikely to present itself, but then again, stranger things had been known to happen.

No One Knows

As expected, the morning saw Bernelle the much worse for wear, and disinclined to indulge in physical activity.

After a shower, she took a couple of vitamin B tablets, remarked that she doubted her ability to make it through the day and thought her toothbrush might not be up to the job of cleaning up her breath.

Since she'd cleared her stomach, she suggested a couple of hours should have been long enough to clear her bloodstream, so she was able to drive home. From where I was sitting that suggestion seemed inconsistent with previous conclusions.

Previous events suggested her judgement was not a reliable conveyance.

I suggested it might be better to get a taxi home and pointed out my suspicion our return to town would have attracted the attention of the constabulary, and you never knew where a police car might be lurking.

Not that my suggestion was, in any way motivated by the thought that leaving her car here would require her return to the premises in the afternoon.

When the taxi arrived, I headed back to the room.

There were no signs of life, although I was sure Sandy was quietly preparing himself for a week at the coal face.

If I couldn't assuage the lusts of the flesh and there was no one around to talk to, I might as well sleep.

It was well and truly midmorning when I arose.

There seemed to be activity in the courtyard, and I paused to consider the cause. There were voices and footsteps where all should have been quiet.

The voices seemed familiar.

I ran through the list of likely suspects.

Sandy would have long since gone to work at the High School.

I'd seen Bernelle off the premises.

The Twins would be engaged in gathering content for Wednesday's *Sausage Wrapper*.

Hopalong and Jeffrey would be around the place somewhere, but neither of the voices were theirs. There was a knock at the door.

"Herston!"

It was Jeffrey and the tone in his voice that indicated news of some importance.

"What is it? I'm just about to get in the shower."

Actually, I was considering a return to bed, but that was obviously out of the question. A shower was advisable before I faced the world outside.

"You'll never guess what's *waddled* in! Catch you after your shower."

With sleep out of the question, I headed for the shower cubicle, where there was remarkably little evidence of Bernelle's distress the night before.

The girl had obviously been well-trained.

While I stood under the shower, I considered the possibilities.

Emphasis placed on the *waddled* in Jeffrey's statement must signal the arrival of Waddles, although when we had last seen him there had been no indication of an intention to return to Denison in the near future.

Emerging from the shower, I dressed, and wandered out to see what was going on.

I was partly wrong.

Entering Reception I beheld the awesome figure of Waddles, and beside him, the diminutive figure of Wally, his stable jockey.

Over the next five minutes, I learned the unexpected pleasure of our friends' company had been prompted by fear in the wake of a certain race result.

Le Ver Marin's effort had incurred the wrath of high profile crime figures of Italian extraction.

Over the years, I'd heard the odd rumour suggesting the proceeds of criminal activities were being legitimised through betting. It seemed the last race in Sydney on Saturday was being used to launder a large amount of drug money.

It wasn't too hard to guess how these things worked.

A mixture of cajolery, financial inducement and intimidation would arrange a result to allow a substantial plunge.

There had been a shortener when the fluctuations came through, and it had run second. That was obviously the horse.

“Straight after we'd passed the winning post, before the Clerk of the Course got anywhere near me, the bloke riding the second horse was heading towards me. Thought he was going to congratulate me since I thought it'd been a good ride, but when he got about a metre away from me, he was straight into me. *What the fuck do you think you're doing? Can't you ride to instructions? Course I can.* That's what I said. *The trainer told me to get him back in the field and bring him home down the outside. And that's what I did.* He muttered something about a grand and reckoned I'd better be careful crossing the road. By that time, the Clerk of the Course was there, and he didn't say any more,” was Wally's description of the minute or two when he should, by rights, have been over the moon having ridden his first city winner.

“On my way to the Mounting Yard,” Waddles took up the narrative, “feeling good since things had worked out exactly how we figured, this bloke stepped out in front of me with his hand out. Thought he was going to congratulate me on the win, but he said something about my shoe size that I didn't quite catch.”

“When you asked?” I inquired.

“He suggested that I'd be taking that size in concrete boots. Strange thing is it's the guy you two were drinking with at the bar that Saturday.”

“And?” I asked.

“Anyway when we had correct weight and I’d collected on the bets I said to *Wally, Mate I think we’re just about outta here*, and we headed off towards the cab rank. On the way, another bloke suggested I’d better be making myself scarce. When we got into the cab, I thought pretty quick and headed back to the yard to clean out the safe since we’d be needing plenty of cash.”

“What about Hilda?” Jeffrey asked. “Where’s she?”

“Called her from the yard. *Listen*, I said, *you’re going to need to get out of town for a while. Got any relatives you haven’t seen for a while?* Turns out she’s got an aunt in Perth she hasn’t seen for years, so I told her to grab her purse, passport and credit card, don’t worry about packing, get into the car and head straight for the airport. *Leave the car in the long term car park*, that’s what I told her. That’s where we were headed, see, and once we’d cleaned out the safe.”

“How’d you get there? Same cab or did you call another one?”

“That’s when I started thinking. Knew that we might need to get out of the country, that’s why I told her to grab the passport. Had mine in the safe, so I grabbed it as well. I figured anyone who was after us would be able to track us as far as the yard, so it was time to start muddying the waters a bit.”

“So you didn’t take a cab,” Jeffrey guessed. “You took one of the cars from the yard?”

“Figured there’s no way they’d know the rego numbers of the cars in the yard. I grabbed the keys to the one Wayne’d have the most trouble getting rid of and headed for the airport. Figured they’d guess where we were going, but you don’t want to make things too easy.”

In between his training commitments Captain Headrush was pulling in extra money as an assistant used car salesman.

“So when you got to the airport you bought three tickets,” I suggested.

“That’s when I started thinking, so I bought one ticket for Hilda, used her maiden name, ‘cos that’s the one on her passport, see. Thought that’d be safe

enough since they wouldn't be after her. Told her to buy whatever she needs with the credit card but make sure it's nowhere near her aunty's or wherever she ends up staying. Got her aunty's phone number and said I'd be in touch and left her there to catch the next plane to Perth."

"Where'd you go?" Jeffrey asked. "If you didn't buy a plane ticket you must have."

"Caught the train. Thinking about it on the way to the airport, I asked Wally to ring and see if there's an overnight train from Melbourne to Sydney, which there is as it turns out. In case you're interested, they don't ask for ID on the train, so we left Hilda at the airport and headed into Central, booked two seats on the train to Melbourne and parked the car somewhere it'd be towed away Monday morning. Wayne'll report it stolen, so there's no hassle there, and we pissed off to grab a feed while we waited for the train to leave at eight-forty."

"In the morning, when you got to Melbourne," I surmised.

"We got off at Southern Cross and caught the airport shuttle. When we got there, I booked two seats to Hobart and got onto my mate who's got a car yard in Launceston. He got onto a mate of his in Hobart who met us at the airport with a car we could borrow for a week and headed up to Lonnie, where my mate met us at the airport after he'd booked two seats to Adelaide for him and his offsider."

"After the check-in he handed you and Wally the boarding passes, so there's no record of you two leaving the island," Jeffrey concluded.

"So with a bit of luck they'll track us as far as Hobart and think we're hiding out somewhere in Tassie. Since there won't be any record of Wally or me leaving Tasmania, I figured we'd be reasonably safe using our real names the rest of the way."

Waddles seemed confident, but I had my doubts. Their journey had taken them through Alice Springs, Perth, Darwin and Brisbane, stopping in each place long enough to get onto the next flight to somewhere else.

The final leg took them to Mackay where they'd borrowed a set of wheels from one of Waddles' contacts in the motor vehicle industry and headed for Denison, planning to lie low until things quietened down.

"So," I asked. "Where are you off to now?"

"Nowhere. We figured we could say here."

"Not a good idea," I countered. "A certain gentleman of Italian extraction with a keen interest in your shoe size has the phone number and..."

At this point the phone rang, and I left them to their deliberations.

When I picked up the receiver, I thought the voice at the other end of the line was familiar, but it was not until it offered me a little information for Wednesday's races in return for information of interest to the caller's friends that I realized it was the cooperative gentleman who had organized the final stages of our Sydney betting coup.

I could guess what was coming and tried to sound as noncommittal as possible.

"At the races the other day, you were talking to a bloke called Waddington," the caller observed.

There was no point in denying that.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Know him well, do you?"

"He had a car yard here, but he packed up and bought into a place in Sydney. Don't hear a lot from him these days, but he rings from time to time. Why?"

"Ring you last Saturday, did he?"

There was little point in denying that either. Anyone who interviewed people present at the track on Saturday afternoon would have shot us down in flames. Likewise, The Duchess's excursion to the TAB would have been very difficult to cover up.

"Yeah, that's right. Gave us a good tip."

I hoped there was no hint of my alarm in my voice.

“You haven’t heard from him since.”

“Not a word. I was going to give him a call later today to thank him for the tip. Could have done it yesterday but we were having a bit of a celebration.”

“Well, I don’t think you’ll catch him at the car yard, and if you’re thinking of ringing him at home, don’t bother. The phone isn’t answering. If you happen to sight him could you give me a call? Some of my friends are interested in talking to him about a conveyance.”

Somehow I had the impression that the friends were not in the market for a used car.

“No worries. I wouldn’t be expecting him up this way though. He left because he wanted to be able to get a decent bet on and swore black and blue that he wouldn’t be back.”

“You know what they say about used car salesmen. Most of them couldn’t lay straight in bed. If you happen to see Waddington, or his jockey, be sure to give me a call. You’ve got the number?”

I didn’t, but within a minute it was prominent on the Reception whiteboard. I thought it was a good place for it while certain accommodation arrangements were up in the air.

“Good. You seemed like a nice bloke. Be a shame if something nasty happened to you.”

“For sure. As soon as I hear from the big bastard, I’ll give you a call.”

That had been a little close for comfort, and the cat was well and truly among the pigeons.

I walked back into Recreation.

We had landed ourselves in a Chamozzle.

There had been a particularly well-named horse a few years, Rumpus Room, by Chamozzle out of Downstairs. As I entered our equivalent of a rumpus room, three faces looked up.

“Who was that?” they asked in unison. Something in my face must have showed concern.

“A certain well dressed gentleman from Sydney. Bloke who seemed to be able to get fairly big bets on easily. Seems like you’re definitely not going to be staying here.”

“What’d he want?” The question was again, almost in unison.

“He’s interested in locating you pair, I don’t think we’ve heard the last of him.”

“So, what do you reckon?” Jeffrey asked.

I looked at the two fugitives.

“Have you stopped anywhere else around town?”

“Nope. Straight off the highway into your car park. Right Wally?”

Wally verified that this was the case.

“You wouldn’t have noticed, whether the sign outside the Shoreline had a *No* in front of the *Vacancy*? No? I thought not. Excuse me for a mo.”

Our new home was on the outskirts of town, but it would be impossible to hide them on the premises. Both were sufficiently distinctive and well-known to create difficulties should we try to hide them in downtown Denison.

There was a motel on the outskirts of town, perched on top of a hill looking over the bay, much favoured by commercial travellers. There were a dozen rooms, so it was a husband and wife operation. If they could be sworn to secrecy, there wasn’t much chance of someone breaching security.

The business had changed hands, and I knew the new management from the time their son had been in the district schoolboys’ cricket side. I’d wangled him a spot in the regional team, and they’d told me that if there was anything they could do, all I had to do was ask.

It was time to call in a few favours.

A call was enough to slot Waddles and Wally into the room at the back of the building furthest from the road. There were a number of other matters that needed attention, but we'd made a start.

The car they were driving probably wouldn't be known to pursuers, but in case the two of them were tracked as far as Mackay, it would be better off out of town. Jeffrey volunteered to return it to Mackay and suggested if someone was to drive it to Townsville and back before that, the waters might be further muddied.

The first step was to transfer Wally and Waddles to their new refuge.

If we were going to keep them out of sight we'd need to provide entertainment, but, fortunately, there was a spare DVD player on the premises that had come with the buildings, so assuming we could grab a pile of suitable movies, we'd be able to keep them amused.

Breakfast and dinner could be provided onsite, and I was disinclined to vary the routine at the Shoreline by imposing on them for lunch. Ferrying supplies should be assigned to someone reliable, and Hopalong was the obvious choice since Bright Eyes and the red convertible would be too conspicuous.

Checking with Waddles and Wally revealed that they hadn't sighted him since they arrived on the premises, and a quick check of the car park revealed that he was out and about somewhere.

"And Bright Eyes?" I asked as I checked off people who might be aware of their arrival in town.

"The phone rang while I was seeing the Twins off. The High School needed her for a day's supply work, so she was gone well before nine."

"The thing about Hopalong," I pointed out, returning to the main issue, "is that he's an honest bastard. And looks like one. I mean, *we* know he's a low-down scoffing mongrel, but he's the sort of bloke who looks as honest as the day is long. We've just got to make sure that all the deliveries go to Reception, rather than the actual room. Mmost of the customers out there are sales reps, so it's unlikely

there'll be anyone apart from Ron and Bev on the premises around midday. So if a certain well-dressed Italian gentleman lobbed on the doorstep and asked if he'd seen Waddles."

"And he had," Jeffrey interrupted, "he wouldn't be able to hide the fact that he was lying. But if he hasn't actually seen you pair."

"It'll look like an honest answer." The penny inside Waddles' skull dropped. "That's good. I like it. Now if we can get out of here without him spotting us."

Jeffrey accompanied them so he could bring the car back before giving it a run around the countryside, while, armed with a pen and a sheet of paper I started preparing the shopping list.

About half an hour later Hopalong arrived on the premises inquiring about the unfamiliar vehicle in the car park. Jeffrey had returned and was preparing to set out on what looked like being a seven or eight hour road trip.

Bright Eyes could be detailed to collect him from Mackay when she returned from her day's supply teaching. The story I'd come up with to satisfy Hopalong's insatiable curiosity would probably suffice if an explanation was required.

A scrawled note before he left would provide extra cover.

Something like *Unexpected trip to Mackay. May need Bright Eyes to collect tonight. Will explain later. Jeffrey would probably do. Alternatively, he could head back on the bus.*

"Ask no questions," I informed Hopalong, "and you'll be told no lies. We've got a shit-load of things that need to be done. One question though. It's one that you might be hearing over the next few days, so you'd better get used to answering it. You wouldn't, by any chance, have spotted Scott Waddington during your recent travels?"

"Not since he sold the car yard and moved to Sydney."

"Good. If you wouldn't mind making sure you don't, there'll be a few people who'll be breathing much easier. You might be interested to know that a certain race result has incurred the wrath of members of an Italian crime organization."

"The Mafia?" Hopalong suggested.

“The same. Waddles and his stable jockey aren’t inclined to accept invitations to be measured for concrete boots, so they’ve been forced to make themselves scarce till things quieten down.”

“So they’re here,” Hopalong suggested.

“Have you seen them? No. Have I told you they’re here? No. So do you know they’re here?”

“No,” was the response.

“We’re going to ensure that remains the case. However, there are a few things that need to be done, and you’re the one who’s going to have to do them.”

“Such as?”

“The list starts off with buying a couple of prepaid mobile phones, a couple of bottles of Jack Daniels, about ten litres of Coke, a couple of cartons of beer, two days worth of assorted DVDs from the video library and some fish and chips for lunch.”

It was an impressive list and brought a predictable response.

“Who’s that for?”

It was a thorny question that I had anticipated. The truth would hardly be a satisfactory response.

“A couple of my cricket mates have hit a spot of bother.”

“Like Waddles and Wally.”

“Exactly. The two sets of circumstances bear remarkable resemblances. I’ll let you know the full story when things quieten down, but for the time being all you need to know is that these blokes are on the run from an outraged husband and an irate father who happen to be the same gentleman.”

“Pardon?”

“While Buckets was carrying on with his missus, Knuckles was getting the daughter up the spout. So they’re holed up out at the Shoreline. Now, obviously, I can’t do the supply run to pick up the stuff they’ll be needing.”

“Because you don’t drive.”

“That too, but what is more important because I promised Razor that I’d call him if I spotted them...”

“So that was their car in the driveway,” Hopalong guessed.

“Exactly. They turned up while I was asleep, and persuaded Jeffrey to drop them out at the Shoreline. Couldn’t wait until I woke up for reasons that will soon become obvious. Called me from there to ask for help with supplies and so forth. The phones have been running hot over the past hour or so. Just after Razor’s call when I promised that I’d call as soon as I saw them.”

“If you were to go out to the Shoreline with the stuff you’d be likely to spot them.”

“Exactly. In any case, I need to hang around here and take care of any phone calls. I’m not expecting any more, but you never know in times like this.”

“So where is Jeffrey going with the car?”

“Razor’s best mate happens to be the head of the Traffic Branch in Townsville. Jeffrey’s going to take the car for a spin around the countryside. Apparently the cameras that the cops use to catch anyone running red lights gather more data than everyone thinks, so the car needs to have a run around Townsville and then take a little trip around Mackay so that anyone checking over the video footage...”

“I get the picture, and the mobile phones will keep you in touch with them in case the cops are monitoring the phone lines here.”

“Right on. If they’re asking about the call from the Shoreline that has already happened, I can explain it away as Ron and Bev calling to see how the overseas trip went. Now, when you get the phones, there’ll be some paperwork involved, so we’re going to need a cover story. You wouldn’t happen to have any nephews and nieces with birthdays coming up?”

The Cassidy clan had produced numerous offspring, and I figured that there’d be a couple of kids with birthdays coming up in the not-too-distant future.

“I can check. It’ll be on the calendar in my room.”

While that task was attended to, I scanned the shopping list.

With renovations complete, we'd redefined Hopalong's area of responsibility to encompass the regular run through the supermarket. Since that was the case, supplies he bought for Waddles and Wally, while substantial, could be merged into what was needed for our household. We'd need something to hold supplies once they were sorted into Ours and Theirs.

By the time I'd fetched a box from the pile in the bathroom behind the music room Hopalong had returned. His researches had established his sister's twins, Justin and Jaymee, had a birthday in six weeks' time. They were turning eleven, so supplying them with a prepaid phone would be a sensible precaution.

"If they're your sister's kids their surname's not going to be Cassidy, right?"

"That's right," was the reply. "It's Maher. You know, like the cricketer."

"Even better. That way if you have to fill out any paperwork in their names you can make a joke about their lives being marred by the lack of a mobile phone. Might be handy to have those sorts of details in people's minds if there's anybody sniffing around."

Once the shopping list had been prepared, and Hopalong sent off on his round of errands there was nothing to do except keep to something approximating a regular routine.

I remembered there was a load of washing in the machine, and since it had been there since the previous day it might be best to give it another run through the cycle.

From there, I went on to retrieve the washing Bernelle and I had placed on the line yesterday, separated the wash-and-wear items from those that would need ironing and spent half an hour slaving over the ironing board.

By the time I'd finished, so had the load of recycled washing, so that went on the line before I headed back to the room to stow away what I'd ironed.

With the laundry out of the way, I wandered over to the kitchen to fix brunch. While I was doing that, Hopalong returned bearing fruit, vegetables and mobile

phones, and accepted my offer of something to eat before he made the delivery to the Shoreline.

As we ate, we discussed the need for security, with Hopalong agreeing everyone else in our community should know as little as possible about arrangements that had been made.

Bright Eyes and Sandy were not to be told anything they did not absolutely need to know. I was careful to ensure all references were to Buckets and Knuckles rather than Waddles and Wally.

Once Hopalong left, I placed the dishes, cooking utensils, pots and pans in the dishwasher, then made a quick call to our butcher to request a delivery. With that done, I resumed cataloguing the music purchases.

After about an hour, a knock at the door indicated that the meat had arrived.

Once the supplies had been placed in the fridge, I thought a change of activity was indicated, so taking the latest James Lee Burke and a glass I wandered to the pool for a read while I awaited the return of the rest of the crew.

As the afternoon wore on, I rested my eyes, regaining consciousness just after four to find Sandy and Bright Eyes had returned and were concerned as to the whereabouts of everybody.

In the interests of security, I explained I had slept in, and gathered that Jeffrey had gone to Mackay for some reason or other but that I wasn't sure of the exact details when he'd left since I'd been half asleep.

“There's a note on the counter in the office. Doesn't say anything other than he's gone and Bright Eyes might need to collect him from Mackay. Mind you, knowing Jeffrey there are some things that it's best you don't actually know about if you catch my drift.”

Their response suggested the drift had been caught, so I explained Hopalong had been coming and going on unspecified business, and I was unaware of either the nature of such business or his current whereabouts.

I'd been reading until I'd needed to rest my eyes for a while, which accounted for my lack of knowledge of Hopalong's whereabouts.

A phone call despatched Bright Eyes in the red chariot to collect Jeffrey from the pub nearest to Mackay's main shopping centre.

The vehicle had been left in the car park, and Jeffrey had come up with a story that would explain his excursion.

"Whatever story you come up with, it's probably best if you don't say anything unless specifically asked. If you're definite about having to leave before I surfaced this morning," I suggested, "that'll tie in with the note in the office."

When the phone rang again just after five I thought it was best to leave Sandy to answer it since he was closer to it and since, should the caller have any questions about Waddles' whereabouts he would be able to honestly say that he didn't have a clue.

When he emerged from the office, it was to indicate Bernelle was on the line, and wanted to know if it would be all right for her to pick up her car.

On reaching the phone, I discovered one of her work mates had offered to drop her at The Crossroads, so I suggested she might, perhaps, be interested in joining me for dinner.

There was recently arrived rib fillet in the fridge, and Hopalong had replenished the supply of vegetables, so I suggested that she might fancy a pepper steak, potato casserole and sautéed greens for dinner, and there was a red in the cellar which would make a suitable accompaniment.

While unenthusiastic about the wine, Bernelle agreed dinner sounded *nice* and she would be happy to *stay for a while*, though she was intending to drive herself home later in the night, which would place limitations on alcoholic consumption.

We would, I thought, *see about that*.

There were a couple of late appointments at the salon, but she thought she'd be arriving somewhere after six.

Five minutes later I was knocking on Sandy's door and suggesting that he might be interested in joining us for dinner since Bernelle had been persuaded to dine on the premises. When Hopalong pulled up in the car park, I extended the same invitation before heading into the kitchen to start preparations.

With a bottle of Cabernet opened and decanted and another opened and breathing, I was just placing the potato casserole in the oven when Bernelle walked through the door, accompanied by Gloria, who accepted an invitation to stay for dinner.

That seemed to provide a suitable excuse for a drink, so I opened a Semillon Sauvignon Blanc from Eden Valley. It might not be a good idea to suggest Riesling since one had brought her undone the night before. I suggested that they might like the tropical fruit flavours in the wine, and suggested they swirl the wine in the glass and have a good sniff before tasting, since the nose was rather interesting. Since this seemed outside their repertoire, I demonstrated the technique with the first glass I had filled.

If we were going to overcome intentions to limit consumption for the evening, some distractions were going to be required, and the finer points of wine tasting would provide a suitable smoke screen.

The fact that Gloria was a fresh starter unaffected by recent alcoholic excess would not exactly hinder the scheme.

Sandy and Hopalong arrived as I was filling the other two glasses, and once each of them had been given a glass, that was the end of the bottle, which meant that a second needed to be opened while the two of them entertained our guests and I finished preparing the meal.

Having planned for such an eventuality, it was easy to select a suitable wine.

I'd hit them with tropical fruit with bottle number one, so it was obvious I needed a different flavour in the second bottle. I selected a Hunter chardonnay, opened the bottle, placed it in an ice bucket. Giving it a little time to breathe would be helpful. Not that the breathing time was going to be too lengthy. In case reserves were needed, I checked there was a second bottle in the fridge.

Ten minutes later I was grabbing fresh glasses, and suggesting our visitors would find the nose an interesting contrast to the previous wine.

They should, I suggested, give their palates a good go at the wine since the malolactic fermentation had left it with a buttery taste. I was able to explain the secondary fermentation that transformed nasty malic acid into the more pleasant, buttery lactic acid, thankful we'd taken the time on a quiet Monday in the Hunter to allow a winemaker to talk us through the details.

The need to explain the intricacies of the winemaking process meant the reserve bottle would be called into play.

My explanation had conveniently taken us about as long as it took to finish our glasses and I'd need a refill before I moved off to attend to dinner.

Once my glass was recharged, Bernelle invited herself into the kitchen to watch while the steaks were done, the pan de-glazed with brandy, and a pepper, cream and mustard sauce prepared.

She seemed impressed with the process. While I put the finishing touches to the meal and tackled the plating up I explained I'd always been interested in food, and it was a case of learning to cook or spending a fortune on counter meals.

My explanation that, despite the economies of scale on offer at a commercial establishment, I figured it was still cheaper to cook at home was acknowledged to be sensible, as was my explanation that I'd found if I cooked a sufficient quantity on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday nights the leftovers covered dinner on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

I'd also benefited from discussions with The Duchess, D'Artagnan and Porthos, which had been the source of useful tips, one of which involved the sauce I'd just prepared.

“You should recognize it. D'Artagnan doesn't realise it, but I conned his secret pepper sauce recipe out of Porthos one night when he'd had a few too many.”

Like many chefs, D'Artagnan kept a range of items, his *mise-en-place* above his cooking station. These were colour coded and arranged in a particular order.

None of the containers were labelled, so while it was possible to see what he was doing, unless D'Artagnan was to identify each of the items in his *mise* and you were able to guess quantities used, it was unlikely you'd be able to reproduce some of his trademark dishes.

D'Artagnan had been persuaded to reveal the recipe for his pepper sauce to Porthos. Should some accident prevent D'Artagnan's attendance it was important to have someone else who could prepare one of the establishment's trademark dishes.

I'd wheedled a written copy out of Porthos one night when he was the worse for drink, and though the scrawl had been almost illegible, experimentation eventually produced an accurate reproduction.

Serving complete, Bernelle helped me deliver plates to the table, where a fresh set of glasses had been placed beside the decanter of red that had been quietly breathing for the past two hours.

Over dinner, the conversation turned to the lack of fine dining facilities in town. Apart from the Palace there was one notable restaurant and the consensus was that while the Palace offered exceptional value, the popularity of the venue and the size of the kitchen meant compromises were inevitable, regardless of The Duchess's higher intentions.

From there, the conversation moved to my overseas excursion, and the chances of preparing some of the dishes we'd encountered. There was a strong possibility of Cajun seafood dishes appearing on the menu once I'd had the chance to visit the fish market.

When I mentioned that there were a couple of oyster dishes, the news was greeted with considerable enthusiasm by Bernelle while Gloria suggested that she would be declining invitations in that direction because she can't stand them.

“Even Sydney rock oysters? The ones they get at the Fish Market every week?”

“Particularly Sydney rock oysters. I got sick after eating some when I was little, and I can't stand them.”

I filed this bit of useful information in the memory bank and suggested one of the benefits of living where we do is the availability of abundant fresh seafood.

That gave Sandy the opportunity to suggest my next visit to the Market might allow him to prepare his trademark raw fish, *though you'll need to make sure that it's really fresh.*

Bernelle and Gloria's reservations about the dish prompted the explanation that it wasn't *really* raw, being marinated in lime juice for at least twelve hours and looking at it the chemical reaction gave the fish the appearance of having been cooked although it had been nowhere near a stove.

That discussion, along with some of my reminiscences about Cajun dirty rice pushed the conversation to a consideration of some of the more exotic dishes we'd met, and once dinner was out of the way, the five of us adjourned to the pool with the remains of the second bottle of red.

The juke box had been operating in the dining room, but once we moved it was time to source the background music from my room, so I headed off to look after a suitable soundtrack. ***Forever Changes*** would be a good starter, then it might be best to keep things low key. If I followed Love with something bluesier and female, the right mood might be established, and from there we could move into something jazzier.

As I made my selections and placed the disks in the changer, I continued to think ahead.

It was obvious Gloria was not going to be able to drive herself home, so she would be needing somewhere to crash for the evening.

When I rejoined the group, I was quick to suggest it might be in Gloria's best interests to avail herself of one of our spare rooms.

Situations like these were what they are there for.

While she didn't accept the invitation immediately, there was no indication of an intention to drive home, so it seemed Bernelle would be remaining on site.

I had been careful to get the suggestion in before the subject of phoning for a taxi had come up.

There was something else that would be coming up a later in the evening. if I had anything to do with developments

With that detail attended to, I suggested coffee and, perhaps, a liqueur Muscat. Sandy volunteered to operate the percolator.

When he returned it was nearly nine and the red Mercedes was pulling into the driveway. The travellers had been delayed by the need to pick up a pizza, and while they ate, the conversation turned to events over the weekend, which Gloria found interesting before indicating that she was ready to take advantage of our hospitality and avail herself of the offered room.

With a substantial day's driving behind him, once the pizza had been disposed of, Jeffrey announced an early night was indicated, and toddled off towards his room. I was sure the absence of the Twins was a contributory factor to this gross form reversal.

Sandy announced that pressure of work would require his departure as well, and when Bright Eyes indicated that her studies were calling, Hopalong departed to call his intended in London, or wherever she was based.

News she would be joining him earlier than originally planned obviously needed further elucidation.

Which left Bernelle and I seated beside the pool. The night was cool and still, the level of the Muscat bottle, opened some time in the recent past, was steadily moving downwards, and, as the CD player shuffled on to Nick Drake's *Bryter Layter* I reflected that it was likely that the prospects for later in the evening were definitely becoming brighter.

“That’s nice,” said Bernelle. “Who is it? The last one was nice too. You’ve got some nice music. I’ll have to get to know these people.”

I was sure the next few weeks would provide her with plenty of opportunities to explore my collection, but I had other explorations in mind and suggested that it might be time to adjourn indoors.

After all, she had to front for work in the morning.

“I’ll just check that Gloria is all right. I’ll be right there. It was Number Ten, wasn’t it? It looks like the lights are still on.”

She disappeared towards the room, leaving me to wend my way towards my quarters, contemplating a certain number, coincidentally ending in nine.

Everything was working out fine.

I heard a tap on a door, and a whispered inquiry as to the well-being of the room’s occupant as the door opened.

It was only a matter of time, I decided, leaving the door open as I lay back on the bed. We did not want anyone to be accidentally locked out.

An hour later, with the door still open I opened my eyes. The clock indicated it was eleven-thirty.

An investigation of the area revealed a total absence of Bernelles.

Moving to Ten, I discovered the door was locked, although the lights were still blazing. As I stood outside, I could discern two separate sets of snores.

Curtains prevented further investigation, so there was little else I could do but turn in myself. Despite careful and detailed planning, the prey had slipped through my fingers.

I turned towards my room, resolving to be more careful next time.

Further Complications

A flurry of activity woke me the next morning, and as I left my room I discovered considerable movement afoot. Bernelle and Gloria were heading towards me, and before I could ask what had transpired, Bernelle explained when she asked about Gloria's well-being the response had prompted her to pop inside where she had fallen asleep.

Waking some time after two, she tried my door, found it locked, and had no choice but to spend the rest of the night in Number Ten.

For a moment, I pondered doors that managed to lock themselves, but decided it would be unwise to mention them.

Bernelle had indicated she intended to call in after work to listen to *some more of that music* and suggested I would be unwise to make alternative arrangements such as dropping in to the Palace.

Once Bernelle and Gloria left, Sandy emerged, suggesting he would have to take it easy during the week because of the need to rise early to catch up on his marking. It seemed he was doing everything in his power to improve my chances in the evening.

“I’ve got a shitload of marking that’s going to need to be done by tomorrow, and there’s no way I’m going to be able to get it done in the morning.”

“Especially if you sleep in. Been there, done that, got the shirt, waiting to star in the movie.”

“Even if I don’t sleep in there’s about six hours of the bastard, so it’ll be a case of getting up around one-thirty or starting when I get back from work and going to bed after it’s been knocked over.”

“So we won’t be seeing you poolside this afternoon?” I suggested.

“Not unless you catch me on my way to the fish shop. I think I’ll play it on the safe side and go for fish and chips tonight, and that might have certain advantages as far as you’re concerned.”

“Such as?”

“If I ask Hopalong if he feels like fish and chips he’ll be in it like a shot.”

I found the assumption quite reasonable.

“Jeffrey has arranged to meet the Twins at the Palace when they’ve finished the print run for tomorrow’s paper, and they’re going to want a quiet night tomorrow night since Thursday’s their busy day, so I think that will remove Jeffrey from wider circulation tonight.”

“Sounds likely,” I agreed.

“If Bright Eyes drops him there she’ll probably come straight back here and go back to that book she’s buried herself in. I doubt she’d be a starter for fish and chips since she reckons she’s putting on weight. If she goes into the kitchen at all, it’ll be to whip up a salad or something, which should take no time at all. Should leave the kitchen clear if you wanted to put together an intimate dinner for two, should you feel so inclined.”

Once Sandy had gone, and I’d helped myself to toast and tomato juice, I sat down to ponder the possibilities.

After the wine had flowed to excess for the last few nights, Bernelle would be disinclined to sign on for another evening, so the wine would have to be limited to one bottle.

Or two, at the most.

The shot would be to steer right away from wine, and as I took a sip of tomato juice I thought a pitcher or two of Cajun Bloody Marys would make a suitable starter. Perhaps a vodka based gazpacho?

No, I thought. Go with the pitcher of Bloody Marys with another one ready to go in reserve. Since it's Tuesday, they'll have a fresh shipment of oysters at the fish market. If I pick up two or three dozen, we could have them with a couple of different toppings. Since we'll have a couple of different flavours we should be able to get the best part of two dozen away while she decides which one she prefers. So, we can hit her with the old familiar Kilpatrick and give it a Cajun twist the way they do over there, then maybe Rockefeller, Bienville or, err, Rousseau should get things started nicely. And we should only need a main course and a dessert. Now, fish or chicken for the main?

Working through my cookbooks took a while.

I decided the entree could be followed by a boned chicken and oyster stuffing, a scalloped onion and almond casserole with dirty rice on the side. While we'd been avoiding dessert for the past few nights a bittersweet chocolate cake loaded with Grand Marnier might finish things off nicely.

I'd started on the shopping list when Hopalong strolled in, asking if there was anything that needed to go out to the Shoreline.

A call revealed that Waddles and Wally were running low on liquid supplies and video collection. needed a restock. Something to eat would be nice, although the meals provided by the proprietors were perfectly acceptable.

I added prawns, mud crab and videos to my list and suggested we might be wise to start the expedition as soon as possible.

After a quick visit to Bright Eyes to let her know our plans we grabbed a couple of eskies, piled into Hopalong's vehicle and headed off. Two hundred metres down the road towards town Hopalong glanced into the rear view mirror.

“That's strange. There's a black car I don't know turning into the driveway back there.”

“In that case, maybe you'd better drop me in town once the shopping is done. I'll get a cab back. Keep an eye out for black cars. If there's one behind you, do a couple of laps of the nearest roundabout the way they do in the spy stories when they want to check whether they're being tailed.”

“Why should I be worrying about black cars? I thought that it was the cops that were after Buckets and Knuckles and the Mafia were after Waddles and Wally.”

“There are two explanations for black cars. It could be the Mafia looking for Waddles and Wally, of course. You’d guess that if Waddles and Wally are on the run they’d be likely to head for home. Personally, I’d have hoped they’d have enough sense to steer well clear of here, but...”

That was true enough.

“The other explanation?”

Hopalong’s insatiable curiosity was getting the better of him again.

“When Razor called, he suggested that he’d be perfectly happy if Buckets and Knuckles came to a bad end, so I wouldn’t be surprised if, once the cops have tracked down their whereabouts, Razor was inclined to take out a contract on them. His family come from the Burdekin, so it’s not like he doesn’t have contacts in the Italian community.”

Our first stop was the supermarket. Hopalong drove to the bottle shop, where he grabbed a couple of bottles of bourbon, a carton of premixed rum and cola, a bag of ice and a carton of beer, placed them in one of the eskies and looped back to collect me in front of the supermarket.

Next stop was the fish market, and three dozen oysters, two kilos of prawns and a couple of cooked mud-crabs were placed in another esky. We definitely didn’t want any contamination of ice that Waddles and Wally would be using to chill their drinks.

I retrieved the oysters once we were back in town, hoping the taxi sitting at the rank would be there when I crossed the street and reminding Hopalong to exercise vigilance

“Remember, when you get out there, go straight to Reception and let them know their order has been delivered. Just carry it in and leave it at the office. And,

remember, if anyone asks you, you haven't seen Waddles or Wally since they left town."

The taxi was still on the rank when I had crossed the street, so it was a matter of minutes before I was alighting, noting an unfamiliar black vehicle parked beside the red convertible. Caution was definitely indicated.

As I walked towards the kitchen, I noticed three gentlemen around the pool. One was seated close to Bright Eyes, chatting comfortably as far as I could tell.

Despite the dark glasses, fedoras and black suits, I doubted they were a blues band in between gigs. I paused, decided the need to get three dozen oysters into refrigeration was paramount and had turned towards the kitchen when Bright Eyes called my name.

"Back in a minute. I've got three dozen Sydney rock oysters that need to get into a fridge ASAP."

I had just accomplished that feat when I was joined by one of the three suits. Behind him, I could see the other two still standing by the pool.

"Mr Waddington," the visitor started.

"Not me, boss. Not guilty. Haven't seen the bugger."

As the sunglasses came off, I realized it was our acquaintance from Randwick.

"Sorry mate. Didn't recognize you with the shades. No, haven't seen him since you called. Still need to thank him. You might not have heard, but thanks to his tip we cleaned out the local bookies on Saturday"

"We still need to talk to him. We won't be offering him any thanks. It's like this. My friends have money that needs to be legitimised. We do it by organizing a win at the races. Never mind how, that's what we do. Every so often we make arrangements that allow a betting plunge. We had one organized for Saturday. The oil we had for the rest of the meeting was good, so we thought that once we were sure of the winner of the last we could have a good day on the punt, plunge on the last and if the tax man comes around asking tricky questions we can explain things away because we had a big win."

“Waddles brought that unstuck?”

“Exactly. We arranged things with all the jockeys we know, and we know all of them.”

“With an obvious exception.”

“Right. Our people who watch the provincial meetings reckon the guy can’t ride to save himself.”

Wally would be very interested in hearing that evaluation of his skills.

“Waddles and Wally know you’re looking for them?”

“I guess so. There’s no one home and his trainer is looking after the car yard. As far as we can work out he’s in Tasmania.”

“But you’re here.”

“I had other matters to attend to up this way, so I thought I might check things out. You probably appreciate in circumstances like these we’re going to be very careful to check all the possibilities.”

And, I thought, there’d be a strong possibility that you’d be maintaining some sort of surveillance, just in case. There were matters I would be raising with Bright Eyes in the not-too-distant future.

“Mate, I’m sure if he was round here, I would have heard. If you’re going to check on things, I’d start at the Palace. If the big bastard was in town, he would have been down there big noting himself. I haven’t been down there since Sunday so he could have slipped through town without my knowing.”

“Even though he knows we want to catch up with him?”

“You could be five yards behind him and he’d be looking to stop in there to grandstand. He wouldn’t be able to help himself.”

“You’re sure?”

“Trust me. If he hasn’t been there, there’s no way he’s in town. Ask Betty and Bryan, they’ll tell you the same thing. Ever since he went out on his own, that was his headquarters.”

“Okay. You'll be in touch if he turns up?”

“After what you've told me, I'd be silly not to. You can fix the races? Don't the bookies get a bit tired of paying out all the time?”

The time had come to try to deflect the conversation away from particulars. I hoped our visitors would be gone before Hopalong returned.

“We can always arrange to look after them. Many people have money that needs to travel down paths where it is safe from the tax man.”

I thought I'd found the way to end the conversation.

“Well, if you can do all that, you're way out of my league. If he turns up I'll be in touch.”

As the car pulled away, Bright Eyes joined me.

From her remarks as we wandered into the office, I guessed that there was no way she had broken security.

“What did they say they were doing here?” I asked.

“They're checking on some farming business. That's what they said. They asked about you two, and what you were up to, and they're looking for Waddles for some reason.”

“You couldn't help them on that last one, could you? I mean it's not like he's called in here while I've been away or otherwise occupied, is it? I think you'll find, if you did happen to run into Waddles in the near future, not that you're likely to, of course, you might find he's hoping they don't find him.”

I grabbed a handy scrap of paper and jotted down a registration number. With that minor task accomplished, I thought a little further explanation was required.

“In case they didn't make it clear, there's a race result that didn't go down too well with some sectors of the Italian community.”

“Le Ver Marin?” Bright Eyes asked.

“The same. Those gentlemen had a swag invested on the nag that ran second and made arrangements to ensure their investment was successful. Now, just to be

on the safe side, you haven't sighted Waddles at all since we got back from the south?"

I had a suspicion some form of surveillance had been introduced to Reception. The office, after all, contained the phone.

If the implement itself wasn't being tapped, a bug would be handy when it came to monitoring incoming and outgoing calls.

Fortunately, we had a secure mobile option.

"You know I haven't. Unless he got here while I was at the pub on Sunday morning, you've been here more than I have, and..."

Since the purpose of the exercise was to let interested parties who happened to be eavesdropping hear what they wanted to hear, I thought it was time to change tack and avoid mentioning that Bright Eyes had been away from the premises for a substantial chunk of the previous day.

"So unless he got here while we were out on the bay on Sunday if he'd landed on the doorstep someone would have spotted him."

There was no way I was going to mention someone had.

I started moving towards the door. Bright Eyes moved in the same direction.

"Anyway, if he's got any sense he'll be making sure that he keeps his head well and truly down. If he does happen to lob here, I've assured Punter Dude. Did you notice that he's been very careful not to mention his name? That I'll be in touch. Now, while they were here."

"Yes?"

"They didn't go anywhere other than here and the pool? When you notice they were here?"

"Well," Bright Eyes explained, "I was reading beside the pool when I heard the car. At first I thought it was you and Jack back from the supermarket run because you'd forgotten something, but when I heard the voices I knew it wasn't you pair, so I thought I'd better check who it was."

“And?”

“When I spotted them they were just walking into the office.”

“So they wouldn’t have been down that way at all?” I suggested.

We’d reached the pool gate. I waved my arm towards the accommodation.

“No. Once I’d met them at the office we headed out here, and while we were waiting for you to get back the three of them didn’t go anywhere outside the pool fence. The other two were looking around the garden beds while they were here, but no one went out the gate till you came back”

“While Punter Dude was talking to me in the office, his mates were still beside the pool?”

Since the response indicated that was the case I suspected bugs introduced to the premises would be poolside or in the office. Still you couldn’t be too careful in cases like this. On my way back to my room I ticked off a couple of precautions to take before a phone call that needed to be made while Bright Eyes went into town to post her assignment.

Inside my quarters, I selected the nearest approximation to extreme heavy metal I could find, switched the speaker system to external mode and turned the volume up to a mildly earth-shattering level and closed the door.

It took a minute or so before the call was answered, and when it was, I was mildly surprised to find Wally on the other end of the virtual line.

“Sorry I took so long,” he apologized. “I was in the bathroom...”

“What about His Nibs?” I asked. “Where’s he?”

“Went outside for a walk. You want me to get him?”

“If you wouldn’t mind. It’s a mobile. It’s not like you need to put the phone down.”

“What the fuck,” I inquired in my politest tone once Waddles had been located and the transfer effected, “do you think you’re doing? I thought the idea was that you stayed out of sight.”

The response suggested boredom had set in, and Waddles had taken a stroll from the room at the back of the motel down to the rest area on the other side of the highway.

“During your travels, which I guess would have taken you across the highway,” I inquired, “would you have noticed a black sedan, rego number 359 GMT? Or Hopalong Cassidy? Listen, get your arse back indoors and if I find out you’ve been rambling ‘round the countryside again there’s a mobile number that’s written on the whiteboard in the office.”

“You wouldn’t,” Waddles suggested.

“Trust me, I would. I promised the bloke who left here about five minutes ago that if I happened to see you in the near future I’d be in touch. If you want to stick your neck out, that’s your business, but I’m sort of attached to mine. So, have you seen Hopalong?”

“The Scoffmobile pulled into the reception while I was down at the rest area...”

“So you immediately headed over to say *G’day*,” I suggested.

“Do you think, I’m stupid?”

Under the circumstances, I felt obliged to reply affirmatively.

The response indicated deep hurt as he pointed out that he’d remained in the rest area till Hopalong’s chariot was pointed towards home.

“On your way back across the highway, there’s no chance some bastard driving past would have spotted you and decided to drop into the Palace, where three heavies from Sydney are probably discussing your whereabouts as we speak? You can just imagine it. Bloke walks into the bar and says *You’ll never guess who I saw out on the highway just now. Bloody Waddles. How long’s he been back?* Nice kettle of fish. No, you get your arse under cover and if I hear...”

“OK,” was the response. “I get the picture.”

With one task out of the way I turned my attention to the next matter.

A quick tap on Jeffrey's door was enough to ascertain he'd been in his room when the visitors arrived, and, hearing voices took a look through the curtains.

“When I saw the black suits I figured they were either coppers, tax inspectors or the Mafia. No way I want to talk to any of those bastards, so I made sure the curtains were closed and stayed put until just now. Wouldn't have opened the door if you hadn't asked if I was in here.”

After hearing the news, he seemed happy with his decision.

Leaving him to the Lotto research that had been the focus of attention when I knocked, I headed towards the car park to interview our one-legged messenger boy.

Five minutes later, Hopalong pulled into the driveway.

He wasted no time in reassuring me that he hadn't seen Waddles or Wally.

When I described the visitors who had just left and asked whether he'd sighted them, the answer was negative. He had scarcely finished those assurances when the phone rang. Vaulting into Reception, I hoped matters were not about to be complicated by the intrusion of further variables into the mix.

“Moderation. Herston speaking,”

“So who the fuck are these three bastards you sent round here, asshole?”

It was an agitated Duchess calling from the Palace. This was a definite variable. I would need to word my responses carefully.

“These three heavies just walked in here, and the temperature dropped about twenty degrees in three-fifths of a second. Who are they?”

“The short one is the bloke who helped us out at Randwick the other Saturday. The other two, I guess, are the muscle.”

“They're asking about Waddles. What's this all about?”

“You know the money you collected on Saturday from Waddles' tip?”

“Of course. What have these three got to do with that?”

“They were on the one that ran second. Waddles upset their apple cart, and they’re out to square things. The little bloke phoned here yesterday looking for him, and when they turned up here ten minutes ago I told them if Waddles turns up in town he would make the Palace his first port of call.”

“But he hasn’t been here.”

She seemed far from convinced.

“Which would tend to suggest that he’s not in town. Listen. Do what I just did. Take the guy’s phone number and reassure him that if Waddles turns up you’ll definitely call him to let him know.”

“What if he turns up here? What if he walks through the door in five seconds’ time”

So many questions. So few explanations that can be offered....

“Look, as far as anyone knows, Waddles and Wally are in Tasmania. That’s what they told me, anyway. They’re in the area on other business. They reckoned they had farming interests and were looking in on the off chance that he’d turned up here. But you;d reckon if they’ve been able to track Waddles to Tasmania they should be able to find out if he tries to leave the island.”

I hoped if anyone was listening in my suggestions would assure them we were ignorant of the gentleman’s whereabouts.

Buying mobile phones had been a stroke of genius.

The Duchess expressed doubts, but agreed to go along with it.

“In any case, if Waddles was to walk in the door, you could always warn him they’re on his tail before you call them. He must know they’re after him; otherwise he’d be at home with Hilda, swanning around the Wagon Wheel or looking after the car yard. Relax. If he’s hiding out, he must be somewhere he thinks is secure. If you haven’t seen him up to now, you won’t be seeing him any time soon. The sooner you give them the message the sooner you’ll be rid of them. I don’t think having them hanging around the bar would exactly be good for business.”

That settled the argument, and The Duchess rang off, though she obviously had reservations.

There was no way I would be directing the fugitives towards the pub, and they knew the heavies were in town, so they wouldn't be raising their heads above the parapet, but there was no further reassurance I could offer without threatening to undermine my story.

As I walked outside, the paranoia took over.

Would they be likely to call back on the way out of town?

Could they have introduced some bug onto the premises?

Might they have been able to pick up my end of my recent conversation?

I headed back to Jeffrey's room to call a conference.

Once Jeffrey had been dragged away from Lotto research we found Hopalong in the kitchen, stowing recent purchases in the storage facilities.

'Grab your keys,' I instructed. 'We're going to need to go for a quick drive. Don't say anything.'

As we reached his car, I noticed he had left it unlocked.

Bugger, I thought, another security breach.

While the car had been elsewhere while the visitors were on site, there would be nothing to prevent an interested party from introducing a tracking device at some point in the future should he or she feel so inclined.

"Where to?" Hopalong asked as we headed out of the driveway.

"Beacon Hill. Too early to watch the submarine races, but there's something I want to have a look at."

The journey was completed without further conversation.

When we reached the summit, I indicated Hopalong should lock the car, and gestured to follow me as I retreated to the windward side of the hill and found a convenient boulder.

With the town on the other side of the hill and the car a good hundred metres away, I guessed that there was no way that our conversation could be monitored.

“What’s up?” Hopalong asked.

I ran through a detailed explanation of the circumstances that had resulted in our current predicament without identifying Waddles and Wally as the fugitives at the Shoreline.

“So as things stand, we’ve got Buckets and Knuckles holed up at the Shoreline hoping that Razor doesn’t track them down, and if he does, there’s every chance he’ll take out a contract on them.”

“Right,” came two simultaneous responses.

Jeffrey already knew the cover story that explained Hopalong’s deliveries to the Shoreline. He’d broken the code almost immediately.

Razor referred to a Sydney punter’s well-trimmed moustache, Buckets referred to a used car salesman’s consumption of bourbon and cola and a jockey’s grip on the reins accounted for Knuckles.

“If that were to happen, there’s every possibility the job would be delegated to a subsidiary of the organization that just lobbed three heavies on our doorstep.”

The responses indicated substantial agreement with my line of reasoning.

“Since there’s every likelihood that one of them has placed a bug or something like that in the office and, more than likely, somewhere ‘round the pool, it’d be highly advisable to avoid mentioning any of those names. No Waddles. No Wally. And definitely no Buckets or Knuckles.”

“If someone else does?” Hopalong asked.

“The only people who know about Buckets and Knuckles are the three of us, so those two names aren’t likely to turn up in conversation. Unless it’s in another context, of course. You might be looking to wash the car and be asking where the buckets are kept, for instance.”

“Or you could have scrape marks from dragging the knuckles along the ground,” Jeffrey suggested, glancing towards Hopalong. “You should know all about that.”

“There’s only one troglodyte in this neighbourhood,” came the response.

He glanced in my direction and modified the assessment.

“Sorry, two. And if someone mentions Waddles or Wally?”

“We give them the standard response. *Sorry haven’t seen ‘em*. I assume that’s still the case? You haven’t spotted them during your travels today, for instance?”

The reply indicated that my supposition was correct.

“So we don’t say anything about Waddles or Wally unless it’s to confirm that we haven’t seen them, right? When it comes to Buckets and Knuckles, anything that needs to be discussed gets written down. There’s a shredder in my room so we can destroy the notes that way and the scraps can go into Sandy’s worm farm. Got it?”

They nodded agreement.

“If we need to call Buckets on the mobile we do it offsite. Otherwise it’s text messages. One more thing. As far as I can make out your car should be secure, but keep it locked until further notice. Just in case they do manage to plant something on it, whenever you’ve got stuff that needs to go out to the motel, you drive your car round to your uncle’s place, borrow one of his and use that one for the drop.”

Hopalong’s uncle had spent his retirement restoring vintage vehicles to their original state. He would have a variety of cars on site to choose from.

Having worked out security arrangements and contacted Waddles/Buckets to explain the changes, we headed home and were greeted by Bright Eyes, washing the convertible.

All was quiet apart from a call from Bernelle, who wanted me to call back at my earliest convenience.

Fearing the worst, I picked up the phone, but once contact was made learned her call had been prompted by the need to remind me she would be coming around later to *listen to some more of that nice music* and ask whether I wanted her to pick up a takeaway for the two of us on the way.

“I’ve made an executive decision on the dinner front for the evening. You wouldn’t mind a feed of oysters? There was a fresh shipment when we lobbed at the Fish Board this morning.”

Reassured by the implication that a discreet dinner for two fitted her plans, as I hung up I was quietly optimistic about the chances for the evening, and headed into the kitchen to begin preparations for dinner.

Once the basic preparation was complete, I spent a couple of hours in my room preoccupied with the intricacies of cataloguing a music collection,

Jeffrey’s arrival on the doorstep just after four to report imminent departure for the Palace indicated things were developing as Sandy suspected and reminded me there was preparation to be done. A question about joining him was declined on the grounds of Bernelle’s impending arrival.

In any case, I had things to do to a couple of dozen oysters, and I expected to have a reserve supply under refrigeration for later use if he knew what I meant.

“Say no more,” he responded, then turned and called for Bright Eyes and her burnished chariot.

Arriving in the kitchen by way of the lime tree beside the back door, my first task was to prepare a couple of pitchers of Cajun Bloody Marys, with the best part of a bottle of vodka as the base.

Once they were in the fridge, a supply of ice went into a suitable container.

I ensured that there was a scoop handy and prepared some celery sticks to stir the glasses and then turned my attention to the main course.

Once the bones were removed from the chicken, I inserted the oyster stuffing and placed the roasting tray in the preheated oven with the onion and almond casserole.

With some dirty rice simmering away nicely, I had just finished garnishing the remaining oysters when Sandy and Hopalong appeared, asking whether I would be joining them at the Palace for a couple.

“I thought you were getting your marking up to date,” I remarked.

“That was Plan A,” Sandy replied. “Then I got home and discovered we’d had visitors, so I thought it might be a good idea to head down there to see what was going on. We’re only having a couple and we’ll be picking up fish and chips on the way back. You won’t be needing any, by the looks, but I thought we’d ask anyway.”

Once they’d gone, I completed the preparations, took four trays, covered them in rock salt, placed half a dozen oysters on each, covered them with shrink wrap and set them aside until it was time to place them under the grill. Two would do for starters, and once we established someone’s favourites, the remaining trays could be rearranged to allow a further half dozen of the ones she really liked.

For my part, I liked all the variations, and would be quite happy to finish off whatever was left. After a check on the other dishes, there was nothing left to do but grab a beer, select an appropriate playlist on the jukebox and await Madam’s arrival.

Bernelle walked through the door twenty minutes later, which was two minutes after I’d opened a second beer. In reply to my question about something to drink, she indicated she’d like something different so, fetching a pitcher of Bloody Marys from the fridge and the ice bucket from the freezer, I filled a glass with ice cubes topped it with liquid and grabbed one of my celery sticks.

“You’ll find this refreshing. The celery’s a bit better than a swizzle stick, since you can crunch into it when you’ve finished the drink. Healthy, eh? I’d be having one myself if I hadn’t just opened this.”

Any reservations based on the tomato base soon disappeared, and the celery stick was being crunched before I was half way through my beer. I refilled the glass, supplied another celery stick and directed her attention to the juke box, where Aaron Neville was wailing away.

“Who’s that?” was a predictable reaction, providing the chance to identify Mr Neville as one of New Orleans’ premier vocalists, suggest he possessed a unique voice, and opine that the choice of material did not always do the voice justice.

As I spoke, we moved, glasses in hand, from towards the entertainment area, where a divan seemed to be beckoning. I heeded its siren call, and was finishing my explanation as we sat down. *My Greatest Gift* finished and *Tell It Like It Is* started up. For the next three minutes, we lay back as the music washed over us.

“That’s so beautiful. You said he used to work on the wharves?”

“Exactly. When we get back to my place, I’ll give you a look at the CD case. You’d never guess that a voice like that would come out of a guy who’s built like a brick outhouse. When you see his photo, you’d pick him as the kind of guy you wouldn’t want to run into on a dark night in a back alley”

“He's got a voice like an angel.”

“Ironic, isn’t it? Sort of like Flukey Lukey,” I said, dropping the name of her first boyfriend from years ago.

He’d had all the girls and the female teachers eating out of his hand, starred in all the school sporting teams, and ended up as a gay rights activist.

It would have been easy to remain where we were, but the need to replenish a glass prompted a return to the kitchen.

“Anyway, what’s for dinner?” she asked, accepting another Bloody Mary.

I was pouring one for myself, thinking this would allow me to influence the rate of consumption.

“When I called at lunch time you said you were making something special.”

The inquiry was the signal to remove two trays of oysters from the fridge.

“I thought we’d start with these. There’s a Cajun take on Oysters Kilpatrick. I thought we’d have some of them as a sort of point of reference. The ones with the bread crumbs are Oysters Bienville, and the green ones are Oysters Rockefeller. The green stuff is spinach. The name must have something to do with all the

greenbacks the Rockefellers accumulated. Ten minutes in the oven and they'll be done. If you've got a particular liking for one of these, I've got a reserve supply in the fridge."

To make way for the oysters, I had to remove the chicken and the casserole from the oven.

"Here we've got a deboned chicken with oyster stuffing and a little onion and almond casserole. There's some dirty rice over there on the stove. Anything left over will get demolished over the next couple of days."

The Bloody Marys continued to flow while we attended to the oysters, and once the main course hit the table a bottle of Verdelho appeared.

With the meal out of the way, leftovers in storage and the Verdelho vanished it was time to head along the accommodation wing with a slight diversion to join Bright Eyes, Sandy and Hopalong beside the pool, where they were recuperating from a battle with a mountain of fish and chips.

Sandy reported the visitors departed from the Palace just after my conversation with The Duchess. His Lordship had been directed to tail them to ensure that they left town.

He had followed their car as far as Merinda before turning off the highway to call in at the pub.

Once the report was complete, it was necessary to explain the visit to Bernelle, assure her we were totally in the dark regarding the whereabouts of Waddles and indicate that we believed there was no immediate danger.

As I recounted recent developments I noticed movement in the vicinity of Number Four. There seemed to be someone seemingly intent on disappearing into the interior ASAP.

The end of the explanation, some six or seven minutes later, had Sandy stating he'd love to stay poolside and be sociable, but there was a pile of books in urgent need of a rendezvous with a red biro.

Hopalong, still in need of enlightenment regarding his lady's travel plans and estimated time of arrival, followed immediately afterwards, and a further couple of minutes saw Bright Eyes, predictably, return to her assignments.

Without company, there was nothing for it but to resume our progress towards the nest.

Inside, Bernelle excused herself, and I listened for signs of gastric distress, or anything that might affect my plans as I ensured the door was locked and, for good measure, attached the security chain.

Dimming the lights, I turned to the stereo.

Having selected a suitable soundtrack, I cranked the volume to a level that would drown out any tapping on the door and made myself comfortable.

I was forced to leave the bed when Bernelle reminded me that she needed to view photographic evidence to back up my assertions about that guy with the voice. In my absence, she had changed from her work clothes and placed herself between the sheets.

My return with assorted Aaron Neville and Neville Brothers CDs may have failed to convince her of the accuracy of my previous statements, but it provided an opportunity to develop an intimate atmosphere.

As one thing led to another....

“Wait,” said Bernelle. “What’s that knocking noise?”

“Something in the rhythm section,” I suggested. I needed to develop certain rhythmic activities of my own. “they use all sorts of effects in this stuff.”

“No, there’s someone at the door. See?”

While lack of x-ray vision meant I couldn't see anything through the door, as she spoke the music stopped.

In the few seconds between that track and the next, it was evident there was someone outside.

A female voice was indicating a desire to establish communication with my companion.

“That’s Mum. Get your pants back on and open the door. She sounds upset.”

Once the door opened there was no way any doorstep interviews were going to be conducted. A force of nature appeared to have entered the room, and raged for several minutes, incoherently at first, but as the verbal torrent continued, I was able to fill in the missing details of recent events.

Jeffrey had established his rendezvous with the Twins as planned, and settled in for the evening when Sandy and Hopalong arrived.

His Lordship and The Duchess had joined the party and described the visit they had received earlier in the day.

Revelations of the appearance of organized crime on our very doorstep, of course, was enough to send the Twins into a frenzy. Had they been allowed to do it, details of race fixing, money laundering and the local connection would have made the front page of Friday’s paper.

That, the rest of the party ensured them, might tie in with the public’s need to know but would endanger the welfare of the journalists concerned and members of their social circle.

“So,” The Duchess pointed out, “if you publish a single word about any of this, you’ll be looking for somewhere else for your little drinkies. I can guarantee you that you’ll find yourself barred from every other pub and club in town as well.”

Sandy and Hopalong had supplied the details up to this point, and things had been fairly subdued until a certain lady of northern European extraction appeared on the scene.

The reaction to Olga’s arrival was mixed.

Sandy and Hopalong announced they would be departing for an appointment with crumbed fish and deep fried potato chips, phoned an order and contacted Bright Eyes who had delivered them to the Palace and volunteered to collect them when they were ready.

Once Bright Eyes was on the scene, having allowed time for their order to be prepared, the three of them were about to leave when the Twins, sculling their drinks, requested a lift home.

The casual observer might have formed the impression the request involved transportation to their *bijou* residence, which was only a short stagger away, but as the party departed Bright Eyes was informed that they would be spending the night in Jeffrey's room, producing his key as verification that the arrangement had the requisite seal of approval.

When the car arrived home, I guessed they ensconced themselves in Jeffrey's boudoir and waited for him to return.

Once the convertible pulled away from the kerb, Jeffrey, from what I gathered, invited Olga to join him for dinner, ordered the meal and accompanied her to the dining room. Once the meal as finished they had been joined by His Lordship, and Jeffrey departed to the bar.

Evidently, in his travels, he had done more than collect His Lordship's bottle of red, a tin for himself, and a glass of white for Olga.

Once the drinks had been delivered, he had excused himself, headed towards the conveniences at the back of the beer garden and had failed to return.

His Lordship was joined by his Lady, and though Olga gained the impression the horse had bolted, she had not actually seen him pass through the dining room, or down the footpath outside.

It was ten minutes before she was able to extract herself from the table, head towards the Ladies' inside the building, and quiz Magpie about the whereabouts of a retired dishwasher.

Magpie advised her Jeffrey had emerged from the passageway that leads from the public bar past the office and headed out the front door to a taxi conveniently waiting outside,

‘When Olga tried to organize a taxi, she was told there had been a sudden and unexpected flurry of activity associated with the fishing industry, and it would be a good hour before one would be available, so she decided to walk.

Her temper was not improved when, passing the taxi rank, she noted two cabs parked with no sign of any activity.

When she sought an explanation from the drivers who were sitting in the office playing cards she was informed someone had offered them fifty dollars apiece to ignore phone calls attempting to arrange for a cab to collect females with northern European accents from the Palace.

An attempt to persuade them to transport her away from the rank, would, she was informed, be successful provided her destination was nowhere near a certain building that had once been a motel.

So she decided to walk, and had arrived at The Crossroads more than a little peeved. Her attempts to gain admittance to a certain room had been unsuccessful and she had apparently been directed to the other end of the building where she would, she was informed, find her daughter.

“He said that if I was lucky David would get both of us up the spout. Then we could have half sisters who were each other’s aunt and niece and enter them in the **Guinness Book of Records** or something. You wouldn’t do something like that, would you David?”

I assured her the possibility would never have crossed my mind.

Actually, successful participation in any activity related to human reproduction seemed about as likely as a self-powered flight to the moon.

Despite my reassurances, there was no way, Olga was going anywhere.

Once she had calmed down, she had climbed right into the space I had recently vacated and promptly went to sleep.

My suggestion Bernelle might join me on the couch were met with *it wouldn’t feel right to do that sort of thing in front of my mother.*

Even if she is sound asleep.

Blood, it seems, is thicker than water. *So, I reflected is soup.*

Which was approximately where I'd managed to find myself once again.

Wednesday Morning 6 A.M.

I awoke the following morning, having spent the night on the couch, somewhat less than grunted.

Not quite disgruntled, but not in blissful harmony with the universe either.

On waking, my first instinct had been to turn on the radio to catch the news and weather.

Second thoughts prevailed when I saw Bernelle and Olga sound asleep.

I paused to consider options.

Activity within the room would wake people up, and there was every chance that awakening might be followed by discussions I was not inclined to engage in.

The best move was to place myself where I was less likely to become embroiled in intrigue or negotiations between potential bed partners in or around the vicinity of Room Four.

Besides, I needed time to think.

There was a radio on the bookshelves, so I grabbed it on my way out the door. As I walked to the kitchen, it was obvious six o'clock was too early for the other residents.

It would have been too early for me if the night had been spent in comfort on something that allowed me to sleep with a pillow.

It only took a minute or two to make a cup of industrial-strength coffee with enough sugar to cut the caffeine edge and supply an energy hit.

Cup in hand, I retreated to the pool, taking care to choose a chair where I would not be obvious and where I would be able to see what was going on without being seen myself.

I turned the radio on, lowered the volume to a point where anyone more than ten metres away would be unlikely to notice once the noise along the highway set in and sat back, deep in meditation with one ear loosely tuned to the radio and one eye scanning the various doorways.

Several things seemed obvious.

In spite of recent events, the chances of seducing Bernelle seemed good, but, given the fact the wheels seemed to fall off the conveyance before the act could be completed I started to wonder whether the effort involved was worth it.

While she was easy on the eye, there were issues relating to the longer term that needed to be considered.

Would success in *Operation Bed Bern* be followed by nonnegotiable demands that could well include substantial changes to the lifestyle? Would words like *wedding* and *kids* start to figure in conversations and suggestions that I forsake the current accommodation and set up housekeeping in more conventional circumstances?

It seemed there was a definite case for inserting a sunset clause in current plans to prevent things from meandering into the indefinite future.

If there was no successful coupling by Friday morning, the weekend's cricket-related activities would provide an excuse to extract myself.

In the meantime, it was imperative not to become caught up in the vortex of Olga's attempts to inveigle her way into Jeffrey's affections.

Success with Bernelle could well result in emotional blackmail where her mother's activities were involved. The matter would need to be handled carefully.

Bearing those things in mind, it was best to confine efforts to entice Bernelle into compromising positions to nights when her mother was unlikely to upset the apple cart.

I had established that Olga's roster at the roadhouse was two days on, two days off, and she worked from four in the afternoon until four in the morning.

Since Olga had worked Sunday and Monday nights, yesterday had been a day off, and she would be on the loose tonight as well. Thursday and Friday nights would, on the other hand, be less likely to be interrupted. Friday night was going to involve serious degeneracy as the Dipsomaniacs descended upon the town.

Unless things worked out tonight I could make one more attempt on Thursday, and if that failed, abandon the campaign altogether.

Steps would need to be taken to ensure mother and daughter were kept well apart tonight with some sort of fall back position in place should it be required the following night.

The Olga question also needed careful consideration.

She was more than likely going to be out and about tonight. The Twins would probably be lying low since Thursday was a day for serious effort while Friday's newspaper was compiled. Olga might attain her targets tonight, but her roster would rule out repeat performances on Thursday and Friday.

Perhaps Jeffrey could be prevailed on to organize a roster.

Hanging over everything else was the question of what to do with Waddles and Wally, who'd be starting to go stir crazy.

There must be limits to the number of bottles of bourbon you can demolish and the number of videos you can watch while confined to a motel room.

I suspected the numbers would be reached by the end of the weekend, so I ran through various possibilities without coming up with an obvious solution.

When the first cup of coffee was empty, I decided a second was indicated. Fetching it would involve abandoning my vantage point, but there no signs of life, so if I moved fast enough I could, more than likely, be back beside the pool before anyone stirred in RoomsOne, Three, Four or Nine.

As I headed towards the kitchen, Sandy's door opened, and the occupant emerged, dressed for work and headed in the direction I was already taking.

The response to my greeting indicated the day's game plan involved an early departure for work.

“If you wouldn’t mind hanging off heading to the Palace this afternoon, at least I assume you’ll be going tonight since you missed last night.”

Mate, I thought to myself, you may not know how true that statement is.

Sandy, on the other hand, may well have been involved with paperwork well into the night and may have been only too aware of certain shenanigans outside Four and a subsequent ruckus around the door of Fifteen.

He could well be regretting his choice of a location in the main wing rather than joining Bright Eyes and Hopalong in the relatively quieter rooms on the other side of Reception. A slight increase in background noise from the highway would have more than compensated for the sudden uproars caused by frustrated females.

“I’ve got a full day today, no spares. It's staff meeting afternoon as well,” Sandy went on. “They’ve got some in-service bullshit as the main item on the agenda, so it’s going to be a long meeting and I’ll be needing strong drink afterwards. With your previously undisclosed Italian heritage in mind, I ought to remind you that the Duchess is running an all-you-can-eat pasta night on Wednesdays, so that’ll take care of the catering arrangements for tonight as well.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Pasta night was a relatively recent development, and I hadn’t had the opportunity to avail myself of the Duchess’ version of *pasta fresca*.

Assuring him that I’d remember his request, I left him to his breakfast.

Sandy emerged five minutes later, diverted to collect his briefcase and a box of books which had attracted his attention and his red pen, and departed.

When his car started to reverse out of the car park, a flurry of activity saw the remaining rooms divest themselves of their occupants in the space of five minutes.

Hopalong emerged, heading as if guided by radar to where I was sitting beside the pool.

Unfortunately, when he arrived the seat he chose was more conspicuous than mine. Hopalong had overheard my exchange with Sandy and guessed I would be unlikely to return to my room.

“I heard Olga carrying on last night. First she was outside Jeffrey’s room trying to break the door down, and then she started on yours. That didn’t last as long, and since I didn’t hear her leaving, I guessed she spent the night in your room.”

“That’s right. Aren’t you glad you didn’t end up getting a shot away the other night? The thought of that mad bitch and Liz up against each other for exclusive access to your dick is enough to make anybody shudder. Mind you, I know which of the two I’d be backing to win.”

As Hopalong agreed with my assessment, Jeffrey’s door opened, and the Twins emerged. It was obvious they had only just succeeded in rousing themselves after their efforts arousing Jeffrey the previous evening.

Their departure for work seemed imminent, and they’d be well advised to make an appointment with the shower first. They paused outside the door.

Jeffrey emerged at the same time as my door opened and Bernelle appeared with Olga in her wake.

Looking at Jeffrey, the casual observer would have been inclined to suspect that he had been the victim of a lengthy physical ordeal.

As he staggered into the daylight, the Twins turned towards Olga.

“You can have him tonight, but after the workout we gave him last night, you’ll be lucky if he can get it up,” Jools bragged, patting him on the back.

“Still with a good day’s rest and plenty of vitamin E the old goat might be OK” Char suggested. “Better drop in to the medical centre to get that Viagra script renewed, old boy. At least you’d better if you’re wanting to make sure the old boy doesn’t run out of puff.”

They headed towards the car park giggling as they contacted the taxi service. Jeffrey retreated indoors. Discretion was obviously the better part of valour.

Olga and Bernelle, having sighted Hopalong beside the pool, surveyed the area, seemed to have noted my presence and started to move towards me.

Noting their course, Hopalong decided the kitchen was the place to be.

He exited, announcing he had an appointment at the TAFE College, and he would catch up with me later.

I gathered this development had something to do with his fiancée's imminent arrival and the subsequent necessity of finding gainful employment.

Once he had gone, Bernelle and her mother sat down. It was obvious they would be departing once the Twins had left the premises. There was an apology from Olga for making me sleep on the couch, and an expression of regret that she had ended up on my doorstep.

With the preliminaries out of the way, Bernelle took up the reins.

“I’ll be around after work. You won’t be going to the pub this afternoon, will you?”

Hullo, I thought, tracking back to earlier meditations. Here’s the first of the nonnegotiable demands, and it’s coming before the deed’s been done.

It was obvious that I was approaching extremely thin ice.

“I think we’ll be definitely be heading out to the Palace this afternoon. I saw Sandy before he headed to work, and he reckons he’ll need a drink after his staff meeting this afternoon. On top of that after I’ve cooked for the last two nights I’m inclined to give myself the night off.”

I thought bringing up the catering issue was the diplomatic way to go.

After all, I was addressing someone who had not only enjoyed the fruits of my labours but had been on hand for a substantial chunk of the preparation time and would have been aware of the effort involved.

“From what I hear pasta night seems like the way to go for dinner. I haven’t been there to try it, but Sandy reckons it’s value, and he’s got a good idea of my

tastes when it comes to Italian. Anyone who turns up here looking for company is going to be very disappointed.”

While Bernelle’s reaction suggested this was a development she did not approve of, she seemed to accept it.

The sound of car doors in the car park suggested the Twins were departing the premises.

“Anyway, it’s time to take Mum home. In that case, I’ll catch you at the Palace after work. I might go home for a shower first, but I’ll be there by six.”

As they moved towards the car park, politeness demanded I should accompany them.

There would be a number of issues to be considered, and they would best be addressed away from prying ears. I waved farewell and headed back to my room. There was a pressing need to hurl myself at the shower.

I was passing Four when Jeffrey’s door opened. He shuffled furtively across the space between the doorway and the spot where I’d momentarily paused.

“Have they gone yet?”

“Elvis has left the building. They waited until the cab came for the Twins, then left.”

“So, what’s happening?”

“Sandy’s at work and Hopalong’s scoffing breakfast as we speak. Claims to have an appointment at the TAFE this morning. Something to do with a teaching qualification. Haven’t sighted Bright Eyes, but she’ll be working on an assignment. Apart from that, ain’t no one here but us chickens.”

“Plans for later today?” Inquiring minds obviously needed to know.

“Would centre around a visit to the Palace this evening? That’s Number One on Sandy’s Hit Parade anyway. He wants us to hang off and stay here till he gets back from work. I guess Bright Eyes and Hopalong will be wanting in for the pasta night as well.”

“Your girl and the Old Chook?”

“Well,” I countered, “it’s not actually certain that she’s *my girl*, as such.”

“Looks like it from where I’m sitting, But, in any case you will have boned Bern with the beef bayonet?”

“What? What chance have I had? Friday night Mum gets pissed off and pisses off with daughter in tow. Saturday night Mum gets pissed, and daughter needs to piss off to make sure he gets home all right. Sunday night, with Mum out of sight daughter gets pissed and ends up spending a big chunk of the early hours making long distance calls on the big white telephone.”

I paused to gather breath, allowing my companion the chance to comment. When none was forthcoming, I went on.

“Monday night with Mum out of the way again daughter ends up crashing in Room Nine with her mate and last night right when Percy’s poised for the plunge Mum’s back outside the door before the deed can be done. That’s the story to date. Makes me wonder what’s likely to go wrong next. In any case, I think they’re going to turn up at the Palace this arvo. Bernelle will, at least. The old chook will probably be there as well, I guess. The Twins?”

“Will be resting quietly. There’s a big news story coming up tomorrow, and they’ll be needing to be right on the ball to cover it.”

“Which would allow you the opportunity to take care of the old chook tonight. At least, if you do, it should mean she won’t come banging on my door again. You wouldn’t read about it. That makes, what? Five nights I’ve been on the verge of a root and every time something happens. And you, you bastard, you’re getting more than...”

Jeffrey’s suggestion it was advisable to *take it while it’s there* was scant consolation.

“Do me a favour. If you’re not going to give her what she wants occasionally, do something like take out a restraining order, so she doesn’t turn up out here. Maybe you should work out a roster.”

From the reaction, it seemed the suggestion had been taken on board.

I expanded on the idea.

“The Twins are out of the question Monday and Wednesday. Give Olga those nights, and if she’s working I’m sure you’ll be able to find another playmate if you need one. The only one who seems to be missing out around here is me.”

Had Sandy and Hopalong been there that last statement would probably have been contested, but they weren’t. I was more concerned with making the point that it would be nice if some people’s amatory adventures were conducted in such a manner that other people got a fair go.

While further discussion would have been useful, the sound of a mobile phone ringing gave Jeffrey the opportunity to escape while I took the call.

Reaching into my pocket, I extracted the phone and started to head for the cricket field, where there was less likelihood of listening devices picking up the conversation.

“Go ahead,” I said. “What can we do you for?”

It seemed we could do them for quite a bit, but how that was to be managed without breaching security was another matter entirely.

Cabin fever had struck, and the pair of them were going stir crazy. While I’d suggested contact should be made by text message so I could move away from the premises before establishing verbal contact it seemed cabin fever had caused the suggestion to be ignored.

I was not a happy camper.

“You’re stuck there as long as you’re in town. Whatever you do, don’t contact anyone like Hilda or Captain Headrush who’s likely to have their phone tapped. If you need to contact me, for fuck’s sake make sure you text first so I can piss off somewhere I can be confident is away from any listening devices. Having those heavies back on the doorstep is the last thing I want. Hopalong can keep you plied with piss and videos, and at a stretch he could get you out of town if we have to move you, but remember that as long as you’re here, everyone’s in danger. Don’t do anything stupid.”

I was assured actions likely to attract unwanted attention were the furthest thing from Waddles' mind, but wondered where he was going to go from here.

I noted their requirements and assured him Hopalong would deliver them when he was free from appointments at the TAFE College.

With that attended to, I turned my attention to bathing and breakfast, and once the fast had been broken, Hopalong's continued absence meant there was nothing to be done but to get a little rest.

I did, however, take the precaution of attaching a note to the gentleman's door requesting that he let me know when he returned from his appointment.

An hour later, a knock signalled Hopalong's return.

As I ushered him in, he explained he had heard over the grapevine that courses at the TAFE College were to be expanded, and a range of subjects relating to the building trade were likely. Someone would be needed to supervise students on those courses, so he had decided to check out the qualifications he would need to fill such a position, and had enrolled in the relevant courses.

"Liz? Any news in that direction? You said she might be turning up here earlier than you thought."

"Well, that's all up in the air. I've had to call a new number at definite times to talk to her, and I never get to talk long. All I know is she's involved in something big and when it's over they're going to discharge her from the Forces."

"So, some sort of undercover job?" I speculated.

"Dunno. That's what it sounds like, but all I ever get out of her is you don't want to know the finer points of it all."

"In which case you definitely don't want to be asking any questions beyond the sort of general inquiry about her health you'd be expected to make. You know, all that kind of I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you afterwards scene."

It was a blessing Hopalong could be relied on to accept virtually anything he was told as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

If Liz was involved in some undercover operation, she would be able to rely on him to maintain security.

Considerations of security and issues raised by recent phone calls prompted me to turn our attention towards resupplying Waddles and Wally.

I had just finished writing out the shopping list when a knock at the door suggested there was someone who needed to speak to us.

Opening the door, I found a somewhat perturbed Bright Eyes.

“Switch on your TV. Turn to BBC World on the pay TV.”

We had inherited the previous owner’s satellite subscription, and while we didn’t watch much television, it was nice to have a broader range of options than those on free-to-air.

With that in mind, we’d tailored our subscription to channels likely to attract our attention, and, at Hopalong’s insistence, had included BBC World, along with predictable sport and racing options.

“What’s up?” I asked as I hastily followed directions.

Bright Eyes explained she had been channel surfing as a break from study.

As she flicked past BBC World when there was something familiar about a face on the screen. Skipping back, she was alarmed to see someone with a remarkable resemblance to Hopalong’s fiancée, although the name associated with the face was not the name we knew her by.

The resemblance had been strong enough to send her to Hopalong’s base in Three. Hopalong, predictably had been absent, but the note still attached to the door had redirected her to Fifteen.

A newspaper had uncovered details of a terrorist plot in London, claiming links between members of the British armed forces and the terrorist cell. The group had been rounded up, and their identities revealed.

Five British-born males, allegedly recruited by a fundamentalist with strong links to terrorist organisations allegedly planned to use equipment from military sources in attacks on targets around London.

The source that was going to provide them with weapons and explosives was a member of the British military named Elaine Forsayth

On screen, the male suspects looked like what they were claimed to be, young men of Middle-Eastern origin, who probably checked Islam on documents where indications of religious affiliation were required.

The woman looked like any number of English girls who had meandered through the local backpacker establishments and bore a remarkable resemblance to the woman we knew as Liz Fothergill. Strangely, both our Liz F and this Elaine Forsayth were members of the British military, though the TV channel was not forthcoming with more specific information.

Faced with these developments, I would have understood if Hopalong chose to stay and watch how things panned out. Commendably, he picked up the shopping list and headed towards the door.

“I’ll just get this out of the way. Might be better to do it now rather than wait till later. I won’t know anything definite until I call Liz tonight. Keep an eye on things and I’ll be back ASAP.”

“Where’s he going?” asked Bright Eyes. “What’s so important?”

For a moment, I considered whether I should break security and put Bright Eyes into the picture.

No, I thought, she isn't the sort of person who makes a convincing liar. If anyone turned up asking questions it would be better if she could honestly say she had no idea where certain gentlemen were.

As we watched further details unfolded.

One of the members of the group, according to reports, lived next door to the house Elaine Forsayth’s family moved into about two years previously.

Over the next twelve months, this bloke had apparently become a close friend of the family.

Elaine was, at the time, on active service in the Gulf region and had become disillusioned with British policies in the Middle East. While she was home on leave she expressed these views in discussions with the neighbours before the demands of the service called her back to active duty.

Strangely, the period associated with that return to active service neatly with Liz Fothergill's visit to Denison and subsequent involvement with a gentleman named Cassidy.

From the Middle East, Elaine Forsayth had relayed a quantity of sensitive and highly embarrassing information to the neighbours. They passed it on to Islamist media, resulting in a substantial ruckus in the upper echelons of the government. Questions had been asked in the House of Commons. Departmental inquiries had been launched. Ministers had been called on to resign while Elaine completed her tour of duty and returned to her homeland.

That return fitted snugly into the expiry of Liz Fothergill's visa and subsequent return home.

Developments in the Middle East, including the derailing of the peace process that would esolve the Palestinian question increased Elaine's disillusionment with British foreign policy, to the point where she had, allegedly, volunteered to provide the hardware for an attack on a site in central London.

One of the British tabloid papers had become aware of the plot, but neglected to clear the story with the security agencies.

If they had done so, a British Government representative informed us (and the world at large) the paper would have learnt the authorities had been informed of the threat, and Ms Forsayth had provided the security forces with full details of the plot.

Her involvement allowed her to infiltrate a number of groups with links to those under arrest, but the publicity generated by the news report came before the authorities had enough evidence to put everyone in the networks behind bars.

It seemed a number of attacks were planned, but most were aborted because the authorities were able to arrange things so the intended target was unavailable, failed to arrive where it was supposed to be, or turned out to be covered by an unexpected random security check.

From time to time, the plotters managed to place a bomb.

When that happened the device in question had usually failed to explode.

There had been one case where an explosion had taken place, but having done minimal damage that had been explained away as the result of a gas leak.

When Hopalong returned from his errand Bright Eyes filled him in on details from the news reports, and once developments had been passed on the pair of them departed, leaving me to my pondering.

There was nothing to suggest Elaine Forsayth and Liz Fothergill were the same person, but, on the other hand, there was nothing to suggest that they weren't. There was even a possibility that Liz Fothergill could be a convenient attempt to build a new identity for Ms Forsayth after her involvement in the murkier realms of international espionage was finished.

A random thought crossing my mind sent me to the computer in the music room, and an internet search for *Royal Marines recruiting requirement* informed me recruits, and I quote, *must be male and a member of the Commonwealth or Irish Republic*.

Liz Fothergill, in other words, could not have been a member of the Royal Marines. I paused for a moment to consider the ramifications of this discovery.

Should, for example, Mr Cassidy be informed of this minor detail?

The suggestion was quickly dismissed.

If Liz Fothergill and Elaine Forsayth were the same person Hopalong's calls to her would be subject to surveillance. Raising the subject of someone's true identity could have unfortunate ramifications.

No, I thought. Leave sleeping dogs lie. We've never seen anything to support the suggestion that she's a bona fide member of the Marines, and if anyone were to raise the issue we'd probably

get an explanation that she wasn't an actual member of the Marines. Seconded from some other branch of the military, that'd be the most likely explanation.

Getting recruits to tackle a female who could look after herself meant they'd be less likely to underestimate an opponent when the excrement was in proximity to the fan. On the other hand, Liz could have been using the alleged position as a convenient means of deflecting unwanted attention.

So what, I pondered, do we say if anyone remarks on the resemblance between the girl on the TV and Liz? With a bit of luck, there'll be a couple of backpackers in the bar this evening, and maybe we can deflect attention from Liz by suggesting that a couple of them bear some resemblance to this Elaine Forsayth. "Ever noticed how all these young Pommy backpacker shielas tend to look alike? That'd be the way to go."

In any case, now that Bright Eyes had raised the issue I thought it best to hold a conference to coordinate the versions of the truth to smother any speculation that might pose threats to our own security. It was time to consult with Jeffrey and run through my conclusions to check whether the thought processes had overlooked any significant issues.

A quick tap on the door of Four was followed by an indication the occupant should follow me.

On the other side of the cricket field, Hopalong had constructed a shelter that could serve as a pavilion. Since the location had been chosen to minimise the risk of impressionable minds being exposed to evidence of degenerate behaviour it would probably be far enough from listening devices that may have found their way onto the premises.

"What," my colleague inquired as we made our way around the boundary line, "the fuck is going on?"

"Interesting developments overseas, which mean it's going to be important to make sure we've got our stories straight, so we don't attract unwanted attention."

By the time we'd reached the shelter I'd been able to outline the developments and noted that the phone in the office appeared to be ringing.

I added disconnecting the bell that alerted the entire neighbourhood to the presence of incoming calls to my *To Do* list.

“So, in other words we’re likely to be fielding questions along two broad themes when we get to the pub this evening, and it might be an idea to make sure that we’re all singing from the same hymn sheet if you catch my drift. How much speculation we get about Waddles and Wally is going to depend on how much the Duchess has had to say about her visit from the heavies on Monday.”

“A subject that wasn’t sighted on the horizon last night. I would have expected something, even a passing question about whether we’d heard from a certain used car salesman.”

“Which is good to know, but we need to make sure Sandy and Bright Eyes have the Buckets and Knuckles story in case anybody’s noticed Hopalong heading in and out of the Shoreline.”

I glanced across the field and spotted Bright Eyes making her way towards us.

“Which we should be able to accomplish over the next few minutes, at least as far as Bright Eyes is concerned.”

“If you take a glance over your left shoulder, you’ll notice a certain member of the scoffing fraternity is on his way to join us. You do the talking, and I’ll throw in a comment here and there.”

While Hopalong parked the Scoffmobile, Bright Eyes arrived to alert us that while there were no new developments overseas there had been a phone call from a gentleman in Sydney who’d appreciate a call back at our earliest convenience.

She had been scouring the neighbourhood to establish my whereabouts when Hopalong had returned from his morning errand, wanting to know where I was.

Once Jeffrey and I had been sighted making our way around the boundary Bright Eyes had set out in pursuit. Since a brisk walk over a couple of hundred metres poses certain problems for the one-legged fraternity, Hopalong was unable to accompany her, but an access road lead to the parking area behind the shelter, so he chose to make his way there by car.

When he joined us I was ready to expound the Revised Version of Recent Events.

“It’s like this,” I started “We’ve got two lots of people looking for two pairs of people already, and if Bright Eyes is right and this bird in London does bear an amazing resemblance to Mr Cassidy’s intended there’s every chance that we’ll have Osama Bin Laden’s mates on our doorstep to ask about the whereabouts of certain members of the British military as well.”

“So if the shit does start heading in the general direction of the fan, Herston thinks that we’d better all have our stories sorted out. He’s quite right, of course. Since he’s the only one who knows all three subjects of interest.”

“We’re all in the picture as far as Waddles and Young Wally are concerned. The Mafia are after them after the Le Ver Marin result. They’ve been traced to Tasmania, where we think they’ve...”

“Actually,” Bright Eyes interrupted, “that’s what the phone call was about. Our friend in Sydney seems to think they’ve left the island, possibly via Launceston.”

I shuddered internally. Hopefully there was no external indication of concern.

“That’s as maybe. In any case, both of you can vouch for the fact that you haven’t sighted Waddles or Wally, right? That’s still the case?”

Having confirmed that minor point I went on with the cover story.

“Meanwhile I’ve got two mates holed up at an unspecified location on the run from an outraged husband and father who wants a chat with the bloke who’s been carrying on with his missus and his mate who’s just got the daughter in the family way.”

Bright Eyes looked dubious, but I went on.

“The father of the bride-to-be remarried without knowing his new missus, who’s a fair bit younger than he is, had been having it off for years with my mate Buckets. While that’s been going on his mate Knuckles has been seeing more of the daughter from the previous marriage than Dad would like, so they’d lobbed here on Monday morning looking for somewhere to hide.”

“Herston wasn’t up and about when they called in, but they left a note with me and asked me to pass it on when he surfaced,”

“So, when Razor, who also happens to be a mate of mine, calls I can honestly say I haven’t seen them since the job of looking after them is being looked after by Hopalong. Razor has contacts in the Italian community, so there’s every possibility when certain gentlemen were arriving on our doorstep yesterday morning they were out to kill two birds with one stone. Not that they came out and stated they were after anyone apart from Waddles and Wally, but it wouldn’t surprise me.”

A quick glance around the circle indicated the drift had been grasped.

“As far as you know, Waddles and Wally are hiding out in Tasmania, regardless of what recent phone calls might have suggested. Since neither of you two would recognize Buckets and Knuckles if they came up and bit you in the leg you should be safe there.”

The reaction suggested that all present found this to be a perfectly reasonable conclusion.

“On the other hand, this news from London is going to put the cat among the pigeons. If Bright Eyes spotted a resemblance between Elaine Forsayth and the Lovely Liz it’s safe to assume others will pick up on it as well. You did,” I turned to Hopalong, “manage to talk to Liz last night?”

“She couldn’t talk for long, though. Some problem with the network on the base.”

“So there’s no way to verify that Liz and Elaine Forsayth are the same person, unless Liz comes out and admits it. Mind you, there are some interesting parallels there. When we’re in the pub tonight if anyone asks, all we know is what we’ve seen on TV. If anyone keeps wanting to go on about it, we do everything we can to change the subject or get into a conversation with someone else, right?”

“Anyway,” Jeffrey remarked, turning to Bright Eyes, “since we’ve got that sorted out I’ve got about fifty Lotto tickets that need to be filled in and deposited at the newsagent, so if you wouldn’t mind dropping them in later this afternoon.”

Once the two of them were on their way back I turned to Hopalong's report on the morning's travels.

The news was not good.

Remembering Hopalong was under strict instructions which would enable him to say, if questioned, he had not actually seen Waddles and Wally, the presence of two people who bore a remarkable resemblance to the gentlemen in question seated on deck chairs beside the motel pool was cause for concern.

“Anyway, as I was on my way in to Reception I couldn't help noticing this big bloke on the deck chair. Have you got any idea how difficult it is to drive along a curved driveway and park a car without looking over your right shoulder? Then I had to drive out without looking to the left. It wasn't easy.”

Hopalong had, however, managed to make the delivery without meeting the gentlemen, and, when pressed on the identity of the two figures beside the pool, was unable to give a positive identification.

“One of the two was definitely big enough to be Waddles and the other guy was definitely about the right size to be a jockey.”

“You couldn't be certain unless you'd caught sight of their faces, and you didn't have time to do that.”

“That's right. I made sure I didn't look anywhere I might be able to recognize anyone.”

“There could be a couple of guests at the motel who might be the same size as Waddles and Wally, couldn't there? So if anyone was to ask you whether you've seen them, that should mean you can honestly say you haven't seen them. Right?”

We were drawing a rather long bow but if we could persuade Hopalong that was the case, he'd be unlikely to make any compromising statements.

As he headed back to his own room I was reasonably satisfied.

But if security was to be maintained, it was imperative I establish immediate contact with our leviathan punter. Out came the secure mobile.

“Listen, you bastard,” I started when there was someone on the other end of the imaginary line, “if you want your friends from the south to spring you why don’t you just flounce into the Palace and ask Lady Liz to give them a quick call? She’s got their number. What were you and Wally doing sunning yourself beside the pool this morning?”

It was obvious the party on the other end of the connection had not expected a call of this nature. Flustered explanations were offered, along with an attempt to divert the subject away from a certain party’s indiscretions.

“I can picture what it looked like when Hopalong was on his way in trying not to look in your direction. So you waved? Don’t you realise the risks the rest of us silly bastards are taking on your behalf? What do you mean you’ve got the shits with sitting around indoors? Listen. Do what you like during the day provided it’s indoors or otherwise out of sight. If you want to work on your tan take the deck chair somewhere you won’t be visible to the general fucking public. Remember I’ve got our mate’s number as well. Any more of this and I’ll call him myself.”

As I clicked the appropriate button to end the call, a thought crossed my mind. There was definitely one disadvantage to the mobile phone.

You can’t slam down the receiver at the end of a call.

It was clear Waddles would continue to throw up difficulties and the only way to resolve the threat to our well-being would be to persuade Waddles and Wally to relocate. As I wandered back I decided the best avenue for transferring them would be to borrow Hopalong’s vehicle and drive them to Townsville or Mackay.

The convertible was too conspicuous.

Bright Eyes would be more than slightly miffed if her place at the wheel was usurped for unspecified purposes.

If Jeffrey and I accompanied them, we could use our own identities to get boarding passes for the flight to wherever they were going. If we were to continue in that direction, all that was needed was to work out how to persuade them to move, though cabin fever would make that relatively easy.

The difficulty would be finding a location where they would feel secure.

That problem lacked an obvious solution. It would best be left to the gentlemen in question. In the meantime there was a phone call that needed a response, so I headed for Reception, grabbed the regular phone and dialled the number written on the white board.

“Mate,” I apologised when our punting acquaintance was on the other end of the line, “sorry I missed you when you called. I was out the back checking the cricket field. Got some mates from Townsville coming down for a two-day game this weekend. I presume you were calling to check whether I’d sighted Waddles.”

Like much of the rest of the conversation it wasn’t the exact truth, but it was as close as we were likely to get to it.

The voice on the other end indicated my surmise was correct. Investigations in Tasmania had failed to produce a satisfactory result. There were reports of people resembling Waddles and Wally in the departure lounge of Launceston airport, but their names didn’t appear on the flight manifest, so it was difficult to know which names on the list had been used to conceal their identities.

“We’re working on it. We’ve got the details of the incoming flights after that flight left, so if there was someone who popped across to Melbourne to do a bit of shopping and come back, we can cross them off the list. If there’s someone on the list who’s home at the moment, that’s more than likely the person who might be able to help us track this pair down.”

“Well, mate, as I told you when you were here, I’ll call as soon as I sight the big bastard. I’ve been confined to base since you were here yesterday, but we’re off to the pub this evening, and I’m sure that if he’s been in town that’s where he would have lobbed. Lady Liz hasn’t called you?”

The response indicated I was, again, correct.

“Well, I can assure you when I sight the big bastard on the doorstep, I’ll be in touch,” was the promise that concluded the call before I headed back to my cave, aiming to spend an hour or two working on the music collection.

I managed an hour before Jeffrey wandered into the room, having completed the administrative procedures associated with the Lotto draw and handed the forms to Bright Eyes for delivery to the investment agency.

We took a stroll around the boundary of the cricket field while I outlined my latest thoughts on certain issues. Back at the shelter I ran through the options I thought might be employed, and we were just about to head back to our rooms when vibrations from my pocket indicated an incoming call on the secure mobile. I flipped it open and pressed the appropriate button.

“Go ahead,” I instructed. “It’s your money.”

“Herston.” It was Waddles’ voice that responded. “I’ve been talking things over with Wally, and we both reckon it’s a bit unfair putting you guys’ necks on the line by staying here. Wally reckons he can find somewhere to hide around the Gulf. His cousin’s got a trawler up there, and he reckons he wouldn’t have any problem getting a job on board.”

“Sounds good to me.” I neglected to add a mental *so far* to the spoken word. “What about yourself?”

“I reckon I could get myself over to Perth and meet up with Hilda over there. I’ll be getting in touch with Captain Headrush and asking him to put the horses up for sale, and my partner will probably buy out my share of the car yard so that would give us a bit of cash to set ourselves up over in Sandgroper country.”

There was, I felt, absolutely nothing wrong with the suggestion so far.

“What about getting there. How are you going to do that? I guess you’ll be needing us to get you to an airport or something.”

I used my politest, most non-pressing tone, though I was unable to see any way of avoiding involvement with their relocation.

“No,” came the reply. “I figure we’ve got that covered as well. I was down in the bar here last night.”

“What?” I exploded. “What happened to staying in your room and laying low? What if somebody spotted you?”

Casual disregard for basic security was starting to stretch frayed nerves towards breaking point.

“I was taking a stroll around the back of the motel and stuck my nose in the bar. There was no one local there, so I thought it’d be safe enough to sneak in there for a few provided I stayed near the back door and bolted if anyone I knew came in the front door. I figured I would be safe.”

I wasn’t quite so sure about that, but decided to reserve my judgement.

“I was half way through my first drink when this sales rep walked in and sat down beside me. We got talking, and I spun him a line about how my mate and I were hiding from the Family Law Court. Mentioned something about owing money for maintenance we couldn’t pay because we’d gambled it away on the pokies. Told him our car had broken down in Airlie and we’d caught a bus here. I reckon we could probably bludge a lift to Townsville with him.”

“Where is he now?”

“In Airlie. He’s a rep for a steel company. Does local calls here one day, goes down to Airlie and Prossie on the second day and heads out to Collinsville on day three. He could pick us up on the way back from Collinsville tomorrow afternoon and drop us in Townsville tomorrow night. That way you and Jeffrey won’t have any link to us once we leave. If I keep hold of this mobile.”

“Which is, remember, registered in Hopalong’s name.”

“I’d forgotten about that. Anyway I reckon if I’m discreet enough about it I could use the phone to tie up a few loose ends, then ditch the thing.”

“What about flights? How are you going to get a boarding pass without ID?”

That had been the reason Jeffrey and I had felt our presence at the airport would be required.

“Haven’t you seen the new check-in system? Check in at a computer terminal at the airport. All you need is your booking number. We can book whatever flights we need, use a couple of fictional names, check ourselves in and no one would be any the wiser. I’ll talk to Bill and Marge here, see if I can use their computer to do

the bookings, pay for it through their credit card . I'll give them the cash to cover it, of course, and Bob's your uncle."

I cast my mind over my family tree.

Try as I might, I could find nothing in my memory concerning the existence of an Uncle Robert.

"Anyway, keep me posted," I replied. "If you need Jeffrey or me to get you out of town, just call. If you need to get onto us tonight we'll be heading down to the Palace for the pasta night."

Turning to Jeffrey, I informed him that the problem might have resolved itself, but advised him that holding his breath would be inadvisable.

A glance around the cricket field suggested the grass needed trimming before the weekend.

I handed Jeffrey the mobile, observing vibrations from an incoming call might be difficult to pick up while riding on a lawnmower.

So, with phone monitoring duties delegated, I spent a pleasant couple of hours riding in circles as the mower reduced the sward to a respectable length.

Fez, Please!

Since the outfield had been laser levelled, mowing was a matter of steering around a diminishing spiral. The activity gave me time to ponder the Bernelle situation. There were two more nights before the weekend, and if things had not reached a satisfactory conclusion by Friday morning it would be time to give her the old *heave-ho*.

Her mother was a major part of the problem and would have to be considered when strategic decisions were made.

That was unlikely to be a problem on Thursday night, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Since we'd be heading to the Palace for dinner, I expected we'd come across both of them, and what happened over dinner and afterwards would influence my chances of success in the bedroom stakes.

If things didn't work out, I would need to have a plan in place for tomorrow evening, and the best chance of success would lie in withdrawing from anything that could be a distracting influence.

A move away from headquarters would pose problems should someone need to contact me about the weekend. On the other hand, that sort of interruption was precisely what I was trying to avoid, so departure to Airlie Beach had definite merit.

A quiet dinner?

There was a restaurant in the main street which would be more than adequate, and there was a resort within easy staggering distance.

Sounded good to me. Sounded better and better all the time.

That assumed my intentions would be thwarted tonight, and although recent form suggested that was likely, I decided against specific plans for tomorrow until tonight had unfolded.

If necessary, I could make a spur of the moment decision tomorrow afternoon and suggest we travel to Airlie in Bernelle's car.

Those considerations took a while to work through, and by the time I'd finished mowing it was four o'clock.

Parking the mower, I headed in for a shower and a change of clothes before Sandy returned from his staff meeting. There would not be a suitable envelope of opportunity with an impatient and thirsty high school teacher standing on the doorstep, tapping a foot and feigning acute dehydration.

There was also the advantage of being able to await the gentleman's return with a glass in hand, and the possibility of keeping an impatient and thirsty high school teacher waiting while I finished my glass.

Once I'd emerged from the shower, I selected something from the wardrobe and wandered towards Jeffrey's room to suggest Sandy would prefer not to be kept waiting.

The same message was passed on to Hopalong and Bright Eyes, who assured me they would both be showered, shaved and shampooed well before five o'clock. In one case, of course, the shaving would have been redundant.

Passing the bar, I grabbed a beer and headed for the pool, where I could chill out while the others finished their preparations. I had just finished the beer when Hopalong arrived, asking if I needed a refill. Jeffrey emerged soon afterwards and wended his way pool side, bearing beer for myself and Hopalong into the bargain.

Since we were both barely halfway through the current one, this complicated matters. When Sandy strode into view, expressing the observation that a man is not a camel we had to delay our departure until one beer had been drained and the other started. We would not, of course, be permitted onto the premises at the Palace with an unfinished drink in hand.

While Sandy set out to rouse Bright Eyes, Hopalong and I took our time on our beers. Around ten minutes after Sandy's arrival we were able to move towards the chariot and depart.

When we arrived at the waterhole, we found the Reserved sign in our favoured spot. Jeffrey indicated he had been in communication with His Lordship, who was concerned our return from overseas had not resulted in the anticipated increase in his cash flow.

While we had been out in force on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, our absence from the bar for two whole days was not a development His Lordship considered auspicious. When he joined us, he asked whether we'd be joining the throng for the pasta night.

As he did, I noticed an unobtrusive exchange of envelopes between Jeffrey and His Lordship. I raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as the envelopes disappeared into the respective pockets.

With the preliminaries out of the way, the conversation turned to recent events, the contents of the local paper, activities of local identities, and prospects for the weekend.

His Lordship was anticipating a busy few days, and showed great interest in the personalities of the Dipsomaniacs who would be landing on his doorstep.

“Well, you can never tell who'll be in the side until the bus turns up. Depends on who's still talking to who, who isn't talking to one of the regulars and who's had dry out for a bit.”

“You would have some idea?” His Lordship suggested.

“All things being equal, you would. Of course, all things aren't, so with those blokes you can never be sure. If their side includes more than half a dozen of the most likely suspects, you'd better make sure you've got a good-sized reserve of practically everything you keep in stock and a fair supply of some assorted exotica, particularly if the punters in the crew have a good day on the punt.”

His Lordship expressed some reservations, so I was forced to elucidate.

“It’s like this. They’re all definite on what they’ll drink. If you run out of VB, the VB drinkers won’t change to XXXX. If you try to slip a pot of the other brew into their hands, you’d more than likely end up being accused of trying to poison them. Spirits? They could attack any of the regular ones. There’s one bloke who won’t drink anything but Bloody Marys. There are a couple who are likely to start from that end of the liqueur lineup and have one of everything down to there, and then go back in reverse order. How are you on cocktails?”

“Not one of my strong points.”

“In that case you’d better get Curtis to sit down with the cocktail bible and make sure he has an idea of what he’s doing. They’re particularly fond of ones that burn.”

“Meaning?”

“A couple of them love those cocktails you set alight. One bloke’ll more than likely try to *flambé* his arms. You can usually pick him if he’s had a session recently. He’s the one with no hair on his arms. First time because someone bumped him and spilled his drink over his arms. He decided he liked the effect, and now he does it deliberately. Make sure you have a fire blanket handy if he starts that shit.”

From their reactions, my companions thought I was exaggerating.

“You don’t believe me? I had a couple of years on trips with this mob umpiring games. Trust me, I saw more serious degeneracy over the course of a weekend than the Crustaceans could manage in a month.”

Everyone present had seen the Crustaceans in post-match celebrations. Bus trips after away games were the stuff of legend. Hopalong was the first to suggest I was exaggerating.

“Sure, we’ve seen the Crustaceans in action here. Do you see them on a big night out here the day before a game? No. They’ll have a few quiet ones while the goose club’s running and then piss off home. They won’t drink before the game, and once they’ve made it to full time they go at it like a bull at a gate. If you’re

lucky a couple will keep going till the afternoon session on Sunday before they head off home to sleep it off. You know who I mean?’

There was general agreement about the most likely suspects.

“With the Dipsos it’s different. Whoever’s coordinating the trip will collect the bus Friday afternoon. He’ll have the team list, and stock the eskies with one tin of his preferred brand per man per fifteen minutes. That’ll include a quarter hour’s piss break time per hour of travel. I’ve done enough school excursions to know Townsville’s two and a half hours from here on a coaster bus, so travelling time will be more like three hours when you allow for piss stops, right?”

The consensus was that this was an accurate estimate.

“So that’s a dozen tins per man before they get here. While that might be enough for normal people like you and me...”

“Normal?” interjected Jeffrey. “Don’t try to tell me that there’s anyone here that’s normal. *All the world is mad except thee and me, and even thee is a little strange.*”

“Exactly, but thee and me would be starting to slow down after a dozen tins in three hours. Not these bastards. When they arrive, they’ll hoe into the piss like they’ve been stuck on a desert island for three months without a drink. By the way,” I turned towards His Lordship, “make sure you’ve got a huge supply of chips in the kitchen. Friday they’ll go through about two plates of blotting paper each.”

“They’re playing the next day?’ His Lordship seemed unconvinced.

“Yeah, but they’ll party on till midnight, crash for eight hours and when they surface, after a shower they’ll hit the kitchen big time for breakfast. If they win the toss, they’ll bowl. They’ll have three or four hairy quicks, a trundler or two and a spinner, so the plan will be to bowl first before the quickies have time to get on the grog. They’ll hit the grog during lunch, then try to knock the rest of the batting over quickly after that. Once they’ve finished in the field, the quickies will reckon their part of the trip is over and get into serious drinking, while the batsmen, who’ve probably spent most of the day bludging in the slips while they get over their hangovers, try to wipe out as much of the deficit as possible before stumps.”

“Saturday night?” His Lordship had evident misgivings about stamina.

“Repeat of Friday night except that if they know they’re not going to be doing anything too strenuous next day they won’t collapse into bed until around three Sunday morning.”

“So it would pay,” His Lordship mused, “to rig the result of the toss.”

“It could, depending on whether you prefer to face their pace attack when they’re relatively fresh or you’d rather take your chances with them when they’re hung over and not feeling well disposed towards the world and that bastard at the other end who’s just hit them for four. I’d go with the fresher option, but I don’t know how Brooksy’d feel about it.”

His Lordship’s reaction indicated he thought the avenue was worth pursuing.

“If they bowl first they’ll make a point of getting the opposing bowlers legless. You’ll probably find them carting a couple of eskies away when you close the doors Saturday night...”

“Which won’t be till midnight. I’ve already arranged that one,” His Lordship pointed out. “Will that make a difference?”

“Not much. In the morning, they’ll front up for a huge breakfast, head out to the ground, drink through the day until the innings is over, have a couple for the road before they leave, and before they head off they’ll stack the eskies with the same ration per man as they did on the way down. They’ll leave here about three-thirty or four. When they get home around seven there won’t be an unopened can on the bus.”

“They’ll do all that drinking here?”

His Lordship could not believe how lucrative the weekend was likely to be.

“Provided you’ve got what they want, they’ll stay here. If their punters’ club has been doing OK, you’ll probably have the treasurer wanting to run a tab at the bar for anyone wearing one of their shirts. They’ll probably want you to run one till set up so anything ordered by someone wearing one of their shirts goes into it,

and they'll want you to let them know when you hit whatever amount they specify. I've seen them run up a thousand dollar tab in a couple of hours."

"You're kidding," seemed to be the general opinion.

"Nope. Anyway you'll probably get a phone call tomorrow about all this shit."

It was almost possible to see the dollar signs lighting up in His Lordship's eyes, but the appearance of two familiar figures in the doorway suggested that we were in for a change of subject.

As Bernelle and Olga seated themselves, The Duchess emerged from the kitchen, announcing preparations were under control.

Pasta night was a development which had sprung up while Jeffrey and I were overseas, and I was intrigued. As The Duchess pulled up a pew and surveyed the rest of the congregation, I asked.

"So how does this little operation work? Same as the Sunday Roast?"

"Exactly like the Sunday Roast. Unlike Sundays when we can get away with just offering the roast, we're forced to offer the standard menu as well..."

"So if I wasn't a pasta eater, I could order, say, the coral trout in beer batter."

"You *could*, but you wouldn't want to be dying of starvation. As you'll see, once the horde descends the kitchen is flat out keeping the pasta and sauces heading out to the *bain-marie* in the Dining Room. So they're not going to have much time to worry about orders for anything else. Not if they're going to do a proper job on your coral trout with beer batter."

"Which you'd of course insist on," Jeffrey remarked. "So this pasta night gets them in? Bigger than a Friday night?"

The Duchess glanced at her watch. It was five-forty-five, give or take a minute among friends. She looked across to her former kitchen hand.

"Darling," she said, with a look that suggested the endearment was far from genuine, "if you were still doing the dishes in there you'd be working your little freckle off, I can tell you."

I attempted to divert the conversation slightly.

“So how does it work? You hand over your eight dollars...”

“Magpie or whoever gives you a ticket with *One Pasta* printed on it. We’ve had to have them printed, since writing two words takes up too much time.”

She reached across to the bar and, as if by magic produced something that looked remarkably like a book of raffle tickets.

“You order one pasta, you get one ticket. You want twenty-seven, you get twenty-seven tickets, capiche? Then you wander into the Dining Room and get on the end of the queue that’ll more than likely be half way out the door. When you get to the *bain-marie* you point out what pasta you want...”

“The choice is?”

“One long round, one long flat, one hollow round and one of something else...”

“So,” I suggested, “*spaghetti, fettuccine, penne* and *farfalle* or something.”

“And *ravioli* or *lasagne* if you’re into that. We vary them from week to week so it doesn’t get boring. Same with the sauces. You’ve got to have Bolognese. Don’t know why, but people expect it.”

“On top of that?”

“A vegetarian something or other, a creamy sauce, *puttanesca* or some other sort of tomato and chilli and something fishy. Same thing, vary it a bit from week to week, but you can’t vary it too much outside those basic limits. The punters don’t like it if you do.”

“The punters,” I suggested, “flock in?”

“Darling, it’s like a plague of locusts. Ten minutes to crunch time. Get in now, pick up your docket, wander out and find a table. Don’t be in a hurry to eat. Get your drinks from the back bar; otherwise you’ll dehydrate. They’ll start flocking through the door just after six. By six-thirty there won’t be a spare seat anywhere.

When they've finished eating they'll have one drink and disappear. The *gobble and go show*, that's what I call it."

Acting on information received, five minutes later we'd paid for seven pastas and relocated to a table in the beer garden to watch proceedings.

Sure enough, exactly as promised, just after six a flood of eager diners started, and for most of the next hour and a half the queue in front of the *bain-marie* wound through the Dining Room, occasionally extending into the beer garden. The tables around us were packed, and when one group of diners had departed the plates were barely off the table before another group claimed the space.

All through the proceedings The Duchess graced us with her presence since *the boys can look after this stuff on their ear*. When I suggested it might be time to exchange our dockets for sustenance, I was told there was absolutely no cause for concern.

"No way we're going to run out of anything. There are four pots of water on the rang, and each one has a load of whatever pasta it's being used for in it. When one load is done, it goes out to the *bain-marie*, and we whack another load in. There's a new batch of each sauce ready to go out as well. When that one goes out to the *bain-marie*, they start on the next one. Once they've gobbled and gone, the worst we can look forward to is a batch of each sauce left. Most of them reheat OK, so there's tomorrow's lunch special covered if necessary."

"Seems remarkably efficient," I observed.

"Darling, if we could work this every night things would be a breeze, but if we go more than once a week we'll lose the crowd. Half a dozen sauces, four pastas, conveyor belt approach. No frying, no chopping, no need to think too much. It's a breeze. Once things start flowing I just wander through every fifteen minutes or so. Apart from the pace it's an absolute doddle. Speaking of wandering through, it's about time I headed in there. Want to see a real rush hour?"

Not being a connoisseur of major kitchen action I declined, but Jeffrey decided to take advantage of the chance to observe his former work-mates working flat chat and reemerged five minutes later to report on his observations.

“They’re busy in there all right,” he observed, pausing to point in the direction of Mr Cassidy. “Busier than this bastard at an arse-kicking contest. Not too busy, mind you, to refrain from throwing the odd dish cloth in my direction when her back was turned, and she was on her way back out to the *bain-marie*.”

“So the Duchess was right?” I suggested.

“Unusually, yes. They’re busy as shit, mind you, but they’re only churning out a couple of basic things so it’s not like a regular night when you’ll get an order for five different meals on one table and they’ll want them to all come out together.”

After Lady E’s assurances that the food was not going to run out there seemed little to do but wait for the crowd to disperse before we headed to the *bain-marie*, so the next hour was spent indulging in the usual whimsical character assassination until, just before eight the crowd had thinned enough for us to front for a feed.

Arriving, I discovered a previously unmentioned benefit of waiting. With the rush over there was a need to ensure that leftover pasta and sauces were kept to a minimum, and we found ourselves heading back with plates filled generously.

A period of relative quiet ensued as each of us attacked the mountain of food, and once the assault was over conversation resumed.

Jeffrey was engaged in intimate discussion with Olga, who seemed more than agreeable to whatever was being suggested when vibrations in my pocket indicated someone was trying to establish contact on the secure phone.

I decided it would be wise to head away to take the call. While the beer garden was reasonably deserted, my companions could probably overhear anything that came up in discussion. My glass contained a mouthful, and once that was gone I had an excuse to cover my absence.

“I’m heading inside for a piss,” I explained as I rose to my feet. “Anyone need a refill?”

Having noted the requirements, I headed through the dining room and public bar towards a median strip unlikely to be contaminated by listening devices.

On the way, I noted the beer garden was not the only area to suffer a decline in population. Apart from Michael Brooks, there were only a handful of regulars on the premises. The gobblers had gobbled and gone.

Since it would have been unsociable to have passed through the bar without stopping for a chat, a pause was enough to establish Mr Brooks was on his way home from cricket practice and would be departing the premises when his better half appeared on the scene.

She had, from what I gathered, been inveigled into attending a meeting of the school bus transport committee.

Brooksy said the team for the weekend was looking good, asked whether I needed a drink, then, glancing out the door, remarked that he'd catch up with me on Friday since the chariot had arrived and he had no desire of transforming into a pumpkin.

“Grow the bloody things,” he explained. “Doesn't mean I want to be one.”

The car sped off towards Brooks Acres and I crossed the road, found a spot in the median strip, took out the mobile and called the only number in its memory.

It sputtered and farted for a few seconds, rang for a few more, then there was a cautious *Hello* in the dulcet tones of Mr Waddington.

“You rang?” I did my best to mimic the majordomo from *The Munsters*. From his reply, I gathered Waddles had not spent a great deal of time watching 60s American comedy. It seemed the reference had sailed over his head like a top edged hook off an express bowler.

“Yeah, I did. I thought you'd like to know that I had a few beers with Greg this afternoon....”

“Greg?”

“Sales rep bloke I told you about. He's going to pick us up here when he gets back from Collinsville about three-thirty tomorrow and drop us In Townsville. I thought we'd get him to drop us at the cab rank at Rising Sun and get a cab over to that motel near the airport. I've booked us in there under your name. Hope you

don't mind. I thought that might be enough to muddy the tracks. I'm off south early next morning, and Wally's got a seat on a coach going north and a flight to the Gulf booked, so this time Friday we should be well and truly away from here. I tried to get on a flight tomorrow night, but the only one that leaves after six-thirty was booked out."

"Sounds good," I replied. "No one's seen you while you've been here?"

"Your cleaning lady was having dinner with some bloke in the restaurant..."

"I thought you and Wally were eating in the room," I interposed.

"Well, we were, but Greg invited us to join him, and there was no one there apart from Daphne and this bloke. They were sitting there over dinner with a pile of what looked like textbooks."

"You're obviously unaware of Daphne's interest in sociology. She's doing some Uni course by correspondence. The bloke must have been her lecturer."

"Yeah, he looked like a lecherer. They were still going at it hammer and tongs in the restaurant when we left."

A momentary vision of Daphne's ample proportions reclining across a dining table while some bearded sociologist explored her internal dialectics crossed my mind. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"Apart from that everything looks OK." Waddles paused, and I wondered whether the telephone connection had somehow succeeded in transferring my mental picture across the ether to Waddles.

"Like I said Greg is picking us up here tomorrow arvo. He should be reliable. We paid for his dinner, bought him a good bottle of plonk and let him drink most of it, and I said we'd pay cash for his accommodation as well, so he'll get the whole of his expenses cash in hand when he claims them back from his boss. I told him we'd have the receipt for him when he collects us from here. Saves him having to worry about settling the bill tonight or tomorrow morning, and it guarantees he'll be back to collect us because he can't claim his expenses without it. Reckons

he's going to claim our meals by saying we're a couple of developers looking at a prefabricated steel framework for a warehouse on the industrial estate here.'

"A likely fabrication."

"Yeah, right old load of bullshit but it'll keep his boss happy and throw another hundred and fifty bucks into Greg's pocket, so he's happy about that. Everything looks schmicko, and I'll give you a call from down south Friday morning."

"Sounds good to me," were my parting words, and I heaved an inward sigh of relief. It looked like *Operation Secure Waddles* would reach a successful conclusion and it seemed fair to assume I could now focus on what to do with Bernelle.

With the phone back in my pocket, I crossed the road, walked through the public bar and found Sandy standing in the Quick Service area.

He explained my absence seemed to have been longer than strictly necessary, and people had remarked that their glasses were empty, and there was no sign of an approaching refill.

"So I volunteered to come and see what was holding you up and whether you needed a hand."

He was polite enough to avoid referring to the fact that I seemed to have found it necessary to answer the call of nature on the median strip.

Once we found our way back to the beer garden, it was obvious that we had over-catered.

When I had departed the party had numbered nine, but on our return there were a couple of spare chairs, and there was no one to claim a blue tin or one brightly coloured alcopop.

It seemed Jeffrey had dematerialised.

Suspiciously, so had Olga.

Their drinks sat unclaimed, and while Sandy intimated they had been there when he left, and they must have departed while he was inside, none of the others seemed to be willing or able to explain their disappearance.

As the conversation continued intermittently, I ran through a mental checklist.

If Jeffrey had found an alternative venue, at least for the time being, there was marginally less danger of the struggle for Jeffrey's affections getting in the way.

I recalled envelopes that changed hands earlier.

It was quite possible the one His Lordship passed to Jeffrey had contained a key, and the one in the opposite direction had contained money to secure a room for one or more nights. Those details could be verified later. Assuming Olga had been removed from the list of likely disruptive influences, I mentally checked other factors that might impinge on Operation Bed Bernelle.

The Twins were resting before a heavy day's journalism.

Gloria had gone to the movies with her mother. Earlier reports indicated that Bernelle had suggested she might want to join us but the invitation was declined because we *drink too much*. Not sentiments to be encouraged, but as long as Gloria felt that way the allegation would remove one potentially disruptive influence and the possibility of a repeat of the Monday night debacle.

Other difficulties? None I could see.

Waddles and Wally's plans for tomorrow reduced the chance anything relating to them would impinge on my ambitions.

Mickey's big hand moved inexorably towards ten o'clock.

Sandy started referring to the fact that certain people were going to be looking at an honest day's work tomorrow.

Hopalong joined in to suggest that his presence in Reception would permit a call to the British Isles and the available envelope of opportunity for making such calls was limited.

The Duchess pointed out while it was all right for *all you bloody drunks to sit around carousing till all hours, some of us like to get to bed at a reasonable hour* and indicated, should His Lordship be desirous of her company she would be waiting upstairs once he had secured the premises.

Bright Eyes indicated that she had designs on beauty sleep. Or perhaps we would care to use the other taxi service?

With no sign of Jeffrey or Olga there was nothing to stop us departing *tout suite*, and a party of five would fit comfortably into the convertible.

“Just as well Jeffrey’s not here,” remarked Hopalong. “Where’d he get to?”

His spouse had strong views on Jeffrey’s sexual antics, so her absence enabled His Lordship to explain Jeffrey had booked his old room for the next few days (*in case he needs it*) and should any of our party venture upstairs and knock on the door we would more than likely discover something has come up, and Mr Jeffrey would not be requiring transport home this evening.

Bidding our host farewell, we headed towards the convertible and five minutes later found ourselves pulling up under the Moderation sign.

Bright Eyes departed immediately, indicating that there was little chance of her reading lamp directing benighted travellers.

Sandy, calling down the wrath of the heavens on Year Nine Studies of Society and the Environment classes headed cotwards himself.

When I suggested that Hopalong might care for a nightcap beside the pool, he declined since calls needed to be made and that he would be retiring for the night once those communications had been completed.

Again, I checked off the other possibilities.

Provided I ensured the door was locked, and the security chain slotted firmly into place there were no disruptive influences likely to impinge on the success or failure of my mission.

The breeze delivered a slight chill to the outdoor entertainment area, and the absence of company meant there was little point in remaining out in the cold, so I ushered Bernelle towards my quarters.

Inside, door locked, security chain in place, lights dimmed, and something soothing on the stereo it seemed everything was going according to plan.

A pile of clothing materialised on the floor beside the bed, and I was about to join Bernelle on a horizontal surface.

“Where’s your thing?” she asked.

“Right here. Right where it should be. Pink, pointed, present, correct and ready for action.”

“No, not THAT thing. The other thing. You know. The RUBBER thing. The what do you call it?”

“A condom? A rubber? A fred? A franger? A prophylactic device?” I ventured.

“Yes. One of those. You’ve got one haven’t you?”

With some reluctance, I reported the absence of any such item.

“I didn’t think we needed any. We’ve never needed one before. This is the first time I’ve heard of anything like this.”

“Don’t you keep one as a precaution? Just in case? I promised Mum I’d never do it unless the guy was wearing one of them.”

I had visions of the consequences of any similar suggestion made to Jeffrey.

His objection to the items in question had been expressed with vehemence at frequent intervals. Any suggestion earlier in the evening upstairs at the Palace would have meant that we would have been fitting in an extra passenger on the way home.

“I’ll bet your mother isn’t worrying herself about that as she impales herself on Jeffrey’s mutton dagger. He won’t wear one. If she’d tried to get him to wear one I’m sure we would have found him back downstairs in record time, looking for his blue tin and calling her all the names under the sun.”

“I don’t care. Mum made me promise, and that’s all there is to it. If she doesn’t want to worry about those things, that’s fine for her. She’s had her tubes tied.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the point, is it? The thing about those things is as much about preventing diseases as it is about preventing a belly full of arms and legs, and you’re on the pill. Aren’t you?”

“No. Before I came here I promised Dad I’d never take one of those either. He wanted me to promise that I wouldn’t sleep with anyone before I was married.”

“Which, of course, you did,” I suggested.

“No, I couldn’t promise him that. Because I had.”

“You had...”

“Yes, I’d slept with Luke when I was in Year Nine. Dad asked me to promise him when I was finishing Year Ten. I couldn’t promise him because I already had.”

“This Luke. That wouldn’t be the same Luke I’m thinking of, would it. The guy who’s now a leading gay rights campaigner? Of course, he wore a condom...”

“No, he didn’t, silly. I hadn’t promised Mum then. I was still in Townsville.”

There was a strange logic in operation, which would, make further discussion fruitless, but at the same time I was disinclined to lay the subject to rest.

Bernelle, on the other hand, had decided enough was enough and, inserting herself between the sheets and assumed *Silent* mode.

That was where the matter rested.

Where I rested for the evening was, as any casual observer might have guessed, the couch.

Thursday

While the couch might not have been the most comfortable place to spend the night, it was well after sunrise when someone moving around the room brought me back to consciousness. As expected, the someone was Bernelle, and while she treated herself to a shower, I feigned sleep and reviewed the events of the previous night.

Regardless of recent developments, I was disinclined to abandon the project, but we were approaching the point where the law of diminishing returns would kick in, making further attempts uneconomic in terms of return per unit of effort expended.

It might be the sign of a professional pessimist, but having assumed Fate was slipping the lead into the boxing glove while I'd been checking off the things that could go wrong the day before I already had a fallback position.

There was no point staying in familiar surroundings.

While external factors hadn't contributed to the latest disaster, a change of venue would mean I could dismiss a number of disruptive influences, and I knew the right alternative venue.

There was no point in raising the subject straight away. If I said anything about the idea and gave her the day to think things over Bernelle would quite possibly find a way to inveigle Gloria, her mother or some other malevolent influence into the scenario.

No, I thought. Say nothing. Plan meticulously. Spring a surprise this afternoon and get her away from anything that could interfere. If some unexpected factor does come into play, that will be that. Game, set and match. Thank you umpires, thank you ball boys. The judge's decision is final, and no correspondence will be entered into.

Having come to that conclusion I extricated myself from the couch, dressed, and was seated at the table when Bernelle emerged from the shower.

Since she seemed disinclined to refer to last night's events, I thought it best to leave sleeping subjects lie doggo and made inquiries as to her health and any plans she might have for the evening without making specific suggestions.

Once the phone call to the taxi service has been made I escorted her off the premises, wandered back through the kitchen, fixed myself a cup of coffee and headed towards the rain room.

Emerging shortly after seven-thirty, I finished off the coffee and decided to lie low until it was time to check out preparations for the weekend. Around nine-fifteen I was in the middle of preparing breakfast when the phone rang.

Fearing the worst, I was relieved to hear His Lordship asking if I could find my way to the Palace around eleven. A representative from the Dipsomaniacs had called during the evening.

In the rush associated with pasta night, the bar attendant who took the call had jotted a number on a call back slip and placed it on His Lordship's desk, rather than walking out to the beer garden to ask whether Mr Barron was able to take the call.

His Lordship had found the note while securing the premises but had decided to return the call first thing in the morning rather than last thing at night. That call revealed last night's caller was on his way out of the house and suggested His Lordship arrange for me to be present when he called from his office about eleven to finalise details for the weekend.

Assuring His Lordship there was no need for him to collect me, I went back to my breakfast, then, with the dishes in the dishwasher, strolled down to Bright Eyes' room to arrange transport.

After I had been assured that it would be a privilege to drop me in town at a quarter to eleven I headed towards my room reflecting on a degree of sarcasm I hadn't previously noted in Bright Eyes' demeanour. I hoped it was not a sign of an impending change to our transport arrangements.

Perhaps the novelty of her position was wearing off, and Bright Eyes needed some diversion from her day to day existence.

Alternatively, the return to academic life might be taking its toll, and requests for a lift downtown could be an inconvenient and unwarranted interruption.

On the other hand, it could be a case of someone needing a break.

With Airlie in my plans for the evening, I considered asking Bright Eyes' to transport us there. That would give her the chance to indulge in a little child-bridegrooming while I attended to the matters I had in mind.

No, I thought. Keep things simple. We don't want extra influences that might stuff things up tonight. Maybe I can work out something to give Bright Eyes a chance to escape the weekend after next. Arrange a few nights' accommodation and a lift down. Hopalong could probably do that. Drop her down there Friday evening and pick her up Monday lunch time.

Having come to that conclusion, I settled down to plot my own scheme for the evening.

There was a decent resort looking out over Muddy Bay that Jeffrey and I had operated from while we carried out our search for accommodation in Denison.

A phone call suggested the management looked forward to seeing me again and an explanation that I was thinking of springing a surprise on my girlfriend was sufficient to establish there were several vacancies in the spa rooms.

It was highly likely at least one would be free when I made up my mind to head down that way in the afternoon.

“No. Make it a provisional booking and I'll call this afternoon to confirm. What's that? No. If I give you my credit card number, you can charge me for the night if we don't turn up. I want to spring it on her as a spur-of-the-minute thing, then ring up as if that's the way it is. Yes, it is a bit romantic. She's like that, and I just want to give her a surprise. You'll be in the office just after five? Perfect! So you can expect a call then. You're sure you don't want that card number? Fine. Call you later. Bye.”

Laying it on a bit thick, you say? I suppose so. If this was going to be the final attempt on Bernelle's honour we might as well plan thoroughly. There was no point calling the restaurant I had in mind so, in the meantime, there was nothing for it but to potter round till it was time for Bright Eyes to drop me down at the Palace.

Since the morning failed to reveal any sign of Hopalong I paid him a visit to check on developments on the overseas front. Everything was, as far as anyone could tell, under control, so I returned to base.

Around ten-thirty Bright Eyes was ready to drop me in town.

As the vehicle turned out of the driveway, I glanced across to the fuel gauge.

"Looks like you're getting a bit low in the old fuel tank, Bright Eyes, and while you're filling up I might just pop into the gents."

"Where you'll be dropping a few coins into the condom vending machine."

I was, momentarily, stuck for words, and something in my expression prompted Bright Eyes to elucidate.

"While you were wandering around the pub after dinner last night, Jeffrey and Olga disappeared. Not together, but it was fairly obvious what was going on."

"The Duchess didn't notice? That'd be a first."

"The Duchess was doing a final check through the kitchen when they slipped away. She got back just before you did. Hopalong was quick to change the subject when she was on her way back."

"The subject was?"

"Mr Cassidy was expounding at some length on the importance of safe sex, particularly when you're dealing with someone who'd probably been doing his share of what he referred to as *bareback riding* in the fleshpots of New Orleans. He went so far as to turn to young Bernelle and suggest that she'd be well advised to make sure that she took all the sensible precautions herself."

I made a mental note to raise certain issues with a certain one-legged scoffing gentleman.

“Bernelle explained she’d promised that she’d never do it unless the guy was wearing a condom, which is when Hopalong stated, to the best of his knowledge, you’d never bought a condom in your life. So I guess I’m safe in guessing things didn’t work out the way you hoped last night, and you’re not particularly inclined to pop into the pharmacy or the supermarket and have one of your ex-students.”

“Precisely. So, despite all statements to the contrary, Hopalong knew all along that Jeffrey wouldn’t be needing a lift home last night?”

“Correct,” Bright Eyes observed as she turned into the servo. “Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, Mr Cassidy is slightly smarter than you two give him credit for.”

With the relevant purchases and payments made it was just after a five to eleven when I walked through the front door of the Palace, to be confronted by a visibly angry publican’s wife.

“Herston, you bastard. You must have known about this. How come I wasn’t informed?”

To be quite honest, the directness of the question took me aback.

Which particular situation was under discussion here? A series of possibilities crossed my mind.

Had the syndicate searching for Waddles and Wally been back in touch?

Had Waddles and Wally succeeded in blowing security?

Had their presence at the Shoreline been reported by Daphne?

Was it something to do with the Dipsomaniacs visit?

Something about what could be described as my relationship with Bernelle?

My hesitation before answering must have given some indication of confusion.

“That rattlesnake! You knew he would be carrying out his sleazy activities in my hotel, didn’t you? You probably put him up to it. There I was minding my own business this morning when Downtown Roger wandered into the kitchen asking

whether I'd heard the racket last night. He said it sounded like someone having their teeth extracted one by one without anaesthetic."

She was obviously referring to Jeffrey's nocturnal activities. The *rattlesnake* should, in retrospect, have led me straight to the suspect.

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," I ventured.

Which was, the diligent reader will recall, exactly the case.

I had not been aware of Jeffrey's alternative shagging arrangements until they'd actually kicked in, so to speak. At the same time, I had serious doubts whether Downtown Roger could be termed a credible witness, having spent much of the preceding decade in his cups. The gentleman in question was known as the Plastered Plasterer, as opposed to the Pisspot Paintpot, Uptown Roger, who lived at the pub at the top of the main street.

"What was Downtown Roger on about?" I asked, playing for time till I could summon up facts to present a believable rebuttal.

I had not laid eyes on Jeffrey since I had ventured out to call Waddles, and he had been conspicuous by his absence around The Crossroads that morning. He had, I guessed, escaped the Palace around Sparrow Fart and made his way back to base via the taxi rank.

"He heard someone moaning around midnight. Since it sounded like someone in serious pain, he got out of bed and went to investigate. He traced the noise to room 23. You know, the one Jeffrey used to live in until you took him off our hands when you won that money."

"What about the others? Where was everyone else? How come Roger was the only one to complain? Surely there were other people disturbed?"

That seemed a reasonable assumption.

Downtown Roger had been the subject of many complaints regarding snoring and the grinding of teeth and was notoriously difficult to wake. Noise sufficient to rouse Roger should've roused everyone within a fifty metre radius.

While the accommodation facilities at the Palace fell short of anything approaching palatial, they were usually close to 100% occupancy due to permanent bookings by government departments who used the place as a base for any of their employees stranded in town overnight.

“The boys on the tugs were out at Monkhouse Point, and the two railway guys who were supposed to be staying here were called to an emergency in Collinsville. They had a derailment or something. So for the first time in living memory that end of the building was totally deserted after midnight. Except for Downtown Roger. He says he spent five minutes standing outside the door before he summoned up the courage to ask if everything was all right.”

“What happened then?”

“There was an English voice telling him to be a good boy and toddle off to where he came from.”

“An English voice? So where do I fit in to this?”

I was unsure of exactly how she was going to be able to pin the blame on me, though I was sure the attempt would be made.

“When I went and looked in the register there was no record of anyone booked into that room.”

That news came as no surprise, as His Lordship would have had enough sense to ensure there was no direct reference to Jeffrey’s booking.

More than likely, remembering the possibility that his spouse might peruse the register, he would not have put anything in writing and hoped for the best.

“Well, it’s news to me. It probably wouldn’t be the first time someone’s stay here hasn’t been recorded in the register, would it? All I know is I went into the bar last night and got waylaid.”

“I know. You weren’t in the bar when I went into the kitchen to check on things.”

The sound of a phone ringing would, I hoped, provide an avenue of escape from this line of questioning, and I was relieved when His Lordship appeared, beckoning me to join him in the Inner Sanctum.

As I entered, followed by The Duchess, His Lordship switched the phone to speaker mode.

A voice cut through the ether. "So you've got Herston there?"

"Present and correct. You're?"

"Balls," was the reply.

Barry Ballmer had been an up and coming opening batsman when I'd left Townsville. He was now apparently rated Senior Dipsomaniac and Tour Director.

"I've been Minister For Games for the past couple of months. You'd been talking to Razor before that, correct?"

"Right on," I replied. "So what's the G.O. Who's coming down?"

"I'll be opening the batting with Nuts, and Pretty Boy will bat three. Then we'll have Ming and the Holy Trinity from The Fish - that's The Godfather, J.C. and Rum & Coke - and the bowlers. Retread, Psycho, Brown Dog, Angry and Ankles. Usual deal? Bat eleven, field and bowl twelve?"

"In other words Ankles' batting hasn't improved."

Bryan Angstrom was an aging spin bowler with a legendary capacity for strong drink whose batting fell into the category of legendary incompetence.

"Yeah, well if we bat twelve he'll only last one ball anyway, and your bloke would probably make bloody fifty. Anyway, fifty overs, eight over limit, everyone barring the keeper and one other bloke bowls at least two?"

"That was what Razor wanted. You'll have to confirm that with Brooksy, but. I don't think he'll be objecting. No, I think that'll be fine."

"Anyway, we can worry about that later on. Let's get the nuts and bolts sorted out. Accommodation?"

“In the old movie theatre behind the pub,” His Lordship cut in. “Showers and toilets in there We use it for the Crustaceans’ preseason carnival, so there’ll be more than enough camp beds to go around. We’ll have twenty set up, assuming you’ll have a couple of extra bodies in tow. We’ll change the bedding on Saturday as well. You’ll need to let me know if you need any more than that. Won’t be a problem provided I know before things start to get busy on Friday arvo.”

“Meals?”

“We’ve got counter meals on Friday night. I can fax you the menu if you like so you can ring through with your orders. Friday night’s busy, so that might be the way to go if you’re running late. Otherwise, there’ll be plenty of chips and bar snacks.”

“That should be fine Friday night. Saturday night’ll be counter meals as well, I guess. More importantly, breakfast Saturday and Sunday morning?”

“Same deal as we offer for the Crustaceans Classic,” The Duchess interjected. “Big cooked breakfast. Bacon, sausages and eggs, plenty of cereal and fruit juice. Pineapple and orange?”

“Tomato juice,” came the reply, “and plenty of Tabasco and Worcestershire would be very helpful.”

“A barbecue lunch both days,” The Duchess continued. “I’ve catered for fifty all up, but it’ll be no problem getting extra if we need it.”

“Okay, that’s the basics attended to. Now for the important details.”

I could see the dollar signs starting to flash in His Lordship’s eye sockets.

“We’ll need a bar tab set up both nights. Fifteen hundred will do for starters. Once we hit that you’ll need to let me know. That should cover the beer, standard spirits and Bloody Marys for anyone wearing one of our team shirts. Wine and meals the boys’ll pay for as they need them. At the ground.”

“Tinnies,” His Lordship remarked. “Two dollars a throw. Right?”

“Spot on. I guess Razor would have let you know about the right mix. You’ll have enough to cover us for takeaways for the trip home? Very important, that.”

His Lordship glanced in my direction.

He was obviously having difficulty believing his ears.

See? I mouthed. *Told you.*

“On the way down,” Balls went on, “we should be leaving around four, which’ll put is on your doorstep between six and seven...”

“When you hit the turnoff from the highway,” I cut in, “you’ll spot a motel on the left. Used to be called The Crossroads.”

“Know the one. Stayed there once. Coming back from the south when the roads got cut a couple of years back.”

“Anyway, that’s where the ground is. You’ll notice the name’s been changed to Moderation.”

“As in *Drink alcohol in moderation?*” Balls suggested. Our minds were known to follow similar paths.

“You got ‘im in one. Anyway if you pull up at the motel I’ll navigate you into town. Not that you’ll need any help in that regard, but I’ll be able to direct you to the spot to park the bus. Parking’s at a premium around here on a Friday.”

I conveniently neglected to mention that the arrangement would also have the advantage of giving my liver a couple of hours’ valuable breathing space since I could reasonably expect to be the victim of severe Dipsomaniac hospitality.

“If you’re running late, it’ll be easier to call me at Moderation, rather than bothering anyone here at the pub. I can pass on any messages that need to be passed on.”

“Sounds fine. Since that seems to have covered all the bases, I’ll see you down that way between six and seven tomorrow night.”

There was an audible click as the call was terminated.

“See?” I turned to His Lordship and The Duchess, “as I told you. Should be a nice little earner for you. Now, if it’s not too much trouble, if someone could drop

me back home, there are a few pressing matters that need to be attended to, and I don't mean the ironing."

"I can do that," His Lordship offered. "I've got a couple of calls to make around town."

He turned to the Duchess.

"I checked the lights next door. A couple of the fluoros seem to have blown, so I'll need to pick up some replacements. If I'd thought to check earlier in the week, I'd have been able to get a sparky in to check the wiring. Those tubes shouldn't have blown that quickly. Anything else you want me to get while I'm out and about?"

There wasn't, and we made our way through the public bar and into the pub ute with great rapidity.

"Thank goodness for that," His Lordship stated as the engine turned over.

A certain other gentleman in my circle of acquaintances would have invoked the fornicatory deity.

"She's been on my case since Downtown Roger came into the kitchen full of stories about strange noises coming from Room 23."

"Tell me about it. I got the third degree from the time I walked through the door. What'd you tell her?"

'Basically, nothing," His Lordship explained, "for a start there wasn't anything written in the Register..."

"Surprise, surprise!"

His Lordship ignored the remark.

"Fortunately I'd anticipated something like this, so when Jeffrey asked me about the room I asked him to make sure there was no sign it'd been used when he left. I put a change of sheets in there yesterday, and made him promise to make up the bed before he slipped out in the morning."

"The other sheets? The ones reeking of a night of passion?"

I was intrigued to see how His Lordship had arranged things.

“Went in the spare room the tuggies use for their changes of gear. That’s the one you slept in when you came to town, remember? Then I waited till Daphne’d stripped the beds in the rooms that were used last night, and distracted her with a wild goose chase for long enough to slip the extra sheets in with the others. She’s probably scratching her head about six sets of sheets when she’d only had to make up five rooms, but as long as she doesn’t say anything to Betty.”

“You should be all right. Once you get back I guess it’s just a case of staying out of the way till things liven up later this evening and letting time take its toll on certain memories.”

“That’s why I threw in the remark about the fluoros. I had a sparky in to check the theatre last week, but she was at the hairdresser, so what the eye doesn’t see the heart doesn’t grieve over. I’ll catch Bluey, he’s bound to drop in sometime over the weekend, and get him to wander in early next week and take a quick dekho at things. He owes me a favour or two.”

“And the possibility of having the pub burn down because of some electrical fault will give her something to distract her from thinking about noises coming from rooms that don’t appear to have been occupied. Mind you, she’s already put two and two together.”

“Which is what I’ll be talking to Jeffrey about when we arrive at your place. Not that he’ll be needing the room tonight, from what he was saying, but it’ll be handy to have Plan B in place in case a similar situation arises in the future.”

As we turned into Moderation, I reflected Plan B needed, in my experience, to be backed up by Plans C through Z.

That was enough to turn my mind to more pressing matters and I bade His Lordship farewell as he stood on the step outside Four and headed for my own quarters.

The accommodation was organized, so the next issue was the small matter of an intimate dinner.

There wasn't much point in calling before two, so I continued working through the shelves till then, and made the call to check there was a table available in the upstairs section of the eatery.

With a booking in place, I explained I'd pay them the courtesy of calling back to confirm once I was sure we were on our way.

From there it would be a case of back to the catalogue once a further call had been made. I was about half way around the boundary of the cricket field when the secure phone saved me the trouble of calling.

"Fire away. I was about to give you a bell."

"Great minds think alike," Waddles' voice informed me.

"Either that or fools never differ. Anyway, what can we do you for? I thought since you're heading north this afternoon there was no need to send Hopalong out with another round of supplies."

"That's what I thought. We're on the last of the videos. Tell Hopalong that his taste is right up his arse. This is the worst load of shit it's been my misfortune to watch. If it wasn't the last one after we've watched everything halfway decent at least twice I wouldn't be watching it now."

"So Elvis' departure from the building is still imminent?" I inquired hopefully.

"You betcha. Our mate just phoned to say he should be finished his business in Collinsville within the next half hour and he'll probably be picking us up here in an hour and a bit."

"He rang the mobile?" I was more than a little miffed at the possible breach of security. Not that it was the first one.

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

I refrained from stating the obvious.

"Anyway it's too late to change my arrangements without creating hassles for everyone, but I thought I'd let you know about the change in departure time, so you're not likely to be calling while we're already in the car, like."

“So unless something goes wrong, you won’t need to be calling here again. That'd suit my plans down to the ground since I’ll be on my way to Airlie around the time you’re lobbing in Townsville, and a call while I’m in the car could create complications. Of course, if there’s something I really need to know, give me a call anyway, and I’ll just have to come up with a cover story.”

“Which wouldn’t, by any chance, have something to do with a certain little blonde hairdresser you’ve been seeing a bit of, would it?”

As I concluded the call I reflected that Waddles seemed, for someone who had been maintaining a low profile, to be remarkably well-informed.

Crossing off avenues through which he could have learned of developments gave me something to ponder as I continued cataloguing the collection. There was no point in raising the issue with the other residents of The Crossroads.

When it came to making inquiries further afield, I knew only too well how quickly rumours travel. It was possible the news had reached Waddles via Ron and Bev, who could well have picked up the information from any of the multitude who’d wandered into the Palace on Friday night or decided that last night’s *gobble and go show* was the way to go in the catering department.

At least, I hoped that was the source of information.

The possibilities associated with the alternatives did not bear thinking about, and I had other fish to fry for the evening.

Around a quarter past five a tap on the door signalled Bernelle’s arrival on the scene.

Inclining Towards Fine Dining

It was time to feign inspiration. “What,” I asked when she’d ensconced herself in the environs, “would you like to tonight? Or pop down to Airlie for dinner?”

“That sounds nice,” was the reply. “When do we leave? Who’s going?”

“Spur of the moment decision. Thought of it a couple of minutes ago when I realized we hadn’t worked out anything for dinner. I thought a *bouillabaisse* on The Balcony sounded good, and there’s bound to be a vacancy somewhere in Airlie. Have a good feed and a few drinks, follow it with a good night’s sleep and back home early tomorrow morning. What do you reckon? Want me to start making a few calls?”

I was informed the idea had potential, but someone would need to change out of *these yucky work clothes* since they were not up to the standards of sophistication appropriate to dining in Airlie Beach.

“Well, then, just hang on while I phone The Balcony. Should be early enough to make sure we get a table and pre-order two bowls of *bouillabaisse*.”

The dish in question was one of the specialties of the house, prepared fresh daily. The preparation was a lengthy process, taking up much of the afternoon, so there was a limited supply and latecomers were likely to learn that the dish was all gone. Given the possibility of unexpected complications delaying our arrival, a pre-order would be helpful. The phone book was consulted, and the appropriate number dialled.

“Hello, Kelly. Dave Herston from Denison here. Yes, it has been a long time. I’ve been overseas. Any chance of a table for two tonight? Preferably the one in the corner looking out over the street. Fine. Say around seven-thirty? Sounds good. Put a hold on two serves of the *bouillabaisse* if you don’t mind. My friend hasn’t had the joy of experiencing it yet. Catch you shortly.”

I turned to Bernelle.

“Easy as. Now for somewhere to stay tonight. Feel like spending the night in a spa room at the place where Jeffrey and I based ourselves while we were looking for somewhere to live? If they’re fully booked they might be able to point me in the right direction, or at least let me know if there’s somewhere along that strip of road that’s fully booked.”

One call, of course, was all it took to confirm arrangements I’d pencilled in earlier in the day. The right wording ensured Bernelle had the impression that it was a spur of the moment decision. When the arrangements were in place, Madam departed for a change of clothes. I hoped she wouldn’t have company when she returned.

In the meantime, I made my way through the rain room, selected something suitable to wear and threw a change of clothes into an overnight bag.

With preparations taken care of I moved along the residential section, advising all involved of my plans for the evening before finding a spot in Reception where I could monitor comings and goings in the car park. In other words, when I sighted Bernelle on the horizon I’d be moving to head off any complications at the pass.

So, as soon as the car had come to a halt I was inside, noting the absence of other passengers, and the vehicle was reversing into a position that would take us back out onto the highway.

“So,” Bernelle asked, “what are the plans? Where are we staying?”

“I’ve got us a spa room at Shoalwater Spa, and we’re booked in upstairs at The Balcony. Been there before?”

The response indicated a lack of familiarity with the eatery in question.

“Next to the pub’s bottle shop, there’s a shop that sells nicknacks, hammocks, things like that. Know it?”

“I think so.”

“Well, right next door to that there’s The Courtyard. Been there for years. I was down there for the cricket trials a few years back, and we went past it on the

way to the beer garden at the pub for a counter tea on the Sunday night. They had a menu board beside the front door, so I stopped for a quick squiz. It looked interesting enough to check out next time I got a chance.”

“And?”

“As things turned out Sharon Quayle was running the social club at school, and she wangled a deal for an end-of-year do on a Saturday night at one of the resorts, Coral Bay, if you know that one, and I suggested to a couple of the others it might be worth going down a night early, staying at the pub and grabbing a feed at The Courtyard Friday night.”

“We're going to The Balcony,” Bernelle pointed out.

“True. At the time, there was a financial adviser operating out of the upstairs section of the building. He moved out to the office complex at the Marina, and the restaurant had room to expand upstairs. That gave them The Courtyard and The Balcony.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, at first The Courtyard was fine dining. Moderate-sized portions, high quality ingredients. Not the sort of place that’d appeal to the backpacker market.”

“Expensive?”

“Exactly. They’re next door to the pub, so they hadn’t bothered with a liquor licence, which saved them hassles about wine lists and stuff like that but took away one of the big money-spinners if you’re in the restaurant business.”

“Which is?”

“The markup on the grog prices. Have you noticed if you order a bottle of wine you can buy from the bottle shop for ten dollars a licensed restaurant will want to slug you for twenty-something? So since they can’t subsidise things with the grog markup, a BYO place has to charge top dollar for meals. Once they’d moved the fine dining section upstairs they were able to change the menu in The Courtyard, and they’re doing very nicely, thank you. Not that there’s anything

wrong with the food in the pub, but it gives you an alternative spot away from poker machines and TV screens.”

“So what’s the food like upstairs? Where we’re going?”

“Not quite what it was when they were downstairs. Both places work out of the same kitchen, so they’ve had to limit the menu in both. The Courtyard’s standard stuff, reasonably priced, good spot for a quiet meal without going to the pub.”

“We're upstairs”

“True. The place is owned by three chefs who were jack of restrictions they had to deal with when they worked in other places. They’re dealing with them again in The Courtyard, so the menu upstairs is things the three of them reckon are interesting. Changes every couple of weeks. A soup, an entree, a main and a dessert from each of them plus a couple of regular favourites to pad it out. Then they have a couple of daily specials.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“Best food you’ll find round here. I try to get there as often as possible because, apart from anything else I enjoy the sledge war.”

The response suggested a degree of puzzlement in my one-woman audience, so I went on.

“The three of them are competitive as buggery. They’re the best of mates away from the kitchen, but once they’re in there, it’s on. Everything on the menu comes from one of them, and when you walk into the kitchen the first thing you notice is the tally board.”

“Which is?”

“A whiteboard ruled into three columns. Upstairs is closed Sunday, Monday and Tuesda. They take turns to work The Courtyard on Sundays and Tuesdays. From the time they open The Balcony on Wednesday night, everything ordered is recorded on the tally board. When they close Saturday night, the winner, the bloke with the highest score gets three nights off, so there’s plenty of motivation there. But it gets better.”

“How?”

“Whoever runs second gets to work The Courtyard Sunday night. It’s usually quiet, so it’s no big deal. Whoever runs third gets Tuesday, which is the night they all want to avoid, because Monday night they go out for a feed at one of the places that are open seven days. The winner chooses the venue, whoever runs second pays for the food and tail-end Charlie coughs up for the grog, which, as you’d guess, is the most expensive part of the deal, because the other two take it in turns to decide what to order.”

“So?”

“So if you win one week you get three nights off and a free feed on Monday night at a venue of your choice. You get to choose whatever you like from the menu wherever you are.”

“So it’s worth winning.”

“You’re not wrong, Narelle.” The *Naked Vicar Show* reference flew straight over the driver’s head. “If you can’t win, you want to run second, because you get two nights off and only have to pay for the meal on Monday night.”

“But,” Bernelle mused, “the other guy gets two nights off as well.”

“*Correctamundo*. He *does* get two nights off, but he has to pay for the grog on Monday night and work Tuesday, more than likely with a horrendous hangover. So you can see no one wants to run third. The competition means you’re always going to get something really good when you eat there.”

“You pre-ordered something? What was that?”

“*Bouillabaisse*, fish soup from the south of France. It’s one of those dishes that there are a thousand recipes for, and I’m sure most of them take less than three hours to prepare. Three-hour recipes aren’t what you want in a restaurant, unless you make a limited quantity in advance, which is what they do. Make a batch each day, and when it’s gone it’s gone.”

Bernelle nodded.

“So, in other words, if you want the *bouillabaisse* you need to get there early. Sometimes, as a favour on a quiet night, they wouldn’t do it on Friday or Saturday, for example, you can pre-order provided you’re a regular who’s arriving early enough to avoid embarrassing explanations. You can imagine what would happen if you got there early, were told that the fish soup is off and then notice someone who turned up after you getting it. That’s why I asked about a particular table first. It’s one that’s out of the way where you can have a discreet dinner without people at nearby tables hearing, or in this case, seeing, what’s going on.”

“So we’re in for a nice intimate dinner, and when we’re in this discreet location, what are we going to be talking about?”

“I’m sure that some suitable subject will come up. It usually does.”

If I had anything to do with it there was something else that was going to be coming up a little later in the evening.

We spent the next few kilometres discussing how I knew about the operations in a kitchen located an hour’s drive from Denison. I explained that I tried to visit The Courtyard as often as I could, that I’d recommended the establishment to any of my friends and acquaintances who’d take the time to listen, and diners from Denison had been known to mention they’d arrived because of a recommendation from Dave Herston.

“You remember the wet weather back in February when the road to Prossie was cut a couple of times? Jeffrey and I had started looking for somewhere to set up camp and commuting between Denison and Airlie. Hopalong and Captain Headrush were looking after the taxi duties.”

“I remember you talking about that.”

“While the rain was around with the water levels there was no guarantee if we got up to Denison in the morning we’d be sure of getting back, and if we could get back we thought it wasn’t being fair to expect Wayne or Hopalong to drive back in the dark.”

I conveniently neglected to mention the fact that our first round of inquiries on the real estate front in Denison had drawn a total blank.

“In any case, we were in good digs in Airlie. Jeffrey and I were staying in the place we’re heading for, Shoalwater Spa. Tonight we’re in one of the spa rooms. Jeffrey and I had rooms a few steps down from that.”

“And,” Bernelle guessed, “you were eating at The Courtyard every night.”

“Right again. Except, of course, for Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, when it was closed. On the Saturday it was pissing down, I was the last customer left, not keen on the walk back to Shoalwater in the rain when they shut the kitchen down, and the three of them wandered out for a knockoff drink. The place isn’t licensed, but you wouldn’t be surprised to learn that they’ve got a couple of decent bottles on hand when they’re feeling thirsty. They get plenty of wine reps eating there, so you’d expect them to be landing the odd sample bottle or two.”

“So you helped them with one?”

“Or two, or three. I’d been there the night before, and the waitress had pointed me in the direction of the bar her sister’s boyfriend plays at. He’s a big Allman Brothers fan, does an excellent *Jessica*, and I was talking to her about that when they emerged from the kitchen. Had a glass or two with them. Got caught in a downpour on the way home, but that’s another story.”

“You can’t see the rain coming at night. I’ve noticed.”

“Before I left I’d been asking the boys for a recommendation for Sunday and Monday nights. Simon reckoned the restaurant at Shoalwater was as good as anything that was open on Sunday and one of them let slip where they were going Monday night, and the general opinion was I was quite welcome to join them.”

“Which you, of course, did?”

“Along with Jeffrey. We paid our way, but the grog bill was horrendous. The roads were open again Tuesday, morning. I wasn’t in great shape when Hopalong arrived on the doorstep. Better shape than when he called to check if we needed him, mind you. Still not in great shape. Jeffrey and I made a flying visit to the real estate agents, had a couple at the Palace and were back in Airlie by five-thirty in time to collect a takeaway for dinner and crash early for a change.”

“So,” Bernelle remarked, “you do take it easy from time to time.”

“From time to time, yes. While Jeffrey was collecting dinner, I stuck my head in the kitchen at The Courtyard to see how Simon was shaping up. Got roundly abused for my trouble, as you might expect. Anyway, over those couple of nights I got a fair picture of how the operation works. I think you’ll be impressed.”

“I’m sure I will be. Do you think they do wedding receptions?”

The comment took me slightly aback.

“Dunno. Why? Know someone who’s getting married? We could ask, if you.”

The lull in the conversation after the remark lasted a couple of minutes while both occupants of the vehicle pondered the implications of that last exchange.

At least I did.

I can only surmise the direction Bernelle’s thoughts were taking.

Subsequent developments suggest she regarded the excursion as an elaborate plan to propose. I guessed she was thinking about when I was likely to pop the question and how she was going to respond.

For my part, I had decided anything resembling a proposal was out of the question until certain acts had been completed.

A large number of times.

After all, I mused, if that old story is true, and the supply does get cut off when you walk down the aisle, it stands to reason that you’d want to get in as much action as possible beforehand. If I’m not getting any now, how much am I likely to get when it stops? Sorry, kid, you won’t want to be holding your breath. If there’s no action tonight you’d better be prepared for the teary farewell.

The silence lasted till we passed the *Trees For Rat Control* sign before the turnoff to Airlie, and the question of exactly how trees could be used to restrict rodents provided an opportunity to channel discussion into safer waters.

At least, it did for a while.

We were coming over the rise that leads into Strathdickie when the driver changed the subject.

“There are some nice houses around here,” she remarked.

“Yeah,” I cautiously concurred, harbouring suspicions as to the direction the conversation was taking. “Nice houses. Acreage. Rain forest. Very nice.”

“I’ve often thought I’d like to live around here. You could afford something nice around here.”

Yeah, more than likely I could, I thought, but that would involve a move away from Moderation. More than likely it would involve a move into moderation. In all things. Kids. Wiggles CDs. Joining the P&C Association. Thanks very much I’m not interested in going there any time soon.

“I like the rainforest. First holiday I had on my own was in a shack in the mountains up at Paluma. One of my mates’ parents owned the place, and I had the chance to spend a week up there when I was at College. Absolute tranquility. Loved it. Before that, when I was at high school my folks took us up for a holiday at Bingil Bay. Some nice spots up that way too. Cost you an arm and a leg if you were looking at buying, of course.”

“You can afford an arm and a leg. You won all that money...”

I did, I thought, and while I’m not exactly hoarding the shekels I’ve bought all the real estate I’m planning to buy for about the next decade.

“Across the bay from Mission Beach, which is just down the road from Bingil Bay, as you probably know, is Dunk Island. My favourite place in Australia, not that I’m the country’s greatest traveller, of course. Wonderful spot. Been there?”

“Dad took me over there at Easter just before I moved to Denison. He was on one of the yachts in the Townsville to Dunk Island yacht race. He’d got married a few months before the race, and they hadn’t had time for a proper honeymoon.”

“So he flew the new bride and the almost adult daughter across to the island for the honeymoon? Puts a new definition into kinky I’d reckon.”

The response indicated that the daughter had been packed off back to school while Dad and the new stepmother had another week by themselves.

“Nice flight over there,” I went on, doing my best to divert the conversation back to neutral territory. “Went over there with the Dipsos a few years ago. They’ve got this cricket team over there. Dunk’s Dozen they call it. Play a weekly game against somebody. They’d gone about a hundred games when we went over without losing one. When we left the unbeaten record was intact.”

By this stage, we were turning onto the main road between Proserpine and Airlie Beach. Increased traffic caused a temporary halt to the conversation while we made our way through Cannonvale. As we were halfway up the hill between Cannonvale and Airlie Beach the silence was broken by a request for directions to the night’s accommodation.

“Keep going through the main street, and then when you get to the end of the business area it’s the third or fourth place on your right as you go past Muddy Bay. There’s a place under construction, or there was when Jeffrey and I were staying there. If it’s finished Shoalwater will be the fourth. Anyway you can’t miss the sign.”

A couple of minutes later the prediction had proved correct, and once we’d checked in we found our way to the Spa Suite. As previously indicated I’d stayed there before, but neither Jeffrey or I had seen any need to access anything beyond the entry level option since all we needed was a place to sleep.

With other purposes in mind, this time I’d gone for the top of the range which involved parking at the rear of the premises and entry through the rear rather than the front of the unit. This involved a drive up the slope overlooking Muddy Bay, locating the designated parking spot (no such luxury for occupants of the units at the foot of the slope) that meant a minimal journey with luggage if we’d had any to lug.

“What do you reckon?” I asked as the door swung open. “Think it’ll do for the night?”

I wasn’t expecting any specific response. I figured that something like *Wow, nice!* was most likely. Once we’d got that far I’d see where ensuing conversation took us.

I ushered Bernelle through the door, and discovered, rather than the interior of an up-market motel room I was looking at a passage way. A passage way that took a dogleg to the left, but a passageway nevertheless.

In my experience of motel rooms, passageways usually provided access to a bathroom, or some form of cupboard space, but this one didn't. As we turned the corner, the aspect improved markedly. Since my first question had failed to elicit a response, I tried again.

“OK. They tricked me with the passage way. What do you reckon now? Good enough?”

Bernelle stopped in her tracks and turned in my direction.

“I thought you said it was a spa room,” she pouted. “Where's the spa? I'm so looking forward to a spa when we come back from dinner!”

“You'll probably find it in the bathroom. Last time I stayed here I was in one of the rooms at the bottom of the slope. No spas in those. I reckon it'll be in there.”

I indicated the doorway that provided access to a room on the opposite side of the dog leg wall in the passage way. A quick glance through the doorway indicated a distinct lack of anything beyond the usual facilities and the usual facilities did not include a plunge bath.

“Well,” I suggested, “it has to be here somewhere.”

Walking through the door that opened onto the balcony at the front of the unit I found the facility in question on my right hand side and noted it provided a rather spectacular view across the water.

Bernelle was close behind me.

“So, what do you reckon now? View across the bay. A dip in the spa with a glass of bubbles after a good meal. Sounds right on the money.”

I squatted, bringing my eye line to the approximate level of someone soaking in the spa.

“Yep, as I suspected. With the height on the slope and the edge of the balcony it doesn’t matter whether the tide’s in or out.”

The waters of Muddy Bay didn’t offer an attractive sight at low tide, and this had been evident during my earlier stay. Bernelle gazed across to Mandalay.

“Beautiful,” she murmured. “This would be a nice place for a honeymoon. Just the first night, of course, after that you’d go somewhere like Hayman Island or some exclusive island resort in Fiji. You could have the reception downstairs, or at the restaurant we’re going to tonight.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” was, I thought, a suitably non-committal response.

I took as read the implication that, in each of the above instances, *you* was meant to be replaced by *we*. “Anyway, first things first. Hungry?”

Since we’d determined the room offered the full range of advertised facilities it was time to turn our thoughts to dinner. A brief stroll down the slope would have been helpful for those who needed to work up an appetite, but since neither of us fell into that category we cheated and took the lift, which delivered us to the lobby that provided access to Reception and the Dining Room.

As we turned onto Shute Harbour Road for the three hundred metre walk to dinner it wasn’t possible to determine whether the tide was on its way in or out, but the fact that the view from the spa on the balcony wasn’t going to be affected by low tide gave us something to talk about until it was time to cross the road.

Once a gap in the flow of traffic allowed us to cross, I guided Bernelle past the entrance to The Courtyard towards the steps that led to The Balcony.

Once we’d made the ascent I was greeted like a long lost friend by the waitress, who happened to enjoy an on-and-off relationship with one of the chefs. Since she was on the premises, I assumed the relationship was in on mode.

Once introductions were out of the way she grabbed a pair of green folders and another two purple ones and started to usher us towards the table.

“So you’re still here?” I asked.

Kelly had been on duty last time I’d dined at the establishment before we made the big collect but had been missing in action when we were there earlier in the year. Presumably the relationship had moved from on to off mode and back on over the intervening period.

“I am,” was the reply, “and after everything that’s gone on over the past couple of years, hopefully this time for good. Simon and I are getting married at the end of the year. We’re in the middle of working out the reception at the moment.”

There was a pause while congratulations were offered and accepted. As we took our seats, Bernelle looked up.

“You’ll be having the reception here?” she asked, her thoughts following a train I’d prefer derailed.

“You’re kidding!” was the immediate response. “There’s no way Simon would be able to sit back and let Brett and Nick do all the work, and there’s no way he’d be able to persuade them to do it anyway since they’d want to be there for the party.”

“It’d be some party,” I suggested.

“Right on. Anyway we’re looking at something like a big spread of seafood and a pig on a spit or something. Keep it simple, leave all the work to the caterers and.”

“*Laissez les bon temps roulez*, as they say in New Orleans. And the wine list? Clare or Eden Valley Riesling with the seafood, Tempranillo or Sangiovese with the spit roast, Noble One with the dessert, whatever that is, and Arras for the toasts?”

The response indicated that I was close to the money.

“If you give me your postal address before you go I’ll have an invitation for the two of you in the mail when they go out some time in the next couple of weeks,” Kelly went on.

I wasn’t quite sure any existing relationships in the neighbourhood would be extant by the end of the year, and was pondering an appropriately noncommittal response when Kelly went on.

“Anyway, enough about that. You’re here for dinner, so I’d better let you have a look at the menu.”

“So I can figure out what I’m looking for when I whip across to the bottle shop,” I suggested.

“Actually, you won’t be needing to do that.”

I glanced at the two folders.

“You mean you’ve taken the plunge and got the liquor licence?” I asked. That issue had been the subject of considerable debate over the years.

“No way. You can take a bit of credit for this one. You remember when you were down at the start of the year, and we ended up at dinner at the Shoalwater? You asked why the boys didn’t have a wine suggestion from the bottle shop along with each dish on the menu? Well, when they went to talk to the people at the pub they came up with an even better idea.”

“Which was?”

“We took the old fax machine here and got another cheap one second hand, set one up here and the other one in the bottle shop. If you want to go with the wine suggestion on the wine list we send a fax to the bottle shop and they’ll deliver the wine here. It’ll cost you an extra three dollars a bottle, but everyone seems happy.”

“The two folders?”

“Are the menu,” Kelly explained. “You might have noticed there’s no Specials board around the place? The green folder is the *a la carte* menu. You’ll notice that the wine matches are there, so we’re not going to be changing it too much.”

“The purple one?”

“Is what used to be on the Specials board. When we worked the arrangement with the bottle shop we couldn’t have the daily specials changing all the time, so we went for a weekly seasonal menu with the wine matches worked out so we can make sure that the pub’s got enough stock.”

With the new arrangements clearly understood, it was time to sort out what we were going to be indulging in. The first course was, as previously indicated, a no-brainer. The *bouillabaisse* was matched with a Sauvignon Blanc from the Adelaide Hills, so that was easy enough.

From there matters became slightly more complicated. Since the Sauvignon Blanc was never going to outlast the *bouillabaisse* by much, it was a question of how many extra bottles we were going to put away. The easiest answer seemed to be to go for a shared dish and the appropriate accompaniment.

“Since we’re starting on a Mediterranean seafood theme with the *bouillabaisse*,” I suggested, “why don’t we continue along the same lines and go for the *paella*, that’s the Spanish version of fried rice. They’ve matched it up with a Vermentino, which is a new variety for me, so I’m definitely interested there. We can look at the desserts when the time comes. What do you think?”

The response was favourable, the order went in, the Sauvignon Blanc arrived, and Kelly was about to pour two glasses when her better half appeared on the scene, offering to take over pouring duties while she attended to other tables, which were filling rapidly.

Things were apparently temporarily quiet around Simon’s station, so we had a couple of minutes exchanging news before a wave from the kitchen indicated his presence was required within.

The *bouillabaisse* arrived, and had no sooner been despatched than a second member of the culinary crew arrived brandishing a bottle.

“Got a few minutes to spare,” Nick explained. “My latest offerings don’t seem to be flavour of the week, so Simon suggested that I pop out with this bottle of Vermentino we were trying with one of the wine reps last night. Kel said you hadn’t tried one before, so I thought that you might like to see how this one stacks up against the one that’s on its way across from the pub. We were arguing about whether to change the wine match last night, and when Kel told us you were out here Nick thought it might be worth seeing which one you thought was the better match.”

Now while you would have presumed the preceding remarks were addressed in my direction, strange to say the gentleman's eyes were fixed on my companion.

He left shortly thereafter, with two glasses poured, and when the *paella* arrived, complete with accompanying bottle and fresh glasses, so did the third member of the culinary triumvirate.

While I'd eaten there reasonably often and regarded the kitchen trio as more than mere acquaintances but not quite bosom buddies, this level of attention was unprecedented. We'd almost finished the first glasses from the sample bottle when the meal arrived with the second bottle.

Brett placed the *paellera* in the middle of the table, From there it was a case of ladling the contents into a smaller bowl to serve.

Brett helped himself to a seat rather than a serve.

“So,” he began, “what do you think of the Vementino? Take your time...”

I did, helping myself to a heap of seasoned rice and checking the combination of wine and food.

“Nice match,” I said after a couple of samples of both. I watched as the fresh glasses were filled from the newly arrived bottle.

“So how about this one?”

I swirled the wine in the glass, took a lengthy sniff, followed by a swig and allowed the liquid to swirl across the palate in the recommended manner.

I held the glass up to the light. It was pleasantly light yellow straw colour with tinges of green around the edge. Topping up the other glass from the first bottle, I did the same, then held both up against the same background. The resemblance in colour, while hardly surprising, was remarkable.

I took a swirl, a sniff and a swig of the first wine.

“You know,” I remarked, “you'd almost think they were the same wine.”

I reached for the first bottle, which bore the insignia of a relatively unknown producer in the King Valley, and glanced across to the second, a product of a larger producer from the same area.

“Any chance they’re sourced from the same vineyard? A contract grower who sells to both wineries?”

There were slight differences in taste between the two, possibly the result of slight differences in the way the grapes had been handled between the press and the bottle. Both wines had the same citrus and passionfruit notes on the nose, and very similar crisp acid on the palate.

“That’s what we thought when we tried the second one last night. It raises an interesting question, and one that we’d appreciate an independent opinion on.”

“Which is?”

“Recommended retail on the first is eighteen-fifty,” Brett went on. “Fair enough, the bottle shop puts them into here at twenty-one.”

The reference to a price by the glass was slightly bemusing, but I allowed him to go on.

“Recommended retail on the second one, the one the rep brought with him, is twenty-three. So if we got that in next door, we’d be looking at, say twenty-five fifty delivered.”

Again, the reference to the glass price was unexpected. I gave a noncommittal nod and took another mouthful of rice.

“But the rep,” Brett went on, “has a pallet of the second one that he’s offered next door at a price that’d let them put it out at eighteen. There aren’t too many places on the coast who’d be interested in a pallet of Vermentino from a relatively unknown producer who needs the cash flow.”

“Hardly surprising,” I observed.

“The pub would be able to offload a few cartons onto the islands and up to your mate at the Palace. We’d probably account for a couple of cases a week if we put it on the menu as a match for the *paella*.”

“So why don’t you?”

“The *paella* is Simon’s baby. He’s the rice and risotto king. When it comes to the weekly tally. Simon does very nicely out of the *paella*, thank you very much.”

“Which is a vital issue,” I remarked to Bernelle, “since the weekly prize is three nights away from the kitchen with a free dinner and drinks Monday night. I was telling you about that on the way down.”

“So Simon reckons that if he changes the wine match and replaces a well-known brand with one that no bugger’s heard of his numbers will go down.”

“With a corresponding impact on his wallet,” I suggested.

“Bang on. He’s done field research that suggests most customers take the dish with the matched wine because they know the winery even if they’ve never heard of the grape variety.”

“Couldn’t you put both wines on the menu?” Bernelle asked. It was probably a good question, but I suspected I knew the answer.

“If we did that,” Brett replied, “we’d be tempted to do the same thing all over the place. Things are running smoothly in that department at the moment, and we’d rather not complicate things.”

“So why not match it up with something else on the menu,” Bernelle suggested. “Maybe put something new in there that’d match up with it?”

“She’s not just a pretty face, eh? It makes sense if you look at it. I assume that Simon’s *paella* counts as two serves on the tally board whenever someone orders it, right?” The response indicated that I’d hit the nail on the head.

“Which means that it only gets ordered if at least two people at a table want it. It’s not exactly cheap, either. No single serves, are there? So while he gets plenty of benefit out of it, there have to be plenty of people who just can’t order it for one reason or another. You’re the seafood king. So you put together something with a Spanish or Mediterranean flavour in the seafood line, whack it in the purple folder, match it with the new Vermentino and make sure you’ve got a note that makes the variety sound like the next big thing and see what happens.”

Promising to give the matter serious thought, Brett headed back to the kitchen, leaving us temporarily to ourselves and our *paella*.

The situation only lasted a couple of minutes. Simon reemerged from the kitchen, engaged us in another conversation based loosely around food and wine, was called back to his station to be replaced shortly afterwards by Nick. The *paella* was gone, the dessert menu was in the process of being examined.

Bernelle indicated that she needed to powder her nose. Her absence gave me the opportunity to give voice certain suspicions that had raised their ugly heads.

“I can’t help thinking,” I started as Bernelle disappeared around a corner, “you three bastards are running a sort of tag team here. I mean, I’ve eaten here a few times over the years, and I’ve usually had one or two of you sit down for a yarn and a drink at the end of the night, but this time I’ve had the lot of you dropping by constantly. In the same bloody order. Wouldn’t have anything to do with ...”

I nodded towards the recently vacated seat.

“You’d have to admit,” Nick retorted, “the scenery’s a bit better than it usually is when you’re in these parts. Is that a problem?”

“Dunno. I have a suspicion Madam thinks this excursion has been staged with the particular aim of giving me the chance to get down on one knee and propose, or some shit like that. That’s not likely to happen when we’re constantly being joined by a third party.”

“So you’d rather we...”

“Kept it going. If that scenario’s going to be fulfilled it won’t be happening till we’re a long way down the track. I was wondering how I’d avoid the issue this time around.”

“So we’ll keep it going,” Nick replied. “We’ll keep the odd extra bottle heading this way as well. I mean, if the girl’s going to be finding herself a permanent spot in your lifestyle she’s going to have to learn to drink, isn’t she? Take a gander at the dessert menu when I’m gone, and remember that if you’re looking at a sticky with dessert I’ve got a little bottle of Rutherglen Muscat for after.”

Bernelle's return to the table saw a brace of *brulees* ordered, with a botrytised bottle from next door. The conversation at the table wandered aimlessly for a few minutes, and when the desserts arrived, so did Brett and a bottle of Muscat.

As the premises emptied, the numbers of visiting chefs doubled.

The conversation ranged across various topics, and as we reached the coffee and Muscat stage, the last remaining diners departed, two chefs became three as the apprentices started cleaning the kitchen.

Kelly's arrival saw six seats surround a table meant for an intimate dinner for two. While there was a degree of coming and going as chefs retreated to monitor the cleanup process and Kelly replenished the coffee the gathering, as any student of Australian social interaction would expect, split into gender-oriented factions.

It was hardly a surprising development given the fact the female proportion of the assembly had a ready-made topic of conversation that was guaranteed to be bloke-unfriendly.

The girls were immersed in discussions about wedding arrangements while the rest of us, rather than drinking beer and talking sport sipped Liqueur Muscat and discussed my stay in New Orleans.

Around eleven various members of the party began to remark on the need to retire for the night, so the bill was produced, payment was made, and Bernelle and I ushered out the door as the premises were secured for the night.

While my arm around a certain waist as we made our way towards the kerb seemed a natural fit there was a certain remoteness when it came to reciprocity. We made our way across the road, headed towards Shoalwater and I pondered the possibilities once we'd made it back to the room.

The way the evening had panned out had effectively ruled out any opportunity for events Bernelle seemed to expect.

Not that they were ever likely, since any suggestion of a permanent relationship was going to occur, if it occurred at all, a long way down the track after frequent repetitions of physical acts that had, to date, failed to materialise.

On the other hand, the way we'd been treated could suggest there were benefits to be gained from establishing and maintaining a physical relationship. There was plenty of money available, and I hoped I had displayed a willingness to splash the cash around liberally in a way that would benefit anybody who managed to place herself nearby on a regular basis.

As we headed along the footpath a thought crossed my mind.

“Been a good night, hasn't it?” was meant to be an avenue into a conversation that would lead to certain carnal conclusions.

The response was noncommittal.

“We should do this more often. Not every week, but every couple of weeks. Make a weekend of it. Roll down Saturday, have lunch somewhere. The *tapas* plate at the pub's always good value, but you don't have to go there every time. Dinner Saturday night, brunch Sunday morning and maybe even dinner Sunday night and back home Monday morning.”

The suggestion brought no response, but I continued undeterred.

“If we were looking to do that every couple of weeks, I guess it'd make sense to check the real estate agents and pick up a unit somewhere up there.”

My left arm waved in the general direction of the hillside on our right. My right arm remained in contact with a singularly unresponsive waistline.

“There are a couple of developments going in up there, and I reckon there's enough in the kitty to get into one of them. I think at least one of them's one of those time share deals. You know, the ones where you use the unit for part of the year, and they rent it out when you're not there. I'm not too keen on that idea just quietly, I think I'd rather have the place set up just the way you'd want it without the thought of some strangers wandering in and out of your personal space...”

I paused for a moment to provide an opportunity for someone to contribute to the discussion. No contribution was forthcoming.

As we turned into the entrance to Shoalwater I again attempted to point out the area to which I was referring.

There was a complex under construction directly above our accommodation.

“A place like that would be just about ideal. You’d probably get access turning off back at the corner and cracking a lefty what, about sixty metres up the hill. Looks like the road would be reasonably flat after you’d done the uphill bit. You wouldn’t want to be doing too much uphill stuff, of course. There is such a thing as too much exercise, particularly if you’re looking at activity once you’ve found your way back at base.”

None of the above produced a response before we reached the lift in the lobby, and I suspected future developments were unlikely to continue down my preferred path. Like it or not, the die was cast.

Once we’d made our way upstairs, events would follow whatever path they were going to follow.

With the door locked and chained, and around seventy kilometres of highway between the two of us and disruptive influences, I suggested that a spell in the spa might be of some benefit to the pair of us.

“A warm spa,” I suggested, “would be an ideal way to round off the evening.” It would also, of course, require the removal of substantial amounts of clothing and open up certain other possibilities.

“It would be.” My companion’s silence was broken. I waited for some further elucidation, but none was forthcoming.

“So,” I went on, moving in the direction of the bar fridge in the room, “what do you reckon? A glass of bubbles to go with the soak in the spa. There’s probably a half bottle of something in here. Not likely to be anything from the top of the line but you can’t have everything.”

“If you absolutely must keep on drinking, go right ahead. Some of us have to work for a living, and I’m going to have to drive back in the morning, so I don’t think I’ll be needing anything more.”

“You will be joining me in the spa?”

“Unfortunately not. I don’t think you’d be happy about it if I did. For hygienic reasons.”

“You mean that it’s the wrong time of the month or something?”

“No or something about it. Now, if you’ll excuse me it’s been a long day, and I’m ready for bed.”

This latest development, coming after earlier comments that suggested the spa was somewhere around the top of the list of priorities, was a surprise. I was about to point out this apparent inconsistency when discretion took over.

After all, there were other options.

I prepared myself for bed, and, once the lights had been dimmed, set off on the now-familiar process of establishing intimate contact. I’d no sooner started when the shutters were slammed down.

“It’s no good,” I was told. “I told you. It’s the wrong time of the month and ...”

“There are other options,” I interposed. “It’s not as if there’s only one string on the bow.”

Bernelle sat up and scowled.

“If you think you’re going to be putting that thing anywhere apart from where it’s supposed to go, you’ve got another think coming. Put it in my mouth? Yucky!”

“I don’t recall making any specific suggestions. All I was doing was pointing out that there are other options.”

Some subconscious radar guided my hand towards Bernelle’s hindquarter.

“Don’t think you’re going to be putting it in there,” she remonstrated. “It’ll come out all brown, sticky and stinky. Icky! You should be ashamed of yourself.”

I pondered the wisdom of pointing out that things almost invariably emerged from the process under discussion in a form that could be described as *sticky and stinky* but decided against it.

“In that case,” I replied, “I think I’ll pop over to the spa. I’m not quite ready to nod off yet.”

I diverted *en route* to check the bar fridge. The previously mentioned bottles of bubbly were present, though they were hardly the most diplomatic option under the current circumstances.

There were, on the other hand, cans of premixed rum and cola, which would fit the bill more than adequately.

Sitting in the spa, I analysed the situation.

I had expended considerable mental energies without anything resembling the desired outcome. If I abandoned the campaign that expenditure would account for nothing. On the other hand, if I maintained the effort, surely my attempts would eventually come to fruition, but was that a desirable outcome?

Regardless of other considerations, Bernelle's attitude to the lusts of the flesh could hardly be described as *an enthusiastic willingness to explore all the possibilities*.

Fair enough. Neither did mine.

Developments over the past few hours suggested someone had decided to head down a particular road.

Until her ambitions reached fruition anything resembling satisfaction would be rationed and there would not be a flood of physical intimacies.

Birthdays and anniversaries, more than likely and not much else. Enough to produce the requisite two-point-something offspring and then *not tonight you'll wake the children*.

No, I thought, tonight was the deadline. It hasn't happened. It's not going to happen. It's over. Thank you umpires, thank you ball-boys. Game, set and march. Knock off the bails and draw stumps.

An examination of the contents of the tin of rum and cola indicated that stumps had been drawn in that department as well. I moved stealthily into the room, procured a resupply and exited, careful not to disturb sleeping beauties.

I felt it was best to ensure that the other party was sound asleep before I made any moves in the direction of slumber. Lengthy, deep and meaningful discussions on the future of a relationship were hardly the highest item on the agenda.

I was midway through a second can when snoring indicated someone was sound asleep. After three liquid sleeping pills, although it was after one o'clock and I was almost totally smashed, I remembered to draw the curtains before I crawled into the cot.

Friday Morning On The Road

I was slowly emerging from the depths of slumber into something that resembled consciousness when I became aware of a burst of unfamiliar music. The sound was enough to jolt me straight into wakefulness, and produced the same reaction on the other side of the bed. It was obvious I was hearing a ring tone, and the source was Bernelle's mobile.

The room was in darkness as Bernelle took the call. For my part, having been jerked unexpectedly into a fairly close approximation of full consciousness it was a reflex reaction to take a glance towards the bedside clock radio.

What I saw caused me to reflect that in all my years of staying in motels while the radio side of the clock radio never worked, the clock could usually be counted on to be reasonably accurate. The digital display, if it was right, indicated I'd been asleep for a good eight hours.

It would have been reasonable to expect a classy establishment would take more care with minor details because while the clock was showing 9:30 as far as I could tell there was no sign the sun had risen.

I was halfway between the bed and the window when it became obvious the journey was no longer necessary. Bernelle was making fervent apologies for her non-arrival at work and promising to be on site as early as could be managed.

When the call had been concluded she turned to me.

"This is all your fault, and if I lose my job because I came down here with you, drank too much and slept in."

"You'd have a case for unreasonable dismissal. That's presuming you haven't made a habit of turning up late. If it comes to that, I'd be able to testify that this little jaunt was all my idea. Anyway, if the worst comes to the worst."

A voice in the back of my brain was quietly stating *you'd better hope it doesn't.*

"I'll look after things," I concluded out loud. It was about the only appropriate response that could be expressed under the circumstances. "Anyway, what did they say?"

The response indicated that the exact words used were something similar to *be here by eleven if you know what's good for you.*

"In that case we'd better get moving."

I had enough experience thinking on my feet to know that inducing a flurry of action in those around you can provide an opportunity to gather your thoughts while ensuring that others don't necessarily have the same privilege.

"You dive into the shower, and we can get straight on the road. I can have a shower when I get back to The Crossroads."

"If we get pulled over on the way? I think I'll still be over the limit and if we are pulled over and I have to blow in the bag there's no way I'll be able to make it back to Denison in time."

"If we get pulled over, we get pulled over. If that happens I'll cover any costs that come out of that. In the meantime, if you dive into the shower I'll get some coffee on the go, and we can probably be on the road by ten. Should give you time for another shower and a change of clothes and still be at work by eleven."

A five minute shower interval provided an opportunity to plot out a course of short term action. Complications introduced by the constabulary might or might not arise, but in the meantime it was a case of negotiating a swift and safe return to base. Once Bernelle emerged from the bathroom and was in the process of dressing I pointed to the cup of coffee I'd prepared while she was in the shower.

"If you can get that into you, that'll be a start. I made it industrial strength, two coffees, three sugars, so that'll be a start. I've grabbed everything that belongs to us that's lying around here, and it's already in the car. If you take a quick squiz around the room to check you shouldn't find anything left behind. I'll head down to Reception and settle the bill. If you drive down, we can be on the road a.s.a.p."

In other words, give the other party things to keep them busy and then find an excuse to get out of the way, so we don't lose time fretting over minor details.

As it transpired the decision to make my own way down to settle the bill turned out to be timely.

Reception was deserted and unstaffed when I arrived.

The arrival of the receptionist coincided with the lift disgorging half a dozen people intent on settling their own accounts. I'd completed the transaction when Bernelle walked through the door and surveyed the queue behind me.

"See?" I nodded towards those waiting to settle their accounts. "Lucky I headed straight down. Of course, it *could* have been better if we'd woken up earlier."

I turned to the receptionist.

"Your curtains are remarkably effective," I remarked. "Do you have a problem with guests who don't make it to checkout time?"

Part two of the strategy involved at least one diversionary topic of conversation for the return journey.

The reply indicated management made a conscious decision to ensure patrons who'd been partying till dawn had ample opportunities to recover before they set out to repeat the process. Checkout time was more flexible than in neighbouring establishments. There wasn't time to pursue the matter further. By the time ten o'clock rolled around we were through Cannonvale and turning onto the short cut through Strathdickie.

In the car, I used the mobile to contact The Crossroads.

It took half a dozen attempts before Jeffrey answered the phone.

Once I'd been assured no pressing matters had reared their ugly heads in my absence, the early stages of the trip back was completed in relative silence.

Predictable, since both of us were somewhat the worse for wear.

Mind you, I couldn't help noting the contrast between someone's chirpiness on the way down and the current somewhat strained silence.

Bernelle was obviously preoccupied with the need to get back to town in time to save her job without losing her licence, and I was to blame for both problems.

At least that's the way it looked from where I was sitting.

For my part, I was going to have to work out a way to extricate myself from the relationship, such as it was. My sdeadline has been passed, and the frostiness on display was a reminder that relationships were not all beer and skittles.

After all, even if you have to take the rough with the smooth it makes sense to avoid the rough if you can. While the weekend was going to provide a temporary disengagement, there was still a need to develop a workable exit strategy.

We were on the run into Strathdickie when we sighted a car bedecked with a display of red and blue lights headed in the opposite direction. A glance at the speedometer indicated we were travelling under the speed limit, but the sight was enough to induce a litter of small furry felines in the driver.

We'd negotiated the right hand turn at the Strathdickie Forge and made our way through the uphill dogleg when I spotted a brown four-wheel drive and a cream coloured sedan on the side of the road.

A figure in a blue shirt was conducting a conversation with the inhabitants of the sedan. The figure was a familiar one.

"Relax," I said as we passed the scene. "The car we saw before was obviously dropping Dennis out here so he could bring the radar unit back to Airlie or Prossie or wherever it's based. There's every chance we're in the clear for the rest of the way back. Unless, of course, the boys from Denison are out on the highway south, but there's nothing we can do about that."

"What do you mean? Why are we in the clear?"

"Well, the brown four-wheel drive back there is obviously a mobile radar unit."

"I could see that. It had *Police* painted on the side."

Score one for the bleeding obvious.

"Mobile radar units need to be moved, which means a car has to deliver the driver to the mobile unit. And it has to pick him or her up from wherever they're moving the revenue raiser to. We passed the car that dropped Dennis here as it was heading back to Airlie, which means the radar unit probably isn't going back out on the highway. There are probably batteries that need to be recharged or something..."

"How do you know?"

"Well," I was forced to admit, "I don't *know*, if you catch my drift, but if you think things over, if they were going to move the radar somewhere between here and Denison the other car would have dropped Dennis here and gone on ahead. They'd probably have gone as far as Longford Creek or wherever the dividing line between Prossie and Denison is and then double back to pick Dennis up once he's landed wherever the radar's going next. In any case they're all behind us, so we should be right. I'd still be sitting under the hundred if I was you, to be on the safe side."

"That's all very well, but what if we'd been five minutes earlier? I mean, if we'd woken up a little bit before we did, that would've meant it could have been me that was pulled over."

The stress was obviously getting to somebody.

"If that'd happened, there are two possibilities. Either we'd have gone past when they were changing over, and they'd be distracted by what they have to do and wouldn't be inclined to worry about someone who's not speeding or doing anything to arouse suspicion."

"Or?"

"If they'd changed over and were heading back it's more than likely Dennis'd be the one pulling us over. Do you remember seeing that brown four-wheel drive on the way down?"

The response was negative, so I went on.

At this point, I wasn't concerned about the accuracy of my suppositions. The idea, as far as I could see, was to provide a reassuring flow of commentary that might dispel the driver's concerns and, in the process, reduce the likelihood that she'd do something that might attract unwanted attention.

"Since you'd guess they'd leave the radar in one spot from some time in the late afternoon till the following morning it must've been just on the other side of the turnoff, and they were bringing it back to Cannonvale so they could redeploy it on the road between Prossie and Airlie later today. Which means five minutes earlier we might have missed them completely. Anyway, assuming it was Dennis who pulled us over we'd still have been OK. More than likely, anyway."

"Why?" A worrier's curiosity is seemingly never satisfied. "You're talking as if you know this guy."

"You'd be surprised who I happen to know. Particularly in cricket circles. Two years ago, Dennis's young bloke, Shane, was the State Primary Schools' wicket-keeper."

"And?"

"Dennis seems to have concluded I had a lot to do with the kid getting the spot. Plays down his own part in the kid's development, which was probably the most important bit. All I did was make sure the kid got noticed by the right people, which is the major part of the battle."

A comment seemed to demand further elucidation, so it was provided.

We were, after all, in the business of stopping certain parties from worrying about things which may well fail to transpire.

"Dennis, apart from being the sergeant at Proserpine, has played cricket all over the state, depending on where the Police Department decided to send him. At one stage he had a chance of playing for Queensland, but he got transferred to Urandangie or somewhere. At the time Queensland had about ten quality quicks and he was number eleven on the pecking order. He could go to Urandangie and take the promotion involved with the pay rise or stick around in Brisbane and wait and see what happened with the cricket."

The observer might suggest the topic of police officers and their activities would be better avoided under the circumstances. On the other hand, the flood of information was hopefully going to be enough to prevent the audience's mind from straying into more worrying territory.

"Anyway, after he'd been a good boy at Urandangie for two years, he got a transfer back to the coast and ended up at Mirriwinni, up near Cairns. Met Jean while he was there, got married and ended up playing grade cricket in Cairns. Played well enough to make it into the Queensland Country side a couple of times. Shifted around a bit while the kids were growing up. There's a daughter named Tracey as well. Anyway, they ended up in Prossie. Jean's a teacher and her family's from there. By that stage, he wasn't the same fast bowler he'd been, but he ended up captaining one of the B-grade sides and had Shane playing with the men by the time he was ten."

"Which would be unusual?" was the not-entirely-unexpected response.

"Would be if the kid didn't happen to have talent and a Dad who was captain of the side and happens to be second-in-charge at the cop shop. Anyway the kid got to bat from time to time, had the occasional bowl and fielded to give one of the older blokes a rest. Played Junior cricket on Saturday morning and B grade in the afternoon with Dad. As far as Junior Cricket was concerned he was good enough to make the Under 12s as a ten-year old, which made him a walkup start the following year, which is when two of the kids from the first year made it into the State Primary School team."

I gave the information a few seconds to sink in. When there was no response I went on.

"So when Tabby and Lofty made the Schoolboys' side, Dennis reckoned Shane was close to a certainty. The kid was probably also a certainty for the Junior Cricket Under 14s as well, but there was a State cap involved, so Dennis was keen to check the chances of Shane making it."

"Which is where you came in," Bernelle guessed.

“September holidays that year we were having a visit from the Ipswich mob, who were bringing their two rep teams on a warm-up tour before their season started in the southeast corner. They were going to stop off in Denison, where I didn't have enough kids to field two strong teams against them.”

'So you got Dennis to bring his kid up to Denison, and *hey presto*."

"There's a cousin who's half handy as well and Dennis brought them both up. One of the blokes on the Ipswich bus was one of the State selectors, so first thing I did was to make sure Dennis got introduced to him. Ken knew who he was, but during the afternoon Shane was standing up to his cousin, who's a better-than-average fast medium bowler, picked up two leg side stumpings and a catch in the process."

"Which was enough to get him into the Queensland team?"

"Not quite. There was a State carnival to get through. But it meant Ken had seen the kid in action, knew who he was, and would have been comparing the kids he saw in the southeast corner to him as they went through their rep stuff in the fourth term."

I went on to explain I'd managed to drop the kid's name into influential ears, had introduced Dennis to everyone who mattered when he went to Toowoomba with the NQ team and most of them recognized the name and knew who they were talking to.

"Then the kid did the right thing. Captained the side well, went within an ace of winning the carnival, scored a couple of fifties, took more catches than any of his rivals and pulled off two leg-side stumpings off the cousin. With the result that both of them made the State team."

“So if Dennis was to pull us over," Bernelle speculated.

"We'd probably have spent five minutes exchanging news and ended up on our way without anyone mentioning the need to blow in the bag. Wouldn't save you from the speeding ticket, if that was the reason he pulled you over. The reading'd already be on the speed gun, and once it's there it isn't easy to get rid of, but you'd have avoided the more unpleasant option."

"So there are benefits having you in the car," Bernelle suggested.

"Could well be. I'd be sitting just below the hundred for the rest of the way just to be on the safe side. After all, the next guy up the road may not be someone I know."

By this point in the discussion, we were within cooe of Denison's outskirts, and while the rest of the journey was completed in silence the conversation had achieved the intended purpose.

Along the way, despite the threat to her hairdressing career, it also seemed to suggest to Bernelle that there were some benefits involved when it came to being associated with David Herston, which is ironic since I'd been trying to work out the most convenient way to terminate the whole thing.

In any case, as the car pulled up outside The Crossroads, Bernelle asked about my plans for the weekend.

Under the circumstances, there wasn't time for a lengthy discussion.

I pointed out it was going to be full-on cricket degeneracy for the next two days and by Sunday afternoon I'd be looking for somewhere like the room we'd recently vacated where I could roll the rock across the doorway and hibernate undisturbed for a couple of days.

Waiting for a break in the uncharacteristically heavy flurry of traffic turning off the highway and making its way towards Downtown Denison, Bernelle suggested that she might drop by on Sunday evening to see if there was anything she could do.

The remark brought up echoes of The Band's *Up On Cripple Creek* as I closed the car door to allow her to head towards whatever fate her employer had in mind.

I looked across to the curves encompassed by the seat belt I reflected that here, indeed, was *a drunkard's dream if I ever did see one*.

As the car receded into the distance, I strolled onto the premises and reflected that while I'd probably be suffering from terminal alcoholic poisoning by Sunday afternoon I'd still need to be exceedingly wary should certain parties come calling.

Once I'd checked in with Bright Eyes and reassured myself that no pressing matters were looming on the horizon I was quite happy to grab a couple of bottles of mineral water and a supply of vitamin B tablets and retreat to my room.

There was, interestingly, no sign of Mr Jeffrey.

"I'll be back on deck by four, I reckon," was my parting remark. "The Dipsos won't have hit the road by then, so there shouldn't be anything serious in the way of emergencies in the interim. On the other hand, if there are I'm afraid to say you're going to have to deal with them yourselves. Until further notice, the doctor is out, the judge's decision is final, and no correspondence will be entered into."



Sorting Things Out

With things starting to get complicated, Herston and Jeffrey, predictably, escape from threatened matrimony, largely through events relating to a cricket match and a quest for the Apprentice Hairdresser of the Year. There's also a timely intervention that takes the Mafia out of the equation.

Friday Night On The Rantan

Cricket Day One

Give Them Curry

Cricket Day Two

Sunday Night

Visitors, Welcome And Unwelcome

Jumping To Conclusions

Friday Night On The Rantan

There may be a body of opinion that the half dozen bottles of mineral water transferred to the cave were a bit over the odds, but half a dozen it was.

Not that I was needing all of them right away. I thought one would be needed while I prepared myself for a spell in the cot while a second might be needed for refills between the time I finished the first and my re-mergence.

A third would cover the spell between the re-mergence and the arrival of the Dipsomaniacs while the other three would be handy over the next couple of days.

There was every chance when I returned home on any of the forthcoming nights minor matters like overnight hydration would skip my mind.

Five hours later I was back on deck, freshly showered and ready for anything. As I emerged from the cave, the remnants of the second bottle of mineral water in hand, I found the other long-term inmates gathered in the pool area.

"We've made an executive decision," I was informed as I pulled up something to sit on.

"Which was?" was my response.

"Considering your predictions regarding the likely course of events over the weekend," Sandy began, "we figured that there wouldn't be much for Bright Eyes to do between now and Monday morning."

It seemed a reasonable assumption.

"I mean," Hopalong went on, "after she's dropped us at the pub tonight, we can probably get a ride in on your mates' bus tomorrow afternoon, and there's every chance you'll be wanting a spell on Sunday night rather than heading into the pub for the evening session."

"I've got temporary accommodation upstairs at the Palace if I need it," Jeffrey pointed out. "So we figured if there was going to be a weekend when Bright Eyes could conveniently head off for a spot of child-bride-grooming, this was it."

My vote made the decision unanimous.

"She won't be taking the Red Chariot with her," Sandy added. "I'm going to be using the chance to get the marking and everything else up to date since the kids have both been invited to birthday parties and sleep-overs, so there's no point in going to Townsville for the weekend. She's left the keys with me so I'll be available to cover for any chauffeuring that needs to be done. After tonight, of course."

With those issues resolved, Jeffrey, Sandy and Hopalong departed at around four-forty-five while I hunkered down with the third bottle of mineral water and a suitable soundtrack to await the arrival of the Dipsomaniacs.

Knowing the path developments were likely to take I suggested there was no need to hold a spot at the bar for me. It would also be advisable to remind His Lordship and The Duchess they'd promised to use their cars to reserve a parking space for the Dipsomaniac bus.

"Bernelle?" Hopalong asked. "If she arrives looking for you do we point her in this direction?"

My response had indicated that, while unanticipated developments might affect the game plan, it was unlikely she'd be looking for me at any time before Sunday evening.

In any case, I had the next ninety minutes or so to myself.

I wandered indoors and selected a James Lee Burke novel. I'd stacked the CD player with a selection of blasts from the bayou, so it was a matter of passing the time until it was time to board the Oblivion Express.

On my way, I paused to ponder telephone connections.

Tour Coordinator Barry Ballmer would call if there were unforeseen delays, so I wandered down to Reception to check where the phone had been switched.

Once I'd assured myself I'd be able to hear it I selected a shady spot close to a light source so nightfall wouldn't pose an insurmountable problem and settled down to have a quiet read while I used the bottle of mineral water to ensure that when I arrived at the Palace dehydration wouldn't have me going at the grog like a bull at a barred gate.

Around six-fifteen, the shades of night were gathering,

I thought of switching on the lights but with a page or two until the end of the chapter I could wait another five minutes. The sound of a car in the car park prompted me to put down the book and ponder the possibilities.

Lack of illumination around the pool provided me with some cover, although the stereo blaring across the environs would probably be seen as evidence there was someone on the premises.

Bright Eyes had departed ninety minutes before, but she might have forgotten some vital piece of child-bridegrooming apparatus and been forced to return to base to fetch same.

The other residents of the premises would by this time be in Full Friday Night Mode and could be ruled out.

Unless the Dipsomaniacs had left Townsville around three-thirty they could safely be eliminated from the list of possibilities, and, in any case the vehicle didn't sound like a coaster bus..

Waddles and Wally were, by now, safely ensconced in whatever locations they thought would provide secure long-term refuge.

The living quarters and Reception were, as far as I could recall securely locked. Rather than moving from my current spot to investigate, I felt whoever arrived was probably going to find me eventually. If, that is, they needed to locate me.

In the gathering dark, I thought it might be an idea to move into the shadows where I could monitor developments without being spotted immediately.

A car door slammed.

Footsteps took themselves along the length of the building, paused outside my door where, I guessed, someone tried the door, and then headed directly towards the pool.

A familiar blonde head appeared over the childproof gate, with an inquiry whether I was there.

"Over here," I volunteered, emerging from a convenient patch of greenery.

"I was in the middle of pointing Horace at the hydrangeas when I heard the car pull up. Normally I would have wandered inside, but Sandy reckons they're in need of a bit of nitrogen, so I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone. What's up? Nothing serious, I hope."

A cynic might well detect a degree of hypocrisy in that observation, given the fact that I'd determined a relationship that hadn't succeeded in going anywhere was due to be concluded. I had, on the other hand, provided guarantees in case of developments concerning certain people's employment status.

'You got into work OK?' seemed to be the best way to approach the issue.

"Yes," was the reply. "And I had time to have a quick shower at home on the way too, which meant that it was a couple of minutes before eleven when I walked through the door."

"The boss? Not standing there with a scowl, tapping one foot pointing at the clock on the wall?"

"Not at all. Her first words were *Bernelle, thank God you're here. I was so worried.*"

"Hardly what you were expecting after comments about knowing what's good for you."

"Exactly. I tried to find out what was up, but she didn't say anything else. I'd just started shampooing Mrs Shankley's hair when the phone rang."

"And?"

The narrative was going somewhere, but its eventual destination remained a close-kept secret.

"Mrs D. answered the phone, said something like *Yes, she's here*, and *No, of course I haven't* and told me she'd finish shampooing Mrs Shankley while I talked to these people who were on the other end of the line."

"People?" I asked. "So it was some sort of conference call?"

"And you'll never guess what it was about."

I gave her time to clarify matters.

"You remember a couple of days back I was telling you that Mrs D and John and Jane from the fashion boutique next door had entered me in this Apprentice Hairdresser of the Year competition?"

I recalled something along those lines, though exact details eluded me.

"Anyway the people on the end of the line were the judges, and I'm one of four Queensland finalists. They'd filmed all the entrants cutting hair when we'd gone for our block prac earlier this year, and we've all submitted a portfolio of photos to show some of the work we've done. So they'd picked out the final four and the phone call was like an interview to select the winner."

"So what happened?"

"Well, they started off asking whether I knew what was happening and whether Mrs. D had warned me that the call was coming. At least I think that's what they were asking."

I raised an interrogatory eyebrow and the narrative went on.

"Anyway, one voice asked whether Mrs D. had intimated that the call was coming..."

"You replied?"

"That I'd never been intimate with Mrs D. After all she's a married lady who's old enough to be my mother, and I have a boyfriend when it comes to things like that. That's you," she pointed out helpfully.

I couldn't help thinking that this was stretching the facts of the case more than slightly but refrained from making a comment.

"So this other voice said something like, *So she's said nothing to you apropos this phone call?* I said *no, because I'd already told you she's a married lady and she'd never proposition someone who worked for her* and that anyway I'd just come back from Airlie Beach, and I thought he was going to propose while we were there."

Certain suppositions had, in other words, been rather close to the money.

"So someone asked if winning the competition was likely to be a problem in that regard, and I said *it wouldn't be because your name was David, not Beauregard*, and they all laughed, and someone wanted to know whether it'd be a problem if I won the national competition and had to go to London for a year to work with a top hairdressing salon and I said *no because you had plenty of money since you won the Lotto and you liked overseas travel and had just come back from two months in New Orleans and Los Angeles where you'd been collecting rhythm and blues and learning to cook Cajun food*, and they said you sounded quite fascinating."

"To which you replied?"

"That you were, of course, but if they were looking for someone fascinating they'd have to go out and find their own because I saw you first and they all laughed and asked where we'd gone last night. I told them all about The Balcony and the Shoalwater, and explained how we ended up talking to the chefs about *bouillabaisse* and Vermentino and what a nice wine it was and how you and Simon were so keen on the interesting new grape varieties from Spain and Italy and even Russia that they're starting to grow in northeastern Victoria and the *paella* and how much we enjoyed it. Before I knew it they were saying good-bye and telling me the results of the competition were going to be published on Monday and I'd probably know the results on Monday morning and they hoped you wouldn't propose over the weekend."

Fat chance, I thought, but maintained a diplomatic silence and what I hoped could be interpreted as a look of diplomatic resignation.

"I told them that you had friends coming down from Townsville for a big cricket weekend, and I wasn't supposed to be seeing you till Sunday night, but I might pop over tonight to let you know the news..."

"I'm glad you did," I replied, which was true enough since it seemed a totally satisfactory solution to a potentially thorny little problem might have appeared on the horizon.

"I remembered what you said about this afternoon, but I thought if I came straight out here I'd find out you'd changed your mind, so I called in at the Palace after I'd been home to tell Mum about the news. When I saw that you weren't there with the rest of them, I was about to turn around and come out here when Elizabeth came out of the kitchen, and she'd been talking to Mrs D. and you know they're very good friends, so I had to sit down and tell her all about it in the kitchen while she was getting things ready for Friday night and have a little glass of bubbles to celebrate which is why I was so late getting here."

"Since I wasn't expecting company I can't really be too upset if it turned up a little bit late, could I?" I suggested in what I hoped was a perfectly reasonable tone.

"So," Bernelle went on, "you're not upset about it? I've been wondering whether to tell you that Mrs D. said I had a very good chance since she said I had a natural flair for creative hair styling..."

"You never think those things are going to work out, do you? I mean, after all you're sitting up here in Denison and there have to people in the running from flash hair salons in Brisbane and places like that. So where does it go from here?"

"If I win the Queensland section, they're going to want me in Sydney next weekend for the national final. There's a week of modelling and deportment classes before the final, so even if I don't win there's a good chance of picking up some fashion work if I don't win the trip to London."

"Amazing, isn't it?" I remarked. "This morning you were driving back from Airlie in a blue funk..."

"I beg your pardon. You know perfectly well I drive a white Hyundai not a blue car from some German company I've never heard of."

I recalled an exchange from Wednesday evening when Jeffrey, having inquired whether the name Quasimodo rang a bell, was informed that it was a Japanese company that manufactures motorcycles.

There was, I decided, every chance that this kid was going to take out the prize through repeated instances of what could only be described as episodes of blonde. I put all references to German car companies to one side and went on.

"Anyway, so there you were, driving back panicking about what was going to happen if you got pulled over and worrying about whether you still had a job when if you know what's good for you was a clue something you'd regret missing was heading your way around eleven this morning. A mere matter of eight hours ago you were probably looking at a career as a small-town hairdresser and mother of two point six kids, and here you are looking down the barrel of international stardom and the jet set big time. Funny how things change, isn't it?"

"I'm sure, no matter how things turn out, I'll always be a small town girl at heart. You're right about how things change. What was the name of that album? You know, the one you say is the greatest achievement in the history of recorded music. ***Everything Changes***? Something like that."

"***Forever Changes***," I pointed out. "By a little-known West Coast band called Love, if you recall."

"That's it. Why don't you put it on now? Seems very appropriate now, for some reason. That song about being *alone again tonight my dear*."

The request wasn't one that could be rejected out of hand.

Since I was apparently incapable of accomplishing the mission unsupervised Bernelle accompanied me indoors. Once the change had been accomplished I found myself in what could only be described as a compromising situation while, in the distance I detected a sound that bore a remarkable resemblance to a ringing telephone.

By the time I'd extricated myself and sprinted towards the office, of course, the caller had decided there was nobody home.

Predictably, the phone had rung off when I was about five metres away.

I paused for a few minutes on the off-chance that whoever it was might deign to call back.

Since I'd turned the office lights on, I spent a moment or two wondering whether I should do the same to the poolside ones.

Figuring that there was no likelihood of resuming my reading, if I did I'd only have to turn them off again on the way out.

On the way back, I met Bernelle, headed towards the pool.

"Who was it?" she asked.

"Dunno, but if it's important they'll call back."

"I'll tell you what. Since you'll be standing up in the hot sun all day tomorrow, would you like a back massage? Dad always said I gave the best back massages..."

I'll bet he did, was my nonverbal reaction.

The spoken response was *sounds good to me*.

Once I'd slipped my shirt off as directed, Bernelle set to work. The need for a solid surface to work on had prompted a move to a wooden bench and, for a good five minutes she sat astride me, working on the back muscles. When instructed to turn over, I acted as directed and the presence of someone straddling the groin area while she worked on my shoulders produced the inevitable physical reaction.

With that stage of the proceedings complete, Bernelle stood, directed me to sit up and was about to resume kneading my shoulders from the other side when she noticed something.

"What's that?" was the immediate inquiry.

"What's what?"

While I was not unaware of developments, recent events suggested that certain parties were not particularly interested in tumescent erectile tissue.

"There!"

An arm reached over my shoulder and continued to stroke the area in question.

"Well, it's hardly a new development," I observed.

Previous instances of a similar development had been evident at various stages of the previous half-dozen evenings.

"Hardly is the operative word," was the response as Bernelle stood and circled to the left. Squatting in proximity to the area under consideration she proceeded to unbuckle a belt, manipulate a button and release rapped flesh.

Given last night's experience I had difficulty believing current developments were actually taking place.

She was discussing something with an individual named *Harry* or *Hairy Hardly*, her lips were poised over the interloper, and I was about to pinch myself when I heard a coaster bus turning into the car park.

The sound was immediately followed by a series of blasts on the horn.

In a matter of about five seconds, items of clothing had been rearranged, and someone was hauling me to my feet and remarking that my cricketing friends *seemed to have arrived*.

The bus came to a halt as I stood up, and there was the immediate sound of an automatic door opening, followed immediately by the dulcet tones of one Barry Ballmer inquiring *Anybody in?*

As I made my way through the pool gate, the bus emptied, with various bodies vanishing to various sections of the shrubbery.

I emerged into the lit portion of the premises.

Balls turned towards me.

"Herston, you bastard. Hope we're not interrupting anything. I called fifteen minutes ago, but no bugger answered, so I tried the Palace. Took the buggers about five minutes to answer there, and when they did they handed the phone to someone called Sandy who told me that you were here, but we should probably be discreet since he didn't think you were here all alone."

He turned in Bernelle's direction.

"We were discreet, weren't we? I know you from somewhere, but if you don't think we've been discreet enough I'll get all these bastards back on the bus, and we can go around the block a couple of times till we get it right."

Various figures were reappearing from the shrubbery, adjusting their clothing as they moved. Bernelle was in the process of reassuring him that their arrival had been quite discreet, and there was no need for a repeat performance. B

allmer continued undeterred.

"Anyway, you might be able to settle a long-standing argument. Sources have stated that Mr Herston here has the biggest middle stump in the business. Not that I'd know, I'm a virgin out of marriage..."

"The general opinion around the schools around town was that Herston was the biggest prick unhung," was the opening volley from one of the figures emerging from the surrounding gloom.

John Menzies was widely known, for obvious reasons, as Ming and had a reputation for merciless sledging. His arm reached towards Bernelle. He was holding an imaginary microphone.

"So, Miss..."

"Butler," Bernelle replied.

"That's it," Balls mumbled. "Knew I'd seen her somewhere."

"So, Miss Butler, your independent opinion," Ming continued mercilessly. "Please tell us, in your opinion, is this mongrel one of the biggest pricks unhung? Inquiring minds need to know."

"Not like this bastard," came a voice from the back.

I recognized it as belonging to fast bowler and arch sledger *Al Angry* Anderson. "The one they couldn't root, shoot or electrocute. Or circumcise, because there's no end to the prick."

The boys had obviously enjoyed a highly fluid and interactive couple of hours on the bus. Bernelle had developed an interesting crimson hue, and I decided to

defuse the situation by suggesting that the party resume their seats on the bus so that they could be delivered to the pub with the greatest rapidity. As the crowd filed onto the bus, I turned to Bernelle.

"Not coming to the pub?" I suggested in my politest and non-pressing tones.

"Not tonight. After all the excitement, I think I'll have a quiet night at home and let it all sink in. I'll be around Sunday afternoon."

She gave me a quick peck on the cheek and retreated hurriedly towards her car, closely attended by various wolf whistles and appreciative comments.

"Bit of all right there," was Mr Ballmer's assessment of the situation.

"I wouldn't mind sinking into that myself, should the occasion arise. Better in there than in debt."

"I thought," I remarked as we climbed aboard the bus, "you were a virgin out of marriage."

"Which one?" Balls replied. "Been three with no sign of the count stopping there. Tell me, she said her name was Butler, right?"

"Spot on," I replied.

"First name Bernelle, by any chance? Dad's a real estate agent in Townsville? He's onto his third missus as well, but the mother would be named Olga? Russian piece, or at least that's what she claims. Was holding her age rather well last time I saw her."

This unexpected development required a few moments to allow me to gather my thoughts.

"Right on all fronts. Hang on a bit, there's one job I haven't quite done."

With that, I extracted the secure mobile from the pocket, thanking my lucky stars I'd gone to the trouble of entering certain key numbers on the SIM card. One of them was, predictably, the Palace.

The phone rang for what seemed an eternity but was the time it took us to travel through three or four intersections. Eventually, Magpie deigned to pick up the receiver.

Once I'd informed her the Dipsomaniacs were inward bound and suggested His Lordship might like care to move vehicles safeguarding the parking spot and provide access to the old movie theatre, I was free to return to the conversation.

"So, you've run across Bernelle and her mum before."

Then the penny dropped.

Mr Ballmer had extensive experience in the real estate industry.

"Working for her old man by any chance?"

It seemed like the most likely explanation.

"Until three months ago, yeah. I was looking after his rental. Been doing that sort of shit for about three years. Not as much money in it as selling

, but there's no weekend work, and there are a few other ways a bloke can pick up a bit of cash on the side."

"So what happened?" The question seemed obvious enough.

"Been there eighteen months when the prick gave me the bullet, but he paid for it. Soon as the word went around that I'd got the chop I was fielding phone calls right left and centre. Ended up going back to where I was before Butler made me a better offer."

"Presumably, they made you a better offer as well."

"Bloody oath they did. When I went back, I took back the hundred and twenty properties I took with me when I went over to Butler with another sixty for good measure. That'll teach him, the prick."

I could have investigated further, but since the bus was negotiating the corner on which the Palace is situated I turned my attention to directing the driver into the alley at the rear of the premises.

References to *back alleys* resulted in a predictable volley of salacious comments, and as the bus pulled into the reserved parking space His Lordship appeared from the shadows of the garage.

Introductions were made, hands were shaken, and we moved onto the main business of the evening. Once the overnight bags had been retrieved from the trailer, His Lordship guided the group through the back of the beer garden into the disused movie theatre that would be accommodation for the next two nights.

"Toilets and showers down there, boys. You'll find the lighting's basic unless we turn on the main lights and light up the whole place. I'll leave the lights down there on all night, and there's another switch here beside the door. As you can see we've make up two dozen camp beds. Take your pick, Daphne'll make up the ones that've been used in the morning. Now, on more important matters."

The consensus was that the assortment of luggage items would be best left in a central location where they could be retrieved by the various owners as the need arose. With that done, the party was ushered back into the beer garden.

"I gave it a bit of thought," His Lordship began, "and decided the till you wanted would be better off out here in the beer garden, rather than in the main bar which, as you can see, is pretty crowded."

He gestured towards the doorway that lead into the Dining Room which in turn debouched into the Lounge Bar.

From where we were standing it was obvious the population density increased in direct proportion to the proximity to the bar.

"I've stocked the bar out here with just about everything that you're likely to need, but if there's something I've forgotten, just let Yeti know, and we'll fix the problem. So."

He gestured towards the bar facilities in a manner that seemed to suggest the facilities are there, go your hardest.

Predictably, most of the party headed for the bar in much the same manner as a school of piranha might approach a bleeding animal in the Amazonian shallows.

Equally predictably, a smaller dissenting party wanted to investigate the social and sexual possibilities on offer inside the premises. The favoured option seemed to involve exiting through the beer garden entrance, making a left turn and going on along the building to make a grand entrance through the main doorway.

'If you're looking to get into the Lounge Bar, you'd be best off heading down through the Dining Room,' I suggested. 'You'll find the area down there gets packed on a Friday night.'

While you might expect visitors to take on board whatever local knowledge is on offer, the leader of the group in question was a relocated Melbourne grade cricketer and, as has been widely observed, while you can always tell a Victorian, you can't tell him much.

Sandy's version of the next couple of minutes runs as follows:

"We knew you'd arrived because someone spotted the bus and trailer going around the corner. Then Hopalong sighted His Lordship talking to the mob out in the beer garden. No problem, everyone kept on as normal. Then someone said *Hey, look at these bastards* and next thing you know there are these three blokes crawling through the window."

The trio, in other words, having arrived at the main entrance to find the bar packed to the gunwales and faced with the ignominious possibility of a retreat along the path by which they'd arrived opted for the only available alternative point of entry.

Once the preliminaries were out of the way, the rest of the night developed along predictable lines.

Introductions were made. Acquaintances were established or renewed, and news was exchanged.

The exchange of news apprised me of two interesting developments.

First, I learned of the circumstances under which Mr Ballmer left his previous employment.

Having established early in his career that people tended to prefer inspecting properties on the weekend, and this would have unfortunate ramifications for his playing career, Balls had moved into the rental property management side of things.

Being possessed of slightly more get up and go than the average punter, he had built up his employer's rental holdings to the point where he was Number One on the local real estate hit parade.

Such success was hardly going to go unnoticed, and he was soon recruited by a rival firm to build up their portfolio of properties. Some extent of the gentleman's rating among owners of properties he was managing can be gauged by the fact that when Balls jumped ship, so did they.

These developments also failed to go unnoticed, and when Balls' initial twelve-month contract was up for re-negotiation, Butler Realty stepped with an offer of, effectively, twenty per cent on top of whatever they're offering.

Working on the principle that fixed contracts reduced flexibility Mr Butler hadn't gone to the trouble of setting anything in concrete.

Real estate salesmen can rarely be described as shrinking violets, and much of Butler Realty's success was ascribed to the eye-catching fact that rather than the predictable *Sold by* signs that appear when a successful sale has been negotiated, Mr Butler advised the world at large of his success through signs featuring a large white tick on a red background over which was superimposed the simple message of *Sold. The Butler Dunit.*

With Balls on board, it wasn't long before rental properties all over the city were sporting signs with a slight variation on the original legend, which now read *Another Rental Vacancy Filled. The Butler Dunit.*

In almost every case, however, the individual responsible for filling the vacancy was B. Ballmer, property manager extraordinary of this village.

In the meantime, there were other developments on the rental front of which Balls' employer was unaware.

The first was the emergence of a new player in the rental market, one that could be appropriately described as Barry Ballmer and Cricketing Associates.

It began simply enough. From the time he'd started in the real estate industry, Balls had spotted the odd property that represented good value as an investment or a rental proposition.

There were houses on sites that looked promising as unit developments down the track and could be rented out in the meantime, and a couple of properties that weren't appropriate for redevelopment but would bring in an income stream. Since rents on the properties were paying them off, it was hardly surprising to learn Balls was disinclined to pay commission or management fees and preferred to look after the properties himself.

Once he made the transition into property management he was dealing with most of the issues that concerned his property portfolio. When one of his cricket mates came looking for someone to look after a property he'd inherited, Balls added it to his own portfolio, deducting only the expenses incurred along the way. Mates do things like that, and when opportunities came for them to build up their residential empire other properties were added to the list.

Most of the Dipsomaniacs had, one way or another, ended up with real estate interests that Balls was kind enough to administer for them at the right price.

When a couple of landlords approached him because they preferred not to have signs on the lawn drawing attention to a rental property Balls could see where they were coming from.

After all, once he'd finished running around cricket fields he expected to set up an agency in his own right and fees from property management would be a vital income stream, so he was only jumping the gun by a year or three when he agreed to take them on.

That was fine while it lasted, but inevitably someone dropped a hint of Balls' extracurricular activities into The Butler's shell-like ear, and when he learned what was going on Mr Butler was far from pleased.

“Reckoned I’d never work in real estate in Townsville again. That was bullshit, because when I got the bullet the phone was ringing hot with offers to come across to one of the others. Ended up going back to where I was before I went to Butler’s and took back everything I’d taken with me when I left them. Plus a few more for interest.”

“No hard feelings?” I asked.

“Mate, the only hard feeling was the hard on they got at the prospect of Butler being well and truly shafted. When I’d settled in they had me contacting every one of Butler’s remaining rentals clients to see if they were switching over. You’d be surprised how many were.”

“So you’re sticking it to Butler any way you can,” I suggested.

“*Knoath*,” was the response. “Any way I can get at that prick it’ll be done.”

“If I was to point out that his ex-missus is more than likely in the Lounge Bar as we speak?” I inquired.

“Point me right at her. Has she got a bloke at the moment? No? Then we’ll see if there’s an opening for a smart lad. Always was a bit of a looker. If you weren’t seeing a bit of the daughter I’d be sniffing around there as well.”

Here, in other words, was an escape avenue for Jeffrey.

I was confident the development would be getting a warm welcome.

As we moved into the Lounge, I was greeted by Denison’s leading dispensers of ladies’ fashion.

The area around the bar contained the usual suspects, including Jeffrey, Sandy, Hopalong, The Twins and, predictably, Olga.

As Balls moved towards Olga, I stopped to chat to Dagwood and Blondie.

“Actually, David,” was Blondie’s opening remark, “we were hoping we’d catch up with you tonight. We’ve got a bit of a problem.”

“Fire away. As the saying goes, there are no problems. Only solutions.”

“It’s this Apprentice Hairdresser of the Yearthing,” Dagwood explained. “The major sponsor is one of our best ranges, so when they told us about it we decided to sponsor young Bernelle Butler. We figured we’d get a write up in the paper, and the winner’d be someone from the southeast corner, so it wasn’t going to cost much. Not that the cost was a factor when we made the offer to Bernelle. All we were looking at was the cost of a return airfare and a night’s accommodation in Brisbane if she won, and that’s no problem. Or so we thought.”

“Until she made the short list for the state finalist,” I suggested. “More than likely until she took a certain phone call.”

“Exactly,” Blondie chipped in, “we knew you’d been seeing a bit of her. Now we probably shouldn’t be saying anything to you, but this afternoon we got a phone call from Brisbane.”

“Which was something to the effect that Bernelle had taken it out? I thought that the news wasn’t supposed to be out till Monday, but there you go. What did they say?”

“Since he’s the Queensland distributor for the range, Roger was one of the judges,” Blondie went on.

“And was presumably highly impressed.”

“He was more than impressed,” Dagwood explained. “He reckons there’s every possibility if she comes across in person the way she came across over the phone.”

Pity she didn’t come across over the past half dozen nights was my unspoken observation on the matter. On the other hand, in ten minutes I’d been presented with neat solutions to two thorny problems.

“She’d be close to a shoe-in for the national title. He was so impressed that he wanted her to fly down on Sunday or Monday so they could have four or five days to work with her before they fly her to Sydney for the national final on Saturday.”

“When we signed the entry form,” Blondie pointed out, “we’d agreed to meet all her travel and accommodation costs between here and Brisbane. So instead of a plane fare on Friday which we could have got fairly cheap, we’re looking at the

full fare and instead of one night's accommodation we're looking at five or six. That's what Roger was calling to check about. They'd planned to do something like that when they'd found the state winner..."

"Of course, since they'd expected that the winner would come from down that way so there wouldn't be that much extra expense involved," was my response.

"Precisely," Blondie agreed. "Here's the tricky part. They haven't announced the winner yet. They haven't actually decided on the winner. It'll be Bernelle if we can guarantee we'll meet the costs. That was why Roger called us, to check we'd be able to do it. If we say no, we'll end up costing Bernelle the chance of winning the trip to London which is the prize for the national winner."

"There's a big benefit for the state winner as well," Dagwood pointed out. "She'll get her apprenticeship papers transferred to the leading salon in Brisbane till she's finished her time and there's a full wardrobe from the major sponsors that'd be worth a couple of grand at least."

"Don't worry about it. Let me know what you're up for, and I'll cover the lot."

"Really?" Blondie replied. "We were hoping you'd maybe be willing to chip in part of the extra cost. It's our business that'll get the publicity out of it, so we wouldn't expect you to pay everything."

It was obviously impossible to point out that someone winning the national title would take care of certain difficult issues on my own front.

"Don't worry about it. Only too happy to help. Call back first thing tomorrow and let him know you can have her on the plane Monday. I assume there'll need to be a write up for the *Sausage Wrapper*, so that'll need to be done Monday morning after the announcement has been made. Just give me the receipts and I'll reimburse you for the lot. Don't go around trying to look for the cheapest options, either. If it's full fare on Monday or a cheaper fare Tuesday or Wednesday go for Monday. If the choice of accommodation is some backpacker hostel or a five star hotel on Southbank, you go for the five stars. Spending money? You reckon a grand would be enough?"

“So we’ll call Roger first thing tomorrow,” Dagwood promised, “but really we should...”

“ Don't even mention it. If there was a need to fly her Mum down to keep her company I wouldn't be surprised to find out Jeffrey would be only too happy to cover that side of things.”

If he wasn't I could more than likely be persuaded.

Once that offer had been made the rest of the evening unfolded along predictable lines. When His Lordship indicated the bar was about to close eskies were stocked and relocated to the movie theatre where the Dipsomaniacs were happy to host members of tomorrow's opposition and any other players who might care to join them.

For my part, once Time had been called I was only too happy to phone for a cab, retreat to the cave and roll the rock across the door.

Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

While no amount of beauty sleep was going to turn me into a matinee idol a good eight hours was going to be handy for someone who would be standing at the bowler's end for something like fourteen hours over two days.

Cricket Day One

Predictably I wasn't up with the sparrows on Saturday morning. Having partied until around midnight, it would've been surprising if I had. Around eight hunger pangs were setting in since, as usual, I'd forgotten minor matters such as dinner. While the quantities of chips I'd snaffled contained substantial calories, I needed something solid in the system if I was going to make it through six hours on the cricket field. Blotting paper was definitely the order of the day.

After a flying visit to the shower, I was off to the kitchen, locating a lump of rump, poaching a couple of eggs while the steak was in the fry-pan and de-glazing the pan juices with a tin of mushrooms in butter sauce and a cup of water.

Hardly something you'd find in the pages of *Healthy Living* magazine, but then, what parts of my lifestyle were?

There would probably be a need to slow down at some point in the future, but provided that point lay on the other side of Sunday evening that was fine with me.

As I attacked the plateful, I pondered a couple of days on the dry.

It would be easy to move into hibernation mode once the Dipsomaniacs were safely on the highway, and there were no social engagements on the horizon, so I promised myself, barring unforeseen circumstances, I'd be taking things very quiet on Monday and Tuesday.

I could even extend the interlude into Wednesday, but I expected the wheels would more than likely fall off at dinner time, given pasta night at the Palace.

Once cooking implements, plates and cutlery were in the dishwasher I headed towards the cricket field. Nine o'clock was too early to expect players to be rolling up, but there were various tasks which could be undertaken while I was waiting.

A visit to the shed produced stumps and a pile of boundary markers.

Once preparations had been completed in the middle, I was half way through a lap around the boundary, placing a marker every ten metres when the vehicles arrived.

Various figures wandered out while I completed my task. I was on my way to join them when the Dipsomaniacs' bus appeared, closely followed by His Lordship in the Palace truck, packed to the gunwales with eskies. Arriving at the pitch I was summoned to a hastily convened conference.

“Listen,” Brooksy began, “we’ve got a problem, not a big problem, but it’s a pain in the arse. Got a phone call an hour ago. Rambo and Hammer can’t make it. There’s been a derailment between Gumlu and Gutha overnight. They expect the line to stay closed for at least thirty-six hours while they repair the damage, so they’re out tomorrow as well.”

“So you need to find a couple of subs,” I guessed.

“Right on. Fortunately I ran across Zero when I got here.”

Zero, the High School Japanese teacher, was a sports enthusiast who’d thrown himself into the local scene. Not having a local baseball team he’d opted for cricket, and excelled in the field although batting and bowling remained matters of continuing mystery as far as he was concerned.

“He came out to watch the morning’s play. He’s playing for the Crustaceans in Mackay, but if we field, he can stay until the bus leaves. We won’t lose anything in the field while he’s here and if we field first he won’t be needed to bat later today.”

“So we need at least one more sub,” Denison vice-captain Big Al Huxley pointed out. “Two or three would be better..”

“We need to have them in place before the game starts,” Brooksy pointed out. “Under normal circumstances we could just run blokes on and off, but when I was talking to them last night the blokes from the Dipsos have their own take on the playing conditions.”

“So you need to exchange team lists before the toss,” I pointed out.

“Right again. Once Zero pisses off we can run subs on and off, but we need someone else to fill in the gap in the batting order. So we need someone to fill in, and we need him quick.”

I glanced across towards the car park.

“What about His Lordship?” I suggested. “He’s supposed to have been an all-round athlete in his day.”

Sorting that out couldn’t be done where we were. We adjourned to the pavilion.

His Lordship had anticipated a leisurely day dispensing grog and listening to the races. Suggestions he might fill the space in the batting order were countered by pointing out someone had to look after the beer truck, and much as he’d love to have a run, the need to find someone reliable to look after the grog meant that he’d have to decline.

I glanced across towards The Crossroads and noted an approaching scoffer.

“What about Hopalong? I mean you’d have to pay him for his time, but he’s always on the look out for a bit of pocket money. Want me to ask?”

His Lordship nodded, and I set off to negotiate. It wasn’t a difficult task, and I pointed out that the back of the truck would be a suitable vantage point to watch the day’s play.

“In any case,” I pointed out, “doing something during the day will give you something to occupy your mind while you’re waiting to hear from Liz.”

Having solved that problem I joined Balls, Mr and Mrs Brooks and the captain of the Dipsomaniacs so negotiations about playing conditions could be carried out before the toss. Brooksy’s better half’s position as scorer explained her presence. The easiest option would have been to follow standard fifty-over one-day format, but after a visit to Dunk Island the Dipsomaniacs realized the benefits of slight tweaks to the regular rules.

“First things first,” I began, reasoning that my role as umpire carried with it the role of chair of the group discussing playing conditions. “Drinks break every ten overs, right? Drinks off the field and we keep the break to ten minutes. Agreed?”

There was unanimous endorsement although His Lordship would have preferred more frequent intermissions.

“So we’ve got twelve on each side. Eleven on the park at any one time, right? Bat eleven?”

This was the Dipsomaniacs’ preferred option since Bryan *Ankles* Angstrom was notorious for his ineptitude with the willow. The consensus was that Ankles made your average tail-ender look like Don Bradman and only carried a bat because he thought it was part of the uniform.

“Naah,” Brooksy cut in. “Stuff it. Bat twelve. I want to see Zero bat.”

The suggestion did not go down over-well.

“Listen,” Brooksy pointed out, “we’ve had two blokes who work for the railways called out for a derailment on the line north of here. They’ll be out for both days, which means that we needed to find two subs in a hurry. Zero is the Japanese teacher at the High School. Turns up to watch and have a couple of beers every Saturday and doesn’t mind running around in the field if someone needs a sub for a couple of minutes. Good bloke.”

“So?” Balls was unconvinced. “Bat eleven. He can still have a run around. Nothing to stop that.”

“If we bat eleven that gives him an excuse not to bat. If it’s part of the playing conditions he’ll have to. He’s been coming to the cricket for a year and a half and no one’s seen the little bugger bat. *That’s* why I want to bat twelve.”

Since the explanation suggested little benefit to the Denison side the variation to the preferred playing conditions was agreed to.

“Batsmen retire at the end of the over once they’ve passed fifty,” I went on, “and retired bats can come back at the end of the innings if there are overs left.”

Again there were nods all round.

“With the bowlers, maximum of eight overs, minimum of two for everyone bar the wicket-keeper and one other non-bowler. Maximum of four overs in a spell and no one gets a second spell until ten blokes have bowled. Now do we have to specify the non-bowlers? Makes it easier for the scorer.”

“That’ll be Pretty Boy,” Balls interjected. “Joel Francis, he’ll be on the batting list, right Nuts?” His opening partner, Peter Nuttall, captain of the Dipsomaniacs, agreed.

“Well, we could bowl him at a pinch,” Nuts went on. Pretty Boy, according to popular mythology, had cultivated a non-bowling role to avoid overexertion at net practice. It was generally believed that he possessed a remarkable inability to land a cricket ball within the confines of the practice enclosure.

“Your non-bowler?” I turned to Brooksy. “Care to nominate him now, or wait till later?”

“We’ll probably bowl eleven,” Brooksy responded. “As you can understand, we’d love to give Zero a bowl. Just for one over, to see how he goes. Might give him a second, assuming underarm is OK?”

Zero’s background meant he couldn’t bowl in the conventional manner, but could deliver a ball using a softball technique. I suspected this wasn’t quite what Balls and Nuts understood as underarm.

The proposal was, met with grudging approval.

“Nothing else?” I asked. “If we’re all cool there I guess it’s just a matter of a toss to get things rolling.”

Prior experience with the Dipsomaniacs indicated their preference was to bowl first, and there had been occasions where a gentleman’s agreement rendered the toss unnecessary.

Brooksy, Nuts and Balls had conducted a lengthy discussion the previous evening, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if the toss was deemed unnecessary.

“Got a coin?” Brooksy inquired. “I left my wallet in the car.”

From their response, Balls and Nuts felt the request breached conclusions that may or may not have been reached the night before.

Reaching into my pocket I located a fifty-cent piece.

“Your call,” Brooksy intimated to Nuts, producing a response of *Tails*. The coin looped through the air, spinning vigorously and came to earth about three metres away. I moved over to examine the result.

“It’s a head,” I remarked. “Mick?”

“We’ll bowl,” was the response.

Again the reaction suggested further agreements had been breached. As the pair of Dipsos moved off to prepare themselves for battle I noted signs of vigorous warming up by the Denison side in the practice nets beside the amenities block.

“Looks like they’re getting serious,” I remarked to Mr Brooks as we wandered back to the pavilion.

“Fucking oath we’re serious. These pricks aren’t going to know what hit them. Got ‘em on about three fronts already, and there’s plenty more where that came from. Craven and Muscles haven’t had a drink all week.”

It looked like Denison’s opening combination were firing on all cylinders.

Russell *Muscles* Lindsay was operating off thirty metres and Danny Craven wasn’t far behind him as a delivery from Muscles nearly took the batsman’s head off.

Brooksy was rolling his arm over as we walked, a gesture apparently greeted with relief by the batsmen in the nets who appeared to think further warming up was unnecessary and moved away from the firing line.

Over the rest of the walk, I learned last night’s negotiations had produced an expectation that their preferred playing conditions would operate, much to the Dipsomaniacs’ advantage.

“I think that we’ve got right up their noses. No way it’ll be stopping there,” he added as he headed off to don the wicket-keeping gear. “We’ll be knocking fifteen

different bells out of the bastards. Make sure you've got that index finger oiled and ready for use. I have a feeling it'll be seeing a bit of action."

Ten minutes later we were on the paddock with Muscles charging in off the long run, left arm over the wicket pushing the ball across the right hand batsman and jaggng the odd delivery back off the seam.

It might have been the lack of a decent warmup, but Balls, who faced the first delivery poked, prodded, was comprehensibly beaten four balls out of six and was nearly cut in half by the fifth ball of a maiden over. Having managed to connect with one out of six Balls was left scratching his head as the Denison side jogged into position for the second over.

"Fuck me, Herston," was his comment as I reached the bowler's end for the start of the second over. "What'd you bastards feed that prick on?"

"Dunno. Maybe it's what he's not been fed. They tell me he's been off the grog all week."

"In that case," Balls observed, "I'd hate to see the bastard with a hangover. If he's bowling that way on the dry I'd hate to be facing him when he's got a sore head."

For intensity, the second over wasn't far behind its predecessor.

Nuts managed a streaky two through the slips off the third ball.

Balls was far from impressed by the call for the second, having decided the best way to face Muscles was to locate yourself at the other end. The rest of the over produced air swings, as did the third, another Muscles maiden. Muscles pulled up at the end of his follow through after the fifth ball had produced yet another play and a miss.

"Stuff me," he remarked, "how many bats does this bastard want?"

Balls stared back down the track. You could almost see the glint of fire in the eye.

"Dunno," was his response. "How many you going to give me?"

Nuts was ducking and weaving his way through the next over when a voice chimed in from the sideline. *Hit him in the nuts!* There was a ripple of laughter, and since local spectators were thin on the ground the most likely source was from within the ranks of the Dipsomaniacs.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“His brother,” Balls replied. “If he does, wait and see what happens.”

A further play and miss produced a repeat of the call,

When the penultimate ball of the over had the same result, the voice from the boundary changed its message.

Not there, was the new version after a ball that had gone close to decapitating the batsman. *Not his head. It's solid rock. Hit him in the nuts.*

Craven took the advice.

The final ball cannoned into the batsman's midriff, hitting him between wind and water.

Oh dear, came the voice. *It's hit him in the groin.*

After an enquiry regarding the batsman's welfare, I wandered back to hand Craven his cap.

“We're in for a bit of fun now,” Balls observed. “Watch what happens next.”

It took a couple of minutes for Nuts to regain his composure, and, once he had, Muscles was charging in to begin the fifth over. At no wicket for two after four overs, a run rate of 0.5 meant it was time for action. Balls got enough bat on the first to steer it wide of third slip and set off for a single.

“Watch this,” was his instruction as Muscles charged in again.

I did, and followed the trajectory of the pill as it disappeared over mid-wicket. I raised my arms to signal the six.

“See? When he's batting like a hairy goat you want him to get hit in the nuts. Fires him up.”

That was a fair summary of the situation as Nuts despatched the rest of the over through the same area. With a single, three sixes and two fours off the over, Muscles' figures were copping a pounding as the score advanced rapidly from none for two to none for twenty-nine.

His partner's form reversal must have worked some magic on Balls' attitude, and while he didn't get the ball over the boundary that was more a result of the athletic fielding of a certain Japanese teacher than lack of intent. Three twos and a single off the over took the score to thirty-six after six.

Having had the short-pitched deliveries in his previous over despatched through cow corner, Muscles' fourth over was much fuller in length with the fourth ball producing a three through mid off.

The three put Nuts at the striker's end. Most deliveries, going across the right hander had been played out into the arc between gully and mid off, and the three had come from a handy bit of placement and a smidgeon more bat on ball.

Since Nuts had been given a good look from the non-striker's end, once he was on strike Muscles worked a variation, getting the fifth ball to jag back off the seam, thudding into the pads. The fielding side went up for the appeal, and I took a long look before deciding that the ball was more than likely just going down the leg side.

“Not out,” was the verdict, and while it didn't go down that well the delivery proved Nuts' undoing.

The next ball looked to be following the same path, but failed to jag, producing an outside edge that was gleefully accepted by Big Al at second slip.

Seven overs gone, one for thirty-nine.

As Nuts made his way back to the pavilion, I made my way over to the huddle to return the bowler's cap.

As I arrived, Brooksy looked over his shoulder.

“You can tell your mate Balls,” he instructed, “that Zero's coming on to bowl underarm. Softball style.”

I nodded. It seemed like a smart move.

With three overs till drinks, a new batsman at the crease and the different mode of delivery, meant two overs from Zero might go past relatively cheaply, and with those two gone Brooksy would've been clear to avoid bowling someone else.

Brooksy's daughter had been a member of the District Schools' Softball team, which trained at the other end of the oval from my cricket squad and Zero had been called in to assist with the coaching.

Before the girls headed off to their trials we'd built up a tradition of giving them a game against the cricket boys, and, given the different skill sets involved pitching had been a problem until Zero arrived on the scene.

Once he did, assigning him the pitching duties solved that issue.

Coincidentally, after the first encounter we had the unprecedented experience of having the Denison girls going through the trials without a home run scored against them (probably nothing to do with the Zero factor) while walloping three or four a game themselves (which probably did).

The final selection game at the trials was traditionally a *Possibles versus Probables* affair, with the most likely candidates for each position lined up against each other. This time they opted for a Denison versus the best of the rest affair, which proved even more one-sided than the preceding games. They'd ended up selecting the Denison team holus bolus as the Zone side, which had then gone undefeated through the Regional trials, providing three-quarters of that year's NQ team.

Given that precedent the boys and Zero versus the softball girls went straight into annual event status, though subsequent attempts failed to repeat the first year's success.

As a result, I knew what to expect from Zero in the bowling department.

Balls wasn't entirely happy about the prospect when I informed him about the impending change. "What, you mean lawn bowls Trevor Chappell style?"

“Not exactly. You can probably expect a full toss somewhere between the top of your pads and half way up your chest. You know, that sort of area where you’d call a strike in baseball or softball.”

“Run up?”

“Zilch. Standing start, couple of twirls of the arm to get some momentum and *whammo!* Be about the same speed as your average medium pacer. That’s about all I can tell you.”

The arrival of the incoming batsman, who didn’t exactly revel in the moniker of Pretty Boy but didn’t have much choice in the matter broke up the impromptu conference, and as Balls checked his guard, Zero handed me his baseball cap.

“This’ll be interesting,” I remarked.

The first three got to the other end a little under knee height and about a foot outside off stump. Balls got an edge to the third, and the result was a single to third man. Given the *Strike zone* concept the stumps weren’t exactly an endangered species, and since the pitching distance on a softball diamond is five or six metres less than the length of a cricket pitch the relative lack of height probably wasn’t surprising.

After another play and a miss at the other end, Zero seemed less than happy with the height and Pretty Boy seemed less than impressed by the concept.

After the fourth delivery, I decided a little assistance for all concerned was needed.

“Listen, Zero, you’ve been bowling from way back. You’d be better off bowling from up here.”

I pointed to the popping crease, and suggested if he placed his front foot right on the crease he’d be as close to the regulation pitching distance as the rules of cricket allowed. Balls watched with interest.

I called both batsmen to a quick mid-pitch conference. Brooksy invited himself and waved Zero into the huddle for good measure.

“We’ve got a situation where Zero’s sending the ball down over a distance about five metres longer than he’s used to, which probably accounts for the low full tosses. Looking at twenty metres along the pitch, if we take the crease at each end out of the equation, you’re down to about eighteen. On a softball diamond you’re looking at fourteen, so there’s still going to be a bit of a difference. So if you’re worried about the height you could try batting out of your crease.”

While the advice wasn’t strictly within the umpire’s job description, I could see difficulties on the horizon if issues weren’t addressed.

“If we bat out of the crease,” Balls pointed out, “we’re going to risk being stumped.”

“True,” I turned to Brooksy. “You got a problem with standing back? Say about two metres? Seems like the best way around the different distances. Since you’re probably looking at cross bat shots, Brooksy, don’t go stacking the leg side field. Three in the arc between square leg and mid on sounds fair to me. Four? Well, I guess that’d be OK if the fourth guy’s a boundary rider...”

It seemed a reasonable compromise, and the next delivery went through higher, and Pretty Boy managed to connect.

Predictably, the ball went straight to mid-wicket, where it was fielded by His Lordship.

The form reversal continued with what should have been the final ball of the over, which got to Pretty Boy earlier than he expected, resulting in a bunt down to mid on, but with unusual circumstances, mid-pitch conferences and other factors somewhere in the preceding five deliveries I’d neglected to click over the counter and the result was a seven-ball over.

You don’t need to be Einstein or a devout devotee of Murphy’s Law to figure out what came next.

The additional delivery went through slightly higher, and a top edge looped into the air before a circling Brooksy accepted the catch.

Two for forty after nine overs.

Pretty Boy was less than impressed by the dismissal, and as Ming arrived at the crease I noted a bat, a pair of batting gloves and a pair of pads being liberally distributed around the pavilion, and that was before he'd had a look at the scorebook.

Coming on as second change, Mark Silver, better known as Aravinda gave away two singles and another over from Zero produced a two to Ming, a single to change the strike and a couple of dots faced by Balls before I indicated it was time for a break.

I'd given the drinks breaks a fair bit of thought over the preceding day. After a week of big nights with another looming on the horizon, since I'd be looking after the bowlers' end umpiring for the full hundred, I decided to limit myself to a beer or two over lunch.

So, what was I going to do over the next ten minutes? I'd thought of staying in the middle, but dismissed the idea since it'd draw attention to the fact I wasn't drinking, and could also be seen as putting undue pressure on the players.

As we walked off, I thought I might get away with assisting Hopalong behind the bar, but discovered, as we reached the pavilion, things in that department were under control.

Best, I decided, to approach things the way I would if it was a school-kids' match. Wander over to the score book, check the details, have a bit of a chat and keep one eye on the clock on the mobile phone.

The score book the expected work of art since Heather Brooks had filled in the details using a variety of coloured pencils to record ball-by-ball details.

Heather, as a softball player had been impressed by Zero's performance with the ball, and was complimenting him as she explained the finer points of the bowling analysis to him.

Her husband joined us at the point where Heather was concluding, "So I think under the circumstances, you've done very well, Hira."

"Fuckin' oath," was the Denison captain's assessment. "You're on for at least one more, Zero. We're down one of our bowlers with Rambo not here. Another

one same as the first two will go down very well. Those bastards might not agree, but stuff 'em. That's four-nil, I think. You want to let them know, Herston? Nice little coaching tip, by the way. Zero, from here on there's no reason why you can't roll your arm around on a Saturday. Now about this batting caper..."

Frozen out of the conversation, I wandered over to the Dipsomaniacs bearing news that wasn't going to go down well.

I was surprised by the relative lack of objections, which seemed to have something to do with Pretty Boy's reaction to his dismissal.

Pretty Boy was, when the news had been imparted, vehement in his assessment of the situation. His colleagues, on the other hand, were inclined to take a more favourable view, even after the irregularity in the ball count had been belaboured at some length by the disgruntled batsman.

"Listen, Pretty Boy," *Psycho* Nuttall responded, "Balls and Ming can fucking bat. So can The Godfather, J.C. and Rum & Coke for that matter. Just because you can't drop a fucking waist high full toss over mid-wicket without stuffing it up doesn't mean every other bastard can't. A twelve-year-old school-kid could've tonked that ball. Not fucking good enough."

He turned towards his brother.

"Told you this prick shouldn't be batting three. Far as I'm concerned I hope the little bloke's still on when I get in. Not putting you blokes down, but if they bring him back on when I get in I'll be quite happy. Never hit six sixes in an over before. There's a first time for everything."

"It's something that's probably going to have to wait a bit," I pointed out. "Zero's only here until it's time for him to piss off to play Rugby, so this over might be his last. Depends on Brooksy and when he has to piss off, but in any case that's about ten minutes since we came off."

Balls and Ming had a little to finish in the bottom of a bottle, so the Denison side, in line with the long-standing etiquette of the game, hit the paddock first. As I made my way towards the middle I passed Brooksy and Zero in the middle of a serious tactical discussion.

Psycho's assessment of the tactical situation had obviously reached Brooksy's ears.

"So, Zero, you put the ball out there. Forget the stuff about the strike zone that you picked up from softball and baseball. Put it out there, and if you can work it so that the ball bounces just in front of 'em, so much the better."

"If I bowl there," Zero pointed out, "I don't get them out. I should aim for the wicket, I think?"

"That's why we don't do that three strikes and you're out thing in this game. You bowl, and it's their job to hit it and score runs. It's nice to get the bastards out, but you don't just do it by hitting the stumps. You got that first wicket because he made a mistake. You put the ball where I want it. I set the field the right way and with a bit of luck they make a mistake, and you get another wicket."

As Balls and Ming made their way back, I interrupted the conference before Zero could hand me his cap.

"Sorry, Mick," I interposed. "No way you're getting away with bowling Zero both sides of the drinks break. I presume Aravinda's coming on this end."

There had been a concerted attempt at a spot of skulduggery since Aravinda had been despatched to deep cow corner. There was a delay while arrangements were rearranged.

Over eleven produced three dots and three singles, and Zero returned to the bowling crease while Brooksy went about setting the field, taking a great care with the leg side.

Muscles was despatched on boundary rider duties just forward of square leg while his opening partner was pushed back to a wide deep mid on. Big Al moved from slip to short mid-wicket, and the rest of the fielding side were arranged in an arc on the off side.

"You said no more than three in front of square on the leg side, Herston," Brooksy inquired. "How's that arrangement? Fair?"

I nodded, Ming took guard on middle and off, and I signalled that we were ready for the resumption of play.

It's hard to decide whether it was good luck or good management, but Zero managed to deliver six out of six as low full tosses about two feet outside the off stump. There wasn't a lot Ming could do with them apart from get his front foot across and play the ball away on the off side. He got one through the cordon off the fourth ball, and Balls repeated the stroke off the last delivery.

Psycho's assessment of the situation was obvious to all and sundry.

Aravinda came on for his third, producing a three through mid-wicket and a two to Ming before Brooksy signalled to Zero that his presence was required at the bowlers' end. As a couple of mid-wicket conferences convened, Psycho went about ensuring everybody in the neighbourhood was aware of his take on the situation.

The batting conference broke up while Brooksy and Zero were still engaged in deep consultation. As Ming reached the non-striker's end Psycho chipped in.

"Toonka! Go Balls! Hit the little prick outta the park!"

"Bloody easy for his to say from where he's sitting," Ming observed.

"True," I replied. "Puts a whole new dimension to the term *psycho-babble*, doesn't it?"

"*Knoath*. It's not like he's likely to be asked to do what he reckons we should be doing."

"Of course, we could always do something to put him into that position."

"Not on your life," Ming retorted. "Keep that frozen fickle finger of fate firmly in the pocket or wherever you store it when it's not required, thank you hairy crutch."

At that point, the Brooks-Zero huddle broke up, and we started the thirteenth over. Balls obviously decided to ignore acerbic pointers from the pavilion and adopt a conventional approach to issues raised by Zero's unorthodox action and worked the first ball away into the covers for a single.

As Ming took guard, I noticed a signal from Mr Brooks that seemed to suggest the next delivery should be around a good length about a foot outside off stump. Which is where it duly landed, to be worked away through the off side for another single.

"Not there," came a familiar voice from beyond the boundary. "Hit that shit."

"Up your arse, Psycho," was the mumbled response from Mr Menzies. "Like to see you do much better you prick."

Brooksy was signalling again. From what I could make out he was calling for more of the same, and the result was a single into the covers.

"Go the toonk," was the predictable assessment. "Hit that shit."

Brooksy's signal changed. The line requested seemed unchanged, but he seemed to be advocating a fuller delivery, which was what ensued, with an air swing from Ming the result.

"Hit the shit. Hoick 'im into next week."

Brooksy signalled for more of the same, and there was a replay of the previous delivery. Same result and the same predictable assessment from the boundary. Ming took guard again, and Brooksy's right glove bounced upwards and moved slightly in towards the stumps. The last ball of the over came through a little higher on a line closer to the batsman's body.

"That's outta," came the voice from the boundary as Ming unwound a heave towards mid-wicket.

"Here," it went on as Ming's bat came through.

Unfortunately, the prediction was a little too close to the money. A top edge looped out to the short mid-wicket where Big Al took a comfortable catch.

"I think," I suggested to Balls as I handed Zero his baseball cap, "that you might find Psycho making himself scarce for the next half hour or so."

Ming was not known to possess a mild-mannered temperament.

"No way," Balls retorted. "It'll be like scenes you see in wildlife documentaries. You know, the ones where those big bastards with the antlers on their heads lock horns and start to wrestle?"

"Sure," I replied.

"It'll be something like that. Not much noise, but little niggles running through the afternoon, more than likely. Not much noise but niggles, niggles, niggles."

Which seemed to be the way it went. There was no explosion as Ming arrived on the sideline, and a slight realignment in the seating arrangement the absence of audible Psycho-babble from the sideline suggested there could well be some lower volume to-ing and fro-ing nearby.

Having reclaimed his cap, Zero had headed towards Brooksy, informing him that time for him to head off was nigh.

"If you wouldn't mind hanging on about five minutes, we need to get a sub for you. I mentioned that to the Warbler when we came off for drinks, and he's headed home to get his whites. Should be back shortly," as he glanced towards the road out of town. "That looks very much like his wagon headed this way. If that white Tarago turns in here, you're right to go. By the way, next cricket season you're playing for my mob, even if I have to pay your rego. Haven't had so much fun in years."

As the white Tarago made its way towards the car park, Zero headed off.

Play was held up while The Warbler made his way on, and Brooksy adjusted the field. Since the Warbler is no spring chicken, a direct slot into Zero's boundary rider role was out of the question, and the field needed substantial rejigging.

Incoming batsman, Dave Godfrey, The Godfather was the first of three almost inseparable teachers.

They'd been mates since high school, gone to University together, and played Rugby with a well-known religious affiliated club as a Reserve Grade centre-five-eighth combination. Two taught at a Catholic high school, while the third worked

at the neighbouring primary school. Two of them had gone so far as to marry twins.

Primary dude had taken up with their cousin without setting the relationship in concrete.

I'd first met them on a trip to Dunk Island as the Dipsos' umpire. That status hadn't prevented after-hours socialising, and we were sitting beside the pool in the small hours when I remarked on the fact I'd rarely sighted any of them without the other two close by.

This continuous proximity reminded me of D'Artagnan's offsidiers in the Palace kitchen. I'd remarked that these three reminded me of the Three Musketeers, but the label had been consigned to Athos, Porthos and D'Aramis in Denison.

"You could go with The Trinity," Balls had pointed out from an adjacent deck chair. "Didn't we tell you they're all Micks? Micks are big on the Trinity."

"So who are they?" I asked.

"The big feller," Balls explained, "is Dave Godfrey. Bloke beside him on the left is Timmy Cochrane and the other fella's Jason Carter. Got it figured yet? What they call themselves?"

"Big fella's surname is Godfrey? That bloke's initials are J.C. Well that's got to be the Father and The Son. Guess the other bloke's got to be the Holy Spirit."

"True," That's why he calls himself Rum & Coke."

The Godfather made his way to the non-striker's end while Balls remarked his guard and Brooksy continued to adjust the field.

The final over of Aravinda's spell proved uneventful.

Balls worked the first forward of square for a single, The Godfather blocked the second and drove the third through the covers for a couple, played the fourth back down the track, nudged the fifth down through the gully and Balls played the final ball out on the off side.

At 3 for 63 after fifteen overs that was, I guess, par for the course. Less than a third of the innings gone, three top order batsmen back in the shed, consolidation obviously needed.

I noted with interest the ball was headed towards Greg *Typhoon* Tyson, another of my schoolboy protégés who'd gone close to State selection when he was a little tacker, slight in build and liable to be blown backwards in a strong breeze before the growth spurt set in.

Once it had done its thing, Typhoon stood six-four on the old scale and about two and a half pick handles across the shoulders.

"Another quickie?" was a fairly predictable question from the non-striking Balls.

"Spinner, believe it or not," I replied. "Wouldn't guess it from the looks, eh?"

Twelve-year-old Typhoon may have lacked the physical wherewithal to hurl down thunderbolts but had developed into a left arm spinner with a remarkable ability to land the ball on a sixpence and to vary the location of the coin.

As a kid, he'd had a charming habit of talking to himself, describing the forthcoming delivery with an uncanny degree of accuracy.

I'd had plenty of opportunities to observe that little quirk since he regularly managed to deceive batsmen. I found it best to stay away from square leg when he was bowling, leaving the rival coach with the responsibility of adjudicating appeals for a stumping.

We'd had three years from the time I sighted him as a Year Five kid, by the end of which he'd developed his stock ball into a flighted turner delivered on a nagging line and length, developed an arm ball few batsmen could pick and a Chinaman that wasn't as accurate but delivered a surprisingly high percentage of wickets when he decided to send one down.

A spell of medium pace as he started to fill out had been enough to convince him spin was where it was at, and at six-four, he didn't have to loop the ball much to maintain a trajectory above most batsmen's eye-line.

He'd also added a couple of mean darts, one that turned and one that didn't, to the repertoire, and enjoyed a couple of seasons playing Third Grade in Brisbane while he finished his Commerce degree. He'd been lured back to Denison by a local Rugby-mad accountant who thought he'd be useful in the Crustaceans' line-out.

Unfortunately, Typhoon proved unable to jump and developed a strong dislike for finding himself on the bottom of the ruck or maul, which explained why he was coming on to bowl rather than heading off to the footy with the Crustaceans.

I was fairly sure how the next few overs would pan out. Typhoon would keep it tight at one end, and Brooksy would use the other end to get through the rest of the bowling line up two overs at a time so he could get the better bowlers back to finish eight-over spells.

Typhoon's first over should have been a maiden, but a misfield in the deep gave The Godfather a single and both batsmen the opportunity to get a good look at his stock ball from both ends. All six landed around the same spot and turned sharply enough away from the right hander to demand respect.

As expected, Brooksy started working his way through the rest of the bowling order, calling His Lordship into the attack since his overs might best be disposed of while the batsmen were being kept quiet rather than down the track when they were well set and in shot playing mode.

"Big hoo-er, ain't he?" The Godfather remarked with a nod towards Typhoon as I reached the other end for the new over. Brooksy was involved in reshaping the field to a standard *Dunno what this bloke bowls so play it safe* field.

I nodded.

"So why doesn't he bowl fast?" was a predictable question as Brooksy impersonated a traffic cop at the other end.

"Had a go in the Under 16s," I replied. "Got carted. That sort of size is OK, I guess, but as far as anyone can work out he hasn't got the right muscle fibre."

"Heart muscle?"

"Nope, he's got a ton of that. Can run all day, but hopeless if he tries to sprint. Doesn't have that fast twitch muscle fibre you get in West Indian sprinters and quickies. Can't jump, either," and I went onto a brief description of a brief career in the line-out between deliveries from His Lordship that were met with a mixture of respect (#s 3 and 5) and outright contempt (the other four legal deliveries, which were despatched to the boundary).

With a couple of wides thrown in it wasn't as expensive as Nuts' onslaught against Muscles, but 18 would've been too many for most people's liking.

So we were in for an interesting time when Typhoon loomed into view for his second over. The first turned in much the same way as the previous six.

The Godfather, having seemingly sorted out what was what, worked the second away for a single. Balls treated the third with respect, but having sorted matters out as well, danced down the track to the fourth, lofting it back over the bowler's head for four.

Up to this point, out of ten deliveries, variations had been noticeably absent, but when Balls tried a repeat off the next ball he found himself stumped.

He'd completely failed to connect with what I suspected was one of Typhoon's *little Chinese fellers*. I had the chance to verify my suspicion as Balls disappeared into the distance and J.C. arrived at the crease, playing the final delivery back down the pitch.

His Lordship's second over followed the same pattern as the first, with a couple more wides, a brace of fours, a massive hoick by The Godfather that produced the fourth six of the innings, a bye and a single that meant The Godfather would've been on strike for Typhoon's fourth over had Brooksy decided to go down that track.

Instead, he had the ball going out to Peter *Sunset* Westaway, who obliged by keeping things relatively quiet.

Three twos, two singles and a dot were a welcome change from the preceding carnage, and with twenty gone we adjourned for drinks with the score on 4 for 117 - a decent run rate but with seven wickets in hand and thirty overs still to go someone was obviously going to need to stick around.

Unlike the other fourteen blokes making their way off the field I didn't have an urgent appointment with the drinks truck, so I made my way to the score book and took a casual glance.

Brooksy, evidently working on the principle that diplomacy on the domestic front was a worthwhile exercise before after-hours factors came into play, did the same.

"Bit of a master stroke with Zero," I remarked after I'd spotted his figures in the bowling analysis. "Four overs, two for nine. Rather handy Pity you let him go on the Rugby..."

"Well," Brooksy replied, with unusual self-deprecation, "it was a bit of luck, really. The idea was to see if we could slip in a couple of non-bowler overs before they'd had a chance to get themselves set."

"Any particular reason?"

"Seen him in action with the cricket boys against the softball girls. Underarm, different angle. Figured we'd get through one over before they got used to the idea. Even if he really got tonked in the second one, wouldn't be too much worse than two overs from the Scum Dog."

Peter *Scum Dog* Hewitt was regarded as the most accurate bowler in the local competition due to his uncanny ability to search out the middle of the bat.

A Scum Dog over was a rare occurrence at the best of times, and when one did happen it was more than likely to be extended due to the difficulty of locating lost cricket balls.

"So now it looks like you won't need to bowl him at all. Also means you've got a bit of leeway if they get onto one of the other blokes. Who's going to get the full eight?"

"Figure it out yourself. Muscles, Craven, Aravinda and Typhoon all get another four. 'Course it'd be different if we had Rambo here. He'd be another four, but he isn't so stiff shit. Four out of Sunset and Big Al, maybe. See how it goes. Get eleven wickets and we won't have to worry about it at all."

AS Brooksy took delivery of a beer and headed off to consult with the rest of the Denison side I saw the crowd around the beer truck had dissipated and sidled across to see how things were going on that front.

His Lordship had been helping Hopalong dispense the chilled articles, and had turned his attention to one of them as I moseyed up to the truck.

"Been a while since you rolled your arm over, mate?" mightn't have been the most diplomatic opening gambit, but was, I thought appropriate under the circumstances.

"Not since High School. Might be a while until I do it again, too. Be interesting to see how I pull up in the morning. Muscles that haven't been used for years and all that."

"Still, I guess, you're not likely to be complaining too much as long as they keep sucking piss the way they're going."

The incoming cash flow into His Lordship's bottom line would, I suspected, be sufficient to relieve any muscular discomfort.

"Can they keep it up? Cassidy tells me they've been on it like it's going out of style since we started."

A nod from Hopalong verified the story.

"You might find them slowing down after lunch. You can blame Brooksy if that happens. If they'd been bowling first, which was what they wanted to happen, you wouldn't have had this rush at all, would you? There are blokes who don't usually get to spend too much time at the crease who could need to ease up a bit if they're going to get through the fifty overs. Couple of the quickies'll need to be semi-sober to bowl in that hour up to stumps tonight too. They'll keep on going after stumps. Might see the last of 'em fall into bed about three..."

A vehicle on the access road caught my eye. It was The Duchess's preferred chariot, hardly surprising since she'd have been due within the next half hour to coordinate lunchtime arrangements. The car came to a halt, and a minute or so later The Duchess had joined us.

"Bit early," I suggested. "Shouldn't take long to crank up the barbie and all that. Told you the facilities would be adequate. Not like we're talking the average backyard barbie here."

"Darling, I know, but I thought I'd better come out just that little bit early to make sure that there wasn't anything that we need to bring from the pub."

"Well, if you'd care to step this way, I can show you around. I'm sure the fellas won't mind if we're a minute or two late going back on."

I was quietly proud of the facilities we'd installed at the ground, though this had been the first opportunity to do the guided tour bit.

"First stop the barbie. Should be adequate. Being electric it'll take a few minutes to heat up, but there you go. Don't have to worry about the gas bottle being full, anyway."

"I know. Margaret was in for lunch during the week and..."

The technological side of the design and redevelopment of the complex had been handed to Gilhooley, and I suspected The Iron Maiden had been sceptical of the results.

"She was saying practically none of Gilhooley's little inventions ever seem to work as advertised. You can't blame a girl for wanting to check. The boys've got the pub barbeque in Bryan's ute just to be on the safe side."

"Preparation and serving area here and here," I went on. "Should be enough space, judging by what I've seen around school carnivals. Only need to feed thirty, thirty-five here, but I reckon you could do up to sixty or so provided they weren't all looking to eat at the same time. Might be a problem then..."

"No. You might be right even then. I'll just call the boys and tell them they won't need tables or any of that stuff, so they can come straight out."

As she headed off to make the relevant calls I checked the time and indicated we'd better be making our way back onto the paddock.

Brooksy's consultations had sorted out the next bit of the bowling order as I found Paul *The Duck* Drake handing me his cap and stepping out his run up as the fielders made their way to prearranged positions.

The Duck wasn't a bowler likely to strike fear into a batsman's heart, operating not much over half-rat power, and a four and a two to J.C. was a relatively lenient toll. Brooksy obviously worked on the principle of getting one of Paul's overs out of the way before the batsmen got set again.

That over had, however, provided a sighter, since Sunset's second went for three singles, a brace of twos and a boundary four. The Duck's second yielded three boundaries and a two to The Godfather, taking his total to 48 and posing an interesting conundrum.

The playing conditions indicated retirement at the end of the over in which the batsman passes fifty, so if he continued to take full toll of what was on offer, two balls would see him off. As the ball came back from the boundary Psycho's voice boomed out again after a lengthy absence from proceedings.

"Forty-eight, big feller. Way to go. Hit the shit!"

His team mate, however, declined the advice, and took the single to deliver him the bowling for the next over. He called a mid-pitch conference to ensure that was the case. J.C. duly obliged by despatching the final delivery across the boundary.

Having used Typhoon as a foil to His Lordship earlier and with two Typhoon overs up his sleeve until everybody else had rolled their arm over it was no surprise to see the left-arm tweaker back for the over in which The Godfather was almost certain to depart.

While he could have played out a maiden and taken his chances with whoever came on next, it was reasonably certain he wasn't going to take things down that path, so the approach Typhoon was going to take was a matter of interest.

Along with his cap I'd been expecting an *over the wicket* comment from the lad, and had been just about to comment along those lines when I was informed that he might start off round the wicket.

The first ball, delivered from wide on the crease, landed about three metres in from the mid-wicket boundary, settling the retirement issue. From there, it was a matter of when rather than whether with an additional consideration of how many more.

"Now I'll go over the wicket, thanks very much," was Typhoon's reaction.

The next two were spinning deliveries pitched just outside the line of off stump. The Godfather had a good old-fashioned heave ho at both, missing the first and carving the second out to the deep cover boundary for a comfortable two. Three would have been feasible but would have cost him the strike.

Ball four pitched around the same spot but, being the arm ball rather than the turner, caught the inside edge, went uncomfortably close to leg stump and failed to produce a run as Muscles charged in from deep backward square.

There was always a single in it, but an aggressive approach to the ball meant that J.C. called a *wait*, unaware that Muscles was a left arm thrower, and the ball was on his right side.

Ball five was wider, but this time turned out to be the chinaman, spinning back and avoiding the bat by a comfortable margin. With that, Typhoon indicated he was going back around the wicket, and the final delivery was the big spinning turner delivered with the right cheek of his arse a hair's breadth away from the stumps.

A thickish outside edge down to third man would have yielded a comfortable single, but working on the *nothing ventured, nothing gained* principle, The Godfather went back for the second, finishing sufficiently short of his ground to prompt Nuts, who was serving his stint as the square leg umpire to deliver an immediate adverse adjudication.

The Godfather was replaced by the third member of the Dipso Trinity as Big Al Huxley arrived at the bowling crease and the field scattered for distant pastures.

Big Al's military mediums were a tad slower than The Duck's but tended to find the boundary with similar frequency.

Brooksy would have preferred the new batsman on strike, but you can't always get what you want, and at five-for at the halfway point of the innings with the 'keeper and four specialist bowlers to come this pair weren't going to be able to flay the bowling to all points of the compass.

The over brought ten runs including a boundary, a bit of strike rotation, and not much else. Typhoon's emergence for his fourth produced, wonder of wonders, a Rum & Coke-flavoured maiden.

Big Al returned for his second, with the same results as his first, seven to J.C. and three to Rum & Coke, who retained the strike as Damien *Spider* Webber came on as the tenth bowler, much to Scum Dog's evident annoyance.

Three twos to Rum & Coke from Spider's first four deliveries were followed by a single to put J.C. on strike. A boundary brought forth a Scum Dog suggestion that things would have been different had he been given his rightful turn at the bowling crease.

'Fuckin' oath it'd be different," was Spider's reply. "If you were fuckin' bowling we'd have just spent ten fuckin' minutes looking for the replacement ball," which in turn produced merriment all round.

With the twenty-ninth coming up and Spider not allowed to deliver consecutive overs it was obvious someone hadn't bowled their full complement of four overs, and *someone* was Craven, who'd taken the new pill and been held over in case Brooksy needed him as a partnership breaker (or that was how it seemed from where I was standing).

To Rum & Coke, however, those matters weren't quite as clear cut.

"He's had four, hasn't he?" was a predictable question.

"Three," I responded, "I think you'll find that he came off after three. Zero bowled two before drinks, so with five from that end before drinks, he must've had

three. Like a hundred on it? We can check the score book at the lunch break. Can make it a grand if you like."

As an astute punter, in the face of the mathematics and the size of the offered bet, Rum & Coke declined, and set about negotiating a one over spell, much of which came through above waist height.

A top edged pull shot over the slips brought two, and a single off the last ball gave him the strike for the last over before lunch. With his score on eleven, Rum & Coke was able to take close to full toll off Spider's second, and a two, a couple of fours and a three took him to a two dozen and the total to 5/207, a healthy score but one that would have looked rosier with one or two fewer wickets.

It was just after one as we made our way off the field, and we had close to an hour to take it easy before we made our way back out. With the majority of those present making a beeline for the catering department, I wandered across to the beer truck, confident there'd be something left if I waited for the queue at the tucker trough to dissipate.

His Lordship had been temporarily enlisted in the catering corps, so I chatted with Hopalong, and took over the bar duties while he found a bite to eat.

By that stage the crowd was gone, so once the incumbent had hopped back into his designated role I wandered across in search of a feed.

I wouldn't have wanted to have waited too much longer.

The catering table looked like it had been attacked by a swarm of locusts, but there was enough left to assemble a reasonably decent burger. My attempt to pay was politely declined because according to prior agreements they'd refused to take any money from anyone else, so what did I think I was doing?

"So," I ventured after the bun and its contents had made their way down the gullet into the digestive tract, "everything worked OK? No problems? Nothing that we'll need to take a look at before the kids' season starts."

"Darling, I should've known better than to doubt you, but when Margaret was in for lunch."

"Well," I cut in, not wishing to get the nuts and bolts of a lengthy lunchtime conversation, "we did manage to put a fair bit of thought into the layout and that sort of stuff."

Which was true enough. I'd had plenty of chances to assess cricket venues and was aware of regular complaints regarding the availability of shade, the proximity of the toilet and catering facilities and the location of all three in relation to the field itself.

"It's obvious that you did. Good view across the ground, shade right beside the edge of the field, and it even looks like you've got one of those sight screens across there."

She indicated a substantial white wall on the opposite side of the field.

"If you step this way, you'll see we've got something similar at the back of the, um, amenities block,"

The structure that housed toilets, showers and storage space presented a nine foot high bare white wall to the playing field.

"Dunno if you've used the facilities, but if you have, you'll have noticed they're lit by skylights, and the regulation ventilation space goes through the roof rather than the back wall. The wall mightn't be quite high enough for Typhoon over there, but it's going to be more than adequate for a primary school kid."

Her Ladyship nodded, and I went on.

"The catering department's there to make sure the kids and anyone else who uses the ground for that matter have cooking facilities right here, so there's no need for everyone to piss off looking for lunch."

Experience suggested unless it was obvious lunch would be available at the ground, visiting teams invariably departed in search of takeaways. Any suggested time for a resumption was almost invariably a good half-hour less than was needed for visitors to locate food, consume it and make their way back to the ground.

"No, you've done a great job. As long as you've got someone who knows what they're doing."

"The kids'll have an extra little income stream. Won't need to charge ball fees. Should even be enough in the kitty for team outfits and petrol money for parents who choose to drive to the away games. Could've sponsored all that stuff myself, of course, but."

"That's not what I was getting at. What Margaret had to say was while she was quite sure you'd worked out everything very carefully, she hoped you hadn't made a big mistake in hiring someone to put in all the electrical stuff."

"Who turns out to be," I pointed out, "her husband."

"Exactly. As far as she's concerned practically nothing Gilbert spends his time tinkering with ever works the way it's supposed to, and very little works at all."

The Iron Maiden's experience, of course, had differed marginally from our own. Our financial windfall was largely due to Gilhooley's inventiveness, and he'd come up with a number of interesting devices to go into the Crossroads.

Consultations leading up to our departure, however, revealed tensions within the Hoolihan marriage had stretched it close to breaking point.

"That little bastard called the Family Court" Gilhooley had pointed out the last time I'd laid eyes on him, "isn't on the horizon *right now*, but if you cast your gaze towards the horizon you'll notice the odd hair sticking up over the skyline."

As a result, when we hired Gilhooley to install an environmentally friendly power supply, we'd expected to be paying handsomely for same, and the money would be funnelled into the man's dodgy bank accounts away on the coalfields.

Gilhooley, however, didn't want things done that way.

"For a start," he pointed out, "she'll know bloody well where I've been working while I'm putting that stuff in, and she'll expect me to be paid for it. She'll expect that the payment will go into the joint account where she can keep her beady eyes on the bastard."

Gilhooley was expecting a forensic accountant to make a detailed examination of his finances once the Family Court came into the equation, and, as far as he was concerned the investigation would find enough to satisfy the Family Law

Court's insatiable curiosity without venturing too far into the woods, which was where Gilhooley had managed to secrete a larger windfall, including, of course, his dividend from our Lotto successes.

"No, you're getting this for nothing. Well, not *quite* for nothing. I'll be sending regular invoices, and you'll pay them out of money that would've gone into the cunning kick. Once we've got the legalities sorted out, the money can go back into the slush funds. I'm going to need around two hundred thousand in full view of her beady eyes, and with a bit of luck as long as she can see what looks like enough right there, she won't go venturing further afield."

The patents for the devices would, according Gilhooley's reckoning, go into the equation, and while he wasn't happy about the prospect, the fact that these things worked and looked to be capable of delivering an income stream might prevent an investigator uncovering others that also worked and were already generating a healthy return.

"Well," I ventured, "we've laid out big time on the electricals around here."

"Which is why Margaret was concerned. When you look at it, based on his track record there's not much that he's turned his hand to that has worked."

Which was true.

Very little he'd unveiled in Denison apart from a certain dedicated computer did.

"I'd hoped she was wrong, of course," was a statement that I didn't regard as fully credible, but I let it pass. "That's why I didn't come out to check things myself before today. We had the pub barbie ready to roll if the cooking facilities weren't up to scratch, and once I'd had a look at your setup here I knew that was the only likely problem."

"They tell me," I cut in, "that there was a big power outage here about three and a half weeks ago."

"There was," His Lordship agreed. "Bloke in a semitrailer took out a power pole just down the road just before six. Took them close to closing time before they got the power back on all over town."

"Well, remembering I wasn't here when it happened, so I didn't experience this myself, you may well have noted, had you gone past this place while the power was out, everything was hunky dory in these parts. According to Hopalong and Sandy they went around making sure everything that could be turned on was turned on and running flat chat."

"It couldn't have," the Duchess protested, "there wasn't any power."

"Take a look along the roof line across there," I pointed out. "Notice anything?"

"Roofing's a little strange," His Lordship ventured.

"My oath it is. That line faces north, and we've got solar panels running right along there. Go a couple of hundred metres back over my shoulder and you'll see the same thing here. According to Gilhooley, that gives us enough capacity to power every electrical device you'd want in every room, with all the lights on and the air con going flat chat and still be pumping power into the main grid as well."

Both members of the audience seemed reasonably impressed, but not totally convinced.

"Of course," I pointed out, "we'll probably never get to check out whether that's the way things are. All I know it that the control panels in the office suggest we haven't drawn an electron off the grid since the system was switched on, and we've pumped out a heap. Looks good to me."

There was a movement away to my right, and when I turned my attention that way I noted Brooksy and Balls making their way in my general direction.

"It's only a quarter to," Brooksy suggested when they reached me, "but it looks like everyone's just about right to go back on."

"On both sides," Balls added. "So we might as well go back, say ten minutes earlier. That OK with you, Mr Umpire Sir?"

Given the fact that I had another three hours at the bowler's end with a further four tomorrow, an early start suited me though I'd expected the players would have preferred a longer spell.

That was why I'd opted for the two o'clock resumption.

As it was, with the predictable stuffing around it wasn't far short of two o'clock when the field was set, the batsmen in place and the bowler at the top of his run. It was the identity of the bowler that had me bemused.

Looking at the state of play, it was obvious what each side would aim to do.

At 5 for 207 with J.C. on 36 and Rum & Coke 15, it was a matter of the Dipsos getting through ten overs without losing wickets, Rum & Coke doing most of the scoring and retiring both incumbent batsmen. That would leave the keeper and the bowlers ten overs to have an old-fashioned *heave ho* with the prospect of two fairly decent bats able to come back for a slog at the end.

As far as Brooksy was concerned, he had to find four overs.

With twenty to go and Muscles, Craven, Aravinda and Typhoon obvious choices for sixteen of them, there was always going to be a temptation to run through those and hope the wicket tally got to eleven.

That could be dangerous if J.C. and Rum & Coke found themselves back at the crease able to take full toll of whatever overs were left.

My study of the score-book led me to suspect we'd get two from Big Al and two from Sunset, since they had the most respectable figures.

Instead I found The Duck handing me his cap, and the decision made sense when the six legal deliveries went for five singles and a two to Rum & Coke.

There was a wide in there as well, but eight off the over was a strikingly better economy rate than the bowler had managed previously. The following over saw Aravinda back in action, with Rum & Coke taking most of the action, stroking a four through the covers, and working a couple of singles to rotate the strike.

It was obvious J.C. was going to take his time negotiating his way to fifty.

Over 33 brought Big Al into the attack, and Rum & Coke taking his time over the scoring with a pair of twos and a single while J.C. gave him back the strike with a single.

With both batsmen into the forties, it was obvious that one was going to stick around while the other had a dip, and the dip came in the form of a brimming beaker of Rum & Coke.

Aravinda's next effort went two, four, one to Rum & Coke, a dot and a one to J.C. and a dot to Rum & Coke. Sunset was on for #35, which started with a single to J.C. followed by a four to Rum & Coke creamed through the leg side, not quite cow shot corner, but not a million miles away either. A pair of twos took him to 48, a dot led to the last ball of the over and a single should have left him on 49 with the strike for the next over.

He couldn't manage the single, which put J.C. needing twos and fours if the Holy Spirit was going to get a full over of tonking time.

Aravinda's seventh yielded a measly six, with two dots to J.C. a pair of twos and a single on top of that and a single to Rum & Coke to give him open slather at whoever came on to bowl what might well have been the last of the missing four.

Running commentary from the pavilion ensured everyone involved was aware of score-line issues.

The ball went to Typhoon with instructions to bowl darts into the popping crease, giving Rum & Coke the choice of playing out a maiden or taking whatever he could weasel out of the six.

The first ball, however, didn't quite follow Brooksy's instructions.

While it wasn't flighted it wasn't quite a dart either, and a fair old whoosh made it clear that Rum & Coke wasn't interested in maiden overs, but he didn't get it quite in the middle.

The first run took him to fifty, and obliged him to go back for a second, which wasn't the easy run it should have been thanks to an impressive chase and accurate

throw on the turn from Craven. With Rum & Coke on 51 with five balls left in the over, we were obviously in for a cat and mouse game.

"That's his fifty, dart, mate!" was the call from behind the stumps.

The next ball, speared in on middle and leg, evaded the bat, rapped the rear pad and produced a raucous shout.

I took a long look, but the position of Brooksy's feet suggested he'd anticipated taking the ball down the leg side and declined the appeal.

"No time to be fair, Herston."

"Dunno what Hawkeye would've said, but take a look where your feet ended up. Just going down leg side, I reckon."

Brooksy took a glance down, observed *you're not going to get what you don't ask for* and repeated the call for darts. I'd suspected the previous delivery had been the arm ball, but the distance between where the ball pitched and the pad was so small that it would have been impossible to note any significant turn. Ball three was pitched around middle, looked to be the turner, and was whipped away through the leg side, producing a two and a photo finish as the return came in to the bowler's end.

The regulation call for a dart failed to materialise with ball four, flighted and turning sharply enough to catch the outside edge, flying to Big Al's right hand at slip. Al got a finger to it, slowing it down enough to suggest a comfortable single, though there was never going to be a second run. Heather Brooks would've been entering dots in the relevant sections of the score-book.

Ball five went wide of mid on for another two, and with one ball to go, there was an adjustment to the field with everyone in front of the wicket dropping back, cover, mid off, mid on and mid-wicket to the boundary, point to cover, extra cover to a deepish mid off, slip to point, square leg to a standard mid-wicket, third man and deep backward square stationary before Typhoon headed in again.

Given the circumstances the bowler's natural inclination would have been to spear in another dart around leg stump, ensuring there was no chance of the ball

being hoisted anywhere. Typhoon, however, headed in the opposite direction. Flighted higher than the preceding deliveries it pitched, spun hard and caught the outside edge of the bat. Craven set out from third man at full pace and managed to get a fingertip to the ball as it went, first bounce, across the boundary.

Better known as Retread, incoming batsman Dipsos' wicket-keeper Jack Patchen had a reputation as someone partial to the tonk. And with J.C. on 46 it was obvious that once he'd had a chance to get his eye in Retread would be doing the majority of the scoring.

J.C. took a single off the first ball of Aravinda's seventh over, and underlined that point with a twos and fours, mate once he was at the non-striker's end.

Ball two saw a textbook forward defensive shot, and the next two produced pairs through the off side. Another dot was followed by a four and it looked like Retread was well on the way.

Brooksy must have been tempted to get the last of the missing four overs out of the way but opted for Craven, who managed to keep J.C. on strike for three balls with the field up before the expected single turned the strike back to Retread. *Twos and fours, mate* was the call as the field dropped back.

Ball four could've brought a single into the deep on the leg side, but with the end of the over approaching J.C. wasn't interested.

Retread got a bit more bat on the next one and managed to bisect the leg side field, and the boundary was followed by a three, eliminating the need for J.C. to score a single to return the strike to the fresher batsman.

Over 40 saw Muscles back into the attack, and three twos into the score book before we wandered off for another refreshment break.

With J.C. at the non-striker's end, it was obvious we'd end up conversing on the way off the field. Nicknames always interest me, and Retread was an unfamiliar face, so the origin of the moniker was an obvious matter for discussion.

"It was up at the Towers for the Ashes," J.C. explained. "He was up there with Benno's Mob, and they were camped next door to us at the Showgrounds, so you

can guess what the sledging was like. Two teams in A1 camped next door to each other, and we were down to play each other on Saturday."

"It would've started as soon as you got there," I suggested.

"Yeah, and both went up Friday arvo, so it was a case of set up camp and straight on the piss and straight into the sledge. Anyway, things got a bit heated, and he was expecting to play with Benno's Rebels, not the main mob, so he'd brought a pair of spikes that he needed to break in, not expecting to be playing A1, like. After Friday night's little kerfuffle, Benno decided they were going to have a go at us and put 'im in the main side and sent him in to open."

"With the new spikes, no doubt."

"Right on. Anyway he went the big heave ho from ball one and ended up on one-eighty."

"Cementing his place in the side for the weekend."

"Yeah, normally that'd be the case. The new boots were the problem. Before he got to sixty his feet was starting to blister, so he just stood there and went ballistic, figuring that he'd hole out and get off the paddock..."

"But he didn't. Dropped catches?"

"In the beer tent, yeah. Anyway when he eventually got out his feet were stuffed. Couldn't field in the afternoon. They had that show pony from Gatton keeping for 'em, that's what'd got the sledge going big time the night before, so he was never going to keep. When they turned up at Sunday's game the groundsman at Souls wouldn't let any bastard bat in rubbers, so he ended back in B2 with their third side, you know, Benno's Rejects."

"Where he kept."

"Yeah, but there was another little problem. The Rejects were down to play on one of the new fields, and he couldn't run. So he had to dive around a bit more than would've been necessary otherwise."

"Ouch." I knew by reputation what the playing surface was likely to be like when you're looking at a new B2 field. The usual preparation was to bulldoze the

scrub, put it in a pile and burn it, and leave things like china apple stumps in the ground. Diving wasn't the desirable option in such circumstances.

"Yeah, well we got back to camp Sunday night and Psycho went across to Benno's camp."

"For a spot of polite conversation, no doubt."

"Course. Anyway, Retread's there, not that the name had come into play just yet, and he's got bark off all over 'im. His girlfriend was using about half the stuff in the first aid kit to patch him up when Psycho got there. Anyway some bastard said *Look what they've done to bloody Patchen.*"

"Bloody Patchen being the operative word," I suggested.

"Psycho took one look. *Patchen?*" he says. *Bastard doesn't need patchin'. Needs a bloody retread.*"

"The name stuck."

"You got 'im. Catch you back out there," and with that J.C. wandered off in search of a chilled article.

A check at the beer truck revealed sales had slowed marginally.

Hopalong suggested if current trends continued he'd be redundant after the change of innings.

"Not if I have anything to do with it," Brooksy cut in from a neighbouring team huddle where batting tactics had obviously been discussed. "Scum Dog and Big Al are going to take it easy for the first ten when we bat and we've got Muscles as night watchman, so the rest of us'll be having a few cool drinks after a long spell in the paddock. You won't be going anywhere."

Back on the paddock, a single off the second ball of the Craven over took J.C. to 49, and we were back into twos and fours territory.

Retread managed a three off the last ball to go with an earlier two and four, making ten off a reasonably expensive over. Had J.C. been on strike for the over, presumably the ball would've gone to Typhoon, but with Retread on strike and

more twos and fours as the scripted option, Brooksy opted for another one from Muscles, which duly produced two pairs and gave J.C. the tonk for as many of the forty-third as he could manage.

Typhoon would've probably have preferred the other end, but he was the *go to* man, and it was the batsman who determined the end he was going to be coming from. As it was, the matter turned out to be academic.

J.C. worked the first ball behind point and Retread, figuring there wasn't enough on the ball to get it across the boundary, set off in search of a two while J.C. (who obviously figured there weren't two on offer) refused to run at all.

Retread found himself retracing his steps while Heather Brooks entered a dot in the relevant sections of the score book. Ball two went much the same way, and with the halfway mark in the over approaching it was fairly clear that something was going to break the temporary deadlock. The third delivery was flighted enough to allow J.C. to get under it, and the ball flew out to deep mid-wicket where the catch was duly taken by none other than The Warbler.

The batsmen, however, had crossed, so while Psycho made his way into the middle it was Retread who was going to face the next delivery. There must have been a degree of temptation to flight it as well. A single or a three would bring the new batsman to the striker's end. Brooksy's call for darts was acceded to for the next two before a flighted delivery that could've been a comfortable two was used by Retread to retain the strike.

It wasn't a development that went down well with Psycho, who was forthright in demanding access to the strike as Muscles headed off towards the top of his mark. The first ball, pitched up around the block hole, was worked wide of mid on and was presumably meant to reach the boundary, but an excellent chase from Craven kept it down to three and gave Psycho his wish.

"One'll do it, mate," was a predictable suggestion from Retread.

He was, after all, on 34, and there were four deliveries after the next.

The game plan called for him to get as close to fifty as possible, and preferably retiring, then a quick fall of the remaining wickets to bring himself and Rum & Coke back right at the end.

"Bullshit," came the reply from the far end. "If it's in the slot it's outta here." Muscles pitched the next right up, just about in the block hole, and narrowly missed taking off stump.

"That's the slot right there, Muscles," was the comment from behind the stumps. "Let's see what he can do with another one right there."

The next wasn't quite *right there*, a little further up and dead on middle, forcing Psycho to jam down a defensive bat and ensuring Muscles' economy rate stayed relatively low.

Ball four was the same, but some unfavourable commentary from the boundary caused Psycho to plant his left foot down the wicket, take an almighty swing and depart with leg stump about three metres from where it should have been.

There were two balls left, as I informed Bill Barker, known to one and all as Brown Dog, and my advice was followed by a suggestion from his batting partner that they should be played out. The fifth produced a stylish forward defensive stroke, a *Good dog* and a *Woof* from the other end.

The final ball was supposed to go the same way, but an inside edge sailed close to leg stump. Retread, seeing the opportunity for two, called his partner through, offering specific advice about the second as they crossed on the first.

Over 45 saw Craven back for his second last. While Retread managed a four and a three, Brown Dog was able to edge the fourth delivery past slip for a single, giving Retread the chance to pick up another three off the next.

With the final delivery played out, the news that Retread was on 48 and would more than likely be retiring at the end of the over brought Typhoon back on.

A flighted first delivery was tonked through the covers for a boundary.

The remaining five balls were more economical as Typhoon worked through his repertoire, offering up something different each time, switching sides, varying

his position on the crease and keeping the scoring down to a pair of twos before Retread staged a (hopefully temporary) retreat to the pavilion.

With four overs to go, two tailenders at the crease, three of the top bowlers left with one over each and the prospect of retired bats returning with the fall of two more wickets, this was obviously the stage to use up the last of the missing four, and a quick consultation saw the ball go to Big Al for #47.

Brown Dog picked up two off the first delivery, and the following five went for a string of singles. Seven off the over was good going at this stage. With Muscles back for the forty-eighth things were poised for an interesting finish. Brown Dog had taken a single off the last ball of the previous over to retain the strike, but the first ball of Muscles final over would've troubled most batsmen, reversing through the gate and striking middle and leg.

Under the original playing conditions, with each side playing twelve but batting eleven this would have seen Rum & Coke back as the first of the retired batsmen. Brooksy had insisted on batting twelve because he wanted to see Zero bat, but there was more to it than that.

As Brown Dog departed, Brooksy headed to consult with the bowler, suggesting as he passed me that I take note of the time. What followed was ninety seconds of high farce as #12, Bryan *Ankles* Angstrom, having managed to scrounge a pair of pads, attempted to negotiate the loan of a bat. There were repeated shouts of *No, fuck off!* before non-striker Angry took matters into his own hands.

"Just get out here in a hurry Ankles. You can use this one."

Ankles was a notoriously inept bat and owned neither bat, pads nor batting gloves. The club gear bag was called into play on the rare occasions when he was forced to bat in the Townsville competition and the fact that he was invariably the Dipsos' designated non-bat meant the issue rarely raised its ugly head when they were playing.

Everybody else had their own gear.

Unwillingness to lend him a blade was, according to Angry, largely attributable to Ankles' inability to retain a grip on the bat handle.

"I mean," Angry pointed out as Ankles made his way out to the middle, "if you've paid a couple of hundred for a decent lump of willow you don't want to see it flying through the air do you?"

"Is that two minutes?" inquired Brooksy as he made his way to the far end with Ankles about half way out to the middle.

The question produced a suggestion from Angry that he run the rest of the way and after a pause to allow the incoming batsman to regain his breath and a quick stroll to the other end to provide him with a bat I indicated we were ready for the second ball of the over.

It was obvious strategic considerations had been taken into account as Muscles steamed in for the rest of the over. The wicket-taking first ball was followed by four dots, with each ball delivered left arm over the wicket, pitching around off stump and going away with the left-armed's natural angle. Ankles took a swing at each, and predictably failed to connect with any.

I've done more than my share of umpiring kids' games, but I don't think I've ever seen a more casual bit of wicket-keeping than the effort Brooksy put in to the final delivery after it, again, beat the bat. A casual wave of the right glove towards the ball was enough to deflect the ball behind slip providing ample opportunity for a bye.

It was a prospect that apparently appealed to Ankles, though Angry was totally disinterested, having taken a stroll back towards mid-off before wandering down to retrieve the bat. Having accomplished that task he turned back towards the striker's end, delivering specific instructions to his partner.

"Remember, no singles, no threes and no short runs either. Hopefully you won't have to run at all."

Mid-pitch seemed to be the preferred venue for conferences.

Brooksy had claimed his own portion of the area for a discussion with Craven, who'd been assigned the forty-ninth.

The discussion was followed by a careful rearrangement of the field, stacking the off side and limiting the leg side field to a fine leg, forward square leg and a rather wide mid-on.

Given the field it was fairly obvious that nothing was going anywhere near leg stump, which was how it worked out. The first ball, six inches outside off was driven for four, after which Craven moved his line increasingly wide of the stumps.

The rest of the over yielded a pair of twos on the off side. By the time Craven steamed in for the final delivery Angry's stance had moved to the point where leg stump was clearly visible. A yorker pitched on middle would've shattered the stumps if Angry hadn't conveniently placed a pad in the way.

A raucous appeal was fairly predictably upheld.

As Rum & Coke made his way back another mid-pitch conference delivered rather specific bowling instructions to Typhoon, who'd predictably been assigned the final over, though he probably would've expected to be bowling to another more capable batsman. Half a dozen big-turning deliveries from around the wicket produced a maiden over, along with increasing agitation from Rum & Coke since, despite throwing everything bar the kitchen sink at the ball Ankles failed to connect with any of them.

As soon as the last ball was bowled, Brooksy was inquiring about the time.

After the mobile had revealed it was seven minutes to four, he was making a beeline towards the Dipsomaniac cluster, and by the time I'd had a glance at the score book and noted a fairly impressive 9 for 336, a total I thought might take a bit of catching, and made my way across to the beer truck, Brooksy had arrived at the same location, bearing news of a slight change to the schedule.

"Listen," he announced, taking his wallet out of the pocket, "I've just had a chance to your mate Balls, and he's agreed not to go back on till a quarter past to give the openers time to have a beer before they pad up. Nice bloke, eh?"

I glanced over towards where the Denison side was gathered.

No one seemed in a hurry to obtain a drink. Big Al, Scum Dog and Muscles were in the middle of padding up.

Brooksy waved a fifty in His Lordship's general direction.

"That's for the boys to have a few beers once the innings starts. Having one, Herston?"

I indicated my plans hadn't included that particular scenario, but since we weren't going back until a quarter past...

"Good. One for him and one for me out of this," as he wielded a ten. "Put the change with the fifty. The boys'll be thirsty. This way," was the final direction as a nod of the head indicated a movement that would take us to the other side of three batsmen getting a thorough warm up.

"Is that six or seven-nil?" as we made our way behind the three batsmen.

"The toss, that was one. Bat twelve, two. Zero, three. Four overs from Zero makes four, couple of wickets to him is five, the timed out would've been six if it'd come off, but keeping him on strike for two overs is six, delayed start makes seven. Yeah, seven nil."

"You seem," I remarked, "to be taking this rather seriously."

"*Knoath*," Brooksy replied. "You remember a couple of years back I played that season in Townsville?"

Given a location half way between Townsville and Mackay, Denison sporting bodies were aligned with one or the other, though there was no consistent pattern. Cricket usually went the Mackay way, though as far as the Development Officers were concerned we were on Townsville's patch.

Until three years ago, Brooksy had regularly held down the 'keeper's spot in the Mackay rep. side and had progressed as far as Queensland Country after one of the rare occasions when North Queensland had absolutely hammered the South.

Three years before, the Mackay selectors informed Brooksy they were keen to bring a young bloke along and the job for the forthcoming season wouldn't be his.

In Townsville, the incumbent had retired, and there was no obvious light on the horizon, so Brooksy decided to try his luck there.

While the Mackay selectors had done the right thing by Brooksy, giving him the chance to look elsewhere, when he went looking he found that most clubs in the Townsville competition *already had a wicket-keeper, thank you very much*, and weren't interested in trading their incumbent in, even when the replacement on offer had reached Queensland Country level.

One club had a vacancy, but this would only last until their preferred option, a young bloke widely being for stardom had finished Year Twelve exams *et cetera*, but that was fine with Brooksy.

If he could do well enough with the bat in pre-Christmas fixtures he could probably hold down a spot as a specialist bat when the kid came back, and there was always the chance that he might keep the gloveman's spot as well.

So, for four months Brooksy, his missus and two kids packed up on Fridays, headed north and stayed with Mick's cousin, who was a handy Reserve Grade player, on Friday and Saturday night. If there was nothing on the fixture front they'd head back Sunday morning, but with two kids in tow Brooksy wasn't able to do much socialising after stumps on Saturday.

His cousin, Ben Blotto Fuller, however, could, and spent much of his social life with a smattering of players who were followers of the night club circuit.

His relationship to Brooksy wasn't something he went around advertising, at first because it wasn't anybody's business. If Mick was going to get the 'keeper's spot he was looking for, there was nothing Blotto could do to assist.

Given his own well-known ability to take a drink (*Ben Fuller? If he'd ben any fuller, the bastard would've ben blotto* was a frequent assessment) the relationship might work against him.

That was only the start of it. According to the scuttlebutt, young Matthew Stokes was being duded by this ring-in who was past his best anyway. That was how the story went.

Brooksy had, he explained, copped his share of the sledge on the paddock, and there were barbed snipes from the opposition when it came time for a cool drink after stumps so he ended up having Heather and the kids turn up on the dot of six, and that was that.

He didn't get the 'keeper's spot either.

Most of this was already familiar territory as far as I was concerned, but there were a few aspects I hadn't heard before, such as the fact young Stokesy's parents had initially refused to allow him to play cricket at all until the exams were out of the way, but had been persuaded to relent to the point where he could play Third Grade on Sunday afternoons under fairly specific conditions.

"So," Brooksy went on as I noted Balls and Nuts making their way around the back of the warm-up activities, "every time I went out to bat there was shit going on behind me. You can imagine the sort of stuff. *Good young kid pushed back into Third Grade by this wanker*, that sort of shit, that went on as I was facing up, and there's nothing I could do about it. When Ben got home on Sunday morning after a night on the piss, and a spot of rooting, couldn't take the girl home because we were there, we'd hear the shit that was going around."

"Herston," Balls began as he got within conversational distance, "what do you reckon we go back out? Been a good ten minutes and."

"No way,, We agreed quarter past, so quarter past it is. Herston'll need to finish his beer for a start. It's his shout. Not that I'd insist, but."

"When you saw us," Nuts chipped in, "you said that putting the start back to quarter past would give your blokes the chance to have a beer before they padded up..."

"Yeah, they had the chance. Didn't choose to use it, but they had the chance. Nothing to stop you blokes having one, but. See you at quarter past, I'm doing the first stint at square leg."

With that, he turned his back to resume our conversation, leaving Balls and Nuts with little alternative but to make their way back to their team mates, who were less than impressed by the delaying tactics.

"Eight-nil," Brooksy remarked. "It could well be into double figures by the time we draw stumps."

"Taking it a bit far, aren't you?" I suggested.

"No way. That pair don't have very long memories. Two of the most vindictive sledgers out of that little episode right there. Takes a while, sometimes, but what goes around comes around."

The interruption had broken Brooksy's recount, and once he'd finished the story he wandered off to supervise the end of the warm up.

As I glanced at my mobile, I noted the time had crawled towards ten past.

The Dipsos were looking eager to get back on the paddock, I guessed Brooksy's supervision of the warm up was as much directed towards ensuring the batsmen didn't go out for at least five minutes as it was about the actual preparation for the resumption.

Psycho and Angry had begun their preparation to take the new ball when they'd discarded the batting paraphernalia, evidently expecting the regulation ten minute change of innings, so the extra delay probably took Brooksy's score to nine-nil..

In any case, once I'd moseyed past the beer truck, glanced at the score book to check the batting order, retrieved the new ball from the store room, and made my way to the boundary it'd probably be close to time for the resumption.

As I made my way back, I considered the avenues for further niggle.

As square leg umpire, there wasn't a lot he could do. His duties were limited to clicking over the ball counter and adjudicating on the odd run out.

With Angry and Psycho opening the bowling there didn't seem much chance of a stumping in the first ten overs.

The score book revealed Big Al and Scum Doggie were opening the batting and Angry rather than Psycho was going to be operating with the wind from the southern end. Muscles was padded up if a night watchman was needed, and the

written sheet beside the book had Brooksy at number five after Sunset and Spider, so there was every possibility that he'd be out there for the full ten.

I glanced at the mobile when I reached the boundary, noted it was fourteen past and started making my way towards the middle. If I hadn't been intent on getting this stint out of the way as soon as possible I might've changed my mind about things when a voice behind me remarked it was *about fucking time*.

I was sure Brooksy would be ensuring that the resumption of play was delayed as much as possible.

I reached the middle, collected Angry's cap and settled in as Angry paced out his run up and the openers crossed the boundary line. There was no sign of Brooksy as Nuts went about setting the umbrella field. Scum Dog had marked his guard when Brooksy appeared on the boundary, walking briskly into position.

I noted that we were on four-seventeen as he arrived, explaining he'd been caught short requiring a quick detour via the urinal.

"Could've sent some other prick out," was Pretty Boy's take on the situation.

"They're all on the piss after a hard day out on the paddock. Couldn't have got any of the bastards out here without a couple of tons of gunpowder and the odd team of wild horses."

"In any case, we're here now," I cut in, "and the sooner we get started the sooner we can finish and then we can get on the piss. Play."

Angry's first over was, all things considered, uneventful.

Most of it pitched in his half rather than Scum Doggie's and the two that didn't produced stylish forward defensive strokes.

He may have been a Scum Dog, but his batting had the same raffish elegance he let loose among the female fraternity.

I wasn't, however, quite as impressed by the method he'd used to handle the short-pitched stuff, swaying back and watching the ball fly past his throat.

After the third such evasion, I expressed my technical disapproval.

“At least he can do it," Big Al commented. "More than I can do. Hit it or be hit for me."

True enough.

Scum Dog was towards the greyhound end of the scale of canine physiognomy, whereas Big Al was right on the bull mastiff/Staffordshire extremity. I knew from previous experience short stuff directed towards Mr Huxley wouldn't be resulting in much ducking and weaving.

Brooksy took his time wandering across to square leg, something that didn't do much to lighten Psycho's mood since he'd paced out his run up and planted the bowling marker before he'd set off for fine leg before the previous over.

A glance around the field, with no one in front of the wicket on the off side, a forward square leg and a widish mid-on on the leg, suggested an off stump line with outswinging intentions as Psycho steamed in, unimpressed by operating into the wind and less than happy about being forced to wait.

The first ball could have been pitched shorter, but if it had been there was a fair likelihood he'd have been sporting a bruised big toe. As it was, the missile flew straight towards Big Al's head. Since ducking and weaving weren't part of the equation, the bat came round, there was an almighty whack, and the ball sailed away in front of square leg and landing about ten metres on the other side of the boundary.

Square leg set off on a retrieval mission.

The extra delay associated with foxing the ball, the time it took Ankles to find his way back and his brother's instructions to pitch it up did nothing to sweeten Psycho's mood and the second followed the same trajectory. The result wasn't quite the same and rather than connecting with the middle of the bat a top edge, looping over gully and bouncing ten metres inside the boundary ran away to take the score into double figures.

Ball three was much the same, slightly better timed by Big Al. It disappeared over square leg, resulting in a line ball decision.

Given the impossibility of a television replay and lacking a disinterested witness, diplomacy suggested I signal a four.

"Pitch the bloody thing up, Psycho," was a predictable instruction.

I was more than a little surprised when he did. Mind you, it was fast, and just wide enough to allow Big Al to ignore it before Brooksy threw his two bob in.

"He threw that," was the comment from square leg. "If he does it again I'll have to call him."

"I fuckin' what?" wasn't an unexpected response.

Brooksy made his way towards me.

He obviously wanted a conference, so I headed in his direction and Nuts and Psycho invited themselves as well.

"You probably don't know this, Herston," Brooksy began, "but there was a bit of a shit fight at the NQ titles last year about this bloke. One of the Mackay blokes reckoned he chucked his effort ball. Got the Queensland Cricket bloke at the trials to video him, and it turns out he does."

"So how do you fuckin' know?" Psycho wanted to know.

"Reevesy and I go way back, and I've seen the footage and read the report. But it's not every ball, is it?"

Psycho, dumbfounded, nodded.

"No," Brooksy went on. "You're a side on bowler and just about everything you bowl works like this," He mimed the classic *look over the front shoulder side on* action.

"But," the explanation went on, "when you're really fired up, occasionally you put in a bit extra, your front shoulder drops and you chuck. Right? You did it just then, and if you do it again I'll have to call you. Sorry, Herston, but that's the way it is. He can tell you himself, but every grade umpire in Townsville has been given that message, and the bastard thought he could come down here to Hicksville and get away with it."

With that, he was headed back to square leg.

I raised an interrogatory eyebrow in Psycho's direction, and he nodded.

"He's right," was the admission, "won't happen again."

The pressure must've been getting to him. The next one, while short wasn't menacing, but was on the right length to be pulled forward of square for another boundary.

The final delivery, pitched up and moving off the seam brought a play and a miss, though it could also have brought a warning from yours truly that the bowler was going perilously close to overstepping.

Still, I thought, a spell away at fine leg to cool down, see what happens after that.

Angry's second was pitched up around off stump and forcing a stroke five times out of six. A two and a single off the last ball took Scum Dog to the business end for Psycho's second over.

Psycho wasn't a happy camper as he came back with one eye on Brooksy and the other on an unimpressed elder brother. He wasn't bowling total crap, but four out of six came through around chest high with a little sign saying *Hit me*.

A first ball single to Scum Dog turned the strike back to Big Al, and that's what he did. Increasing frustration was taking its toll, and the last ball went down after the front foot had landed well clear of the popping crease.

"Listen, mate," I said as I handed the bowler's cap back, "when you come on for the next over it might be an idea to move your bowling mark about this much." A hand gesture indicated the distance by which I reckoned he'd overstepped. The response was brief, explosive and limited to four letters.

Under those circumstances, I felt it might be time to have a quick word to the captain, who was fielding at first slip and would be passing through the vicinity in the immediate future.

"Got a sec, Nuts?" I asked. "Two things. One, right through that last over your brother's been right up on the crease. If I was a vindictive bastard there were at least two balls I could've called since his front foot landed around here."

I took a moment to demonstrate, shaking my head as I did since Brooksy looked like he was about to change course and add his two shillings' worth to the discussion.

"The last ball came from here, and if he oversteps like that again I'm going to have to call him. I've suggested that he move his mark back about *yea far*, but I don't know whether he's listening."

Nuts nodded. "That's one thing," he replied. "What was the other?"

"Just getting in before it happens, and hopefully it won't. We've had a couple of interruptions, and we started late, so I thought you'd better know about one of the local rules in the comp here just so you don't think we're making things up as we go."

"Such as?"

"If you keep one eye on the street lights over on the highway you may find they come on. If they do while we're out here you'll find Brooksy and the batsmen claiming it's too dark to continue. There's a light meter gadget over on Beacon Hill beside the harbour that comes on automatically at five every afternoon. Once the reading drops below a certain level the street lights come on automatically, and when they do the light meter turns itself off. The standard rule here is that when the lights come on you finish the over and that's that."

"So if we come off?"

"The obvious answer would be to add the extra overs onto the session after lunch tomorrow. Ten overs, drinks, ten overs, drinks, ten overs, lunch then whatever's left. Hopefully it won't get to that, but you can see why I mentioned it. If it's starting to get dark you might want to think about who you're going to bowl for the last two."

Nuts didn't seem to be totally convinced by all this, but at least I'd set things up so that he'd been forewarned should certain issues raise their ugly heads.

Angry's third over was uneventful. A single off the third turned the strike back to Big Al, who blocked the next and took a single off the fifth to return the favour.

While it seemed Psycho had taken my advice and moved the mark back, there was no change in length.

Three of the six deliveries found their way across the midwicket boundary after landing inside the field of play.

The first osaw third slip go out to deep midwicket. The last, lathered colossally, bounced just short of the line and brought grudging admiration from Balls.

"Need a compass and a cut lunch to fetch that bastard," he remarked as the slips field moved to the other end. "Might be easier to have 'im field in that tomato patch or whatever it is. Save a bit of time, anyway. Shit, I'm thirsty."

"Won't be necessary," Nuts remarked as they passed me *en route* to the opposite end. "You're on from that end next over."

"You gonna tell Psycho?" was a natural inquiry.

'He knows," Nuts replied. "Trust me, he knows. There's an issue with street lights, so Herston reckoned I'd need to be looking at who I bowl at the end. I'll take the second last one."

There was a further delay while the ball found its way to Angry, and after Big Al had been informed he was on forty-seven, the over was a quiet affair.

Scum Dog took a single off the second, Big Al did the same off the third, Scum Dog matched that off the fifth, and the final ball produced a dot.

Psycho got the message his presence at the crease was no longer required, and wandered into mid on as Balls made a few adjustments to the field and set about bowling innocuous off spinners. Scum Dog moved things up a notch with a two off the third, a single off the fourth, and when Big Al took a single off the last ball his score moved on to 49 with the prospect of a dip at the ninth over.

Nuts had specified that he'd come on for this one, and his military medium looked like cannon fodder to someone who should, by now, have been well set.

I'd seen him in action.

While he'd always been tidy there was the distinct possibility of substantial carnage if he pitched short, which he did first up, and the result was another lengthy foxing expedition.

He's a sly old dog, is Nuts.

With the striker on 53, the rest of the over was comfortably spread around without being so obvious that a wide call would become necessary.

About half way through I noticed the lights go on over on the roadway, and while Big Al managed a pair there was nothing that could get hammered and a couple of straightforward singles were declined to retain the strike.

"Lights are on over on the highway," Brooksy pointed out as I called *Over*. "That'd be stumps, then."

I can't be certain the intention was to fuel further controversy since the remark was delivered in a matter of fact tone, but if it was, Nuts failed to nibble.

"Fine with me. Thirsty. Herston? What'll that make it tomorrow? Ten, ten, ten, lunch, eleven?"

Give Them Curry

After I'd deposited an armful of stumps in the store room, the next step was to make a beeline for the beer line, which fortunately wasn't much of a line at all.

After a beer at lunch time and another at the change of innings I had a bit of catching up to do. The pursuit was aided by the fact His Lordship and Hopalong were both operating the beer booth.

“So,” I asked once I had something to hold on to, “how has it gone? Satisfied?”

His Lordship, having spent most of the day's play on the field, hadn't been able to monitor sales too closely, but the start of the Denison innings had given him the chance to do a stock take.

Hopalong looked across as he handed over a couple of cans to a couple of the Denison boys.

“You were right about one thing,” he observed. “Bastards can drink.”

On the back of the truck, His Lordship opened the esky and scrutinised the contents.

“Lucky I put those extra cartons in. There I was thinking fifteen would do it. Twenty-five to thirty at the ground and you wouldn't expect them to drink more than, say, a dozen cans. That'd be fifteen. So I threw in a couple of extras after what you said about people sticking to their own brand. Figured that twenty'd be plenty.”

“So what's left? Of course you'd have done well out of the spectators.”

The majority of Denison's cricket fraternity had rolled up to watch the game, most of them arriving around lunch time.

“Can't be more than three cartons. Hard to tell with the ice. Definitely less than four. Probably, what, sixty cans?”

“That,” Hopalong pointed out, “is after I had to ask the Duchess to bring out another ten midway through the afternoon. She wasn’t impressed, but she could see how things were going.”

Once thirsty players had been catered for, His Lordship stood on the back of the truck and addressed the masses.

“I’ve taken the liberty of setting up a section of the beer garden for dinner. We couldn’t do that on a Friday night when the boys wouldn’t be turning up till after the rush had started. Anyway when you get there tonight you’ll find plenty of room reserved for players from both sides. We’ve put on extra staff so there’ll be table service, so.”

“Good move,” I remarked as His Lordship jumped down from the tray. “Get them there, sit them down and see how much you can persuade them to spend. Got anything else up your sleeve?”

“Had a talk to Betty when you went back out after lunch. That’s when we came up with the table service. We’d already arranged for extra staff last night and tonight, so it’s just a matter of working out the best way to use the extra bodies.”

“True,” I observed. “It’s not as if you’re over-endowed with space behind the bar.”

“That’s what we figured. Get ‘em in, sit ‘em down and bring food and drink to them. That’s the theory, anyway. Mind you someone’ll probably stuff things up well and truly. Murphy’s Law and all that.”

“Your biggest problem’s going to be ordering food, though,” I suggested.

“That’s what Betty said. Fortunately Maddy’s in the process of saving up for something. Refuses to say what it is, but she’s making a big noise about doing it. Betty’s got her on the computer doing up a menu for tonight, not the whole box and dice, but the things we’ve got plenty of plus a couple of one-off specials. She likes doing that sort of thing, and she’ll come up with something that’ll look good. Betty’s had a glance at the wine stocks, and we’ll have a wine match for everything on that version of the menu.”

“So they come in, sit down, order a couple of beers while they take a gander at the menu, then change over to the wine that’s matched up to whatever they order. Nice move. You’d figure that’ll be a case of a bottle a head at the very least. Good thinking.”

“That’s the theory. Like I said something’s bound to go wrong. It always does.”

“Fate, in other words, will be lurking around the corner slipping the lead into the boxing glove.”

Further discussion of catering arrangements was precluded by the arrival of the Dipsomaniac’s bus. There had evidently been earlier discussion regarding the transfer of players and spectators between the day’s playing field and the evening’s equivalent.

“I’m ready for the first load if you’d like to attract their attention,” the driver suggested. As His Lordship clambered onto the back of the beer truck, I sighted Sandy on the horizon.

“Folks, if there are a few of you just about finished here and you’re looking for a ride into town, Tony’s ready to take the first load of passengers. Not that there’s any hurry. We’re not likely to run out of beer here for the next hour, but we’ll need to make two or three trips, so if some of you are ready to move, don’t forget we’ve got people back at the Palace waiting to look after you.”

My beer was just about finished as Sandy joined the circle.

“The bus is about to head into the Palace. Can you last ten minutes before you fall off the wagon?”

From Sandy’s response, having refrained over the preceding eighteen hours a ten minute delay would not be an insurmountable problem.

“Hopalong?” I turned towards the gentleman in question.

“I’ll be driving this back when things wind up here. I’ll be right,”

“In that case, it’s time for us to make like the flidgeons and flock off. After you, Mr McNab.”

The bus filled fairly with assorted Dipsomaniacs, the odd denizen of Denison and various hangers-on, and when we arrived at the Palace we found the staff ready to surge into action.

While one of them surged off in a beer-seeking direction, I turned to Sandy.

“So, given a quiet day with minimal disturbances you should have broken the back of the report card shit? Nearly wrapped up?”

“Completely wrapped up. As you’d remember from your past, that’s a cause for celebration.”

The area around us filled, to the point where Sandy pointed out a certain one-legged member of the scoffing fraternity would be requiring a seat and it might be an idea to ensure there was one waiting for him.

When Hopalong emerged from the garage there was a member of the staff hovering as I waved to indicate the available seating. Equally conveniently, I needed a refill and Sandy, having spent the day on the dry, was waiting.

“So how was your day as a bartender?” I asked as Hopalong pulled up a pew. “Did they keep you hopping, or what?”

“Or what? Holy shit those bastards can drink. And sledge. Right through the day. Constant abuse of everything that moved. The opposition, their own players, His Lordship, me, you, the traffic on the road. The lot. One bloke even had a go at a fly, believe it or not.”

I raised an eyebrow.

Not that I was doubting his word for a moment, but elucidation was required.

“Half way through their innings one of them was swatting this fly. Reckoned it was the same fly that was giving him a hard time at the Goldfield Ashes back in January. *How do you know it’s the same fly?* one bloke asked. *Course it’s the same fly*, this bloke answered. *It’s got the same Julia Creek number plates.*”

“Out of it all dild you have a particular favourite? I mean, out of the constant torrent of abuse on display through the day was there anything that particularly stood out?”

Hopalong turned to Sandy.

“You’ll love this one. Right back at the start of the game. This bloke from Townsville was batting. Batting like a hairy goat, at least that’s what one of the other blokes reckoned when he came across to buy a beer. Wouldn’t know myself because I’ve never seen a hairy goat bat, but there you go. Anyway a couple of minutes later this bloke calls out *Hit ‘im in the nuts!* One of his own team, coming out with something like that.”

“In case Mr Cassidy’s not been filled in on the finer details of the matter, the batsman in question’s name is Peter Nuttall. That’s him over there. Big bloke who can hit the ball a mile when he puts his mind to it. You wouldn’t be too surprised to learn his nickname’s Nuts, so there’s a bit of by-play involved there.”

Sandy nodded, and I went on.

“Anyway the bloke who called out, as Hopalong may or not know is his brother, who’s about ten years younger.”

“Someone told me,” Hopalong added, “since his brother’s Nuts he’s Psycho.”

“Exactly. If you ask around, you’ll find that the general opinion is the nickname is well deserved. Anyway, according to Balls.”

“You like that?” Hopalong cut in. “Nuts and Balls opening the batting.”

The remark was followed by a shake of the head, intimating Hopalong had now heard it all.

“According to Balls, when he’s not batting well they want him to get hit there. Fires him up, they reckon.”

I was about to elucidate when I sighted Gordon Walter Jeffrey appear on the horizon. I noted that he was coming from the street rather than the interior of the pub.

“Greetings and salutations. Hope I’m not interrupting anything important, but I need to speak to Herston for a minute. Confidentially.”

He nodded towards the table we'd used to plan our strategy in the wake of the Big Collect a few months earlier. It sat, unoccupied, in a discreet corner of the beer garden.

"I was on my way down to see you on Thursday arvo. To be more accurate, I was *thinking* of heading down to make you aware of some interesting developments when your girl turned up, and it became academic. I reckoned you'd be occupied for the night, so I got Bright Eyes to drop me at the Palace, figuring I could catch up with you Friday once I knew how the ground lay."

"Regarding?" There were, I thought, issues that needed elucidation.

"The incoming phone call I'd fielded five minutes before the girl turned up."

"From?"

"Larry out at the roadhouse, where her mother worked. The long and short of it was the mother pulled the pin on the job at the roadhouse that morning."

"Really?" I remarked. "News to me."

"News to me too. When Larry inquired about the logic behind this apparent disregard of the need to pull in a crust he was told she wouldn't need to work any longer. She was getting married to someone with enough money to keep her in the manner she's become accustomed to."

"Namely yourself," I guessed.

"Larry'd picked up the odd reference over a couple of days and thought I was the likely suspect. Then again, he knows me from the bowls club, and knows how I feel about the institution of marriage."

"Which, in the words of Groucho Marx, *may be a fine institution, but who wants to be confined to an institution,*" I remarked.

"Exactly. The bridal path down the aisle inevitably leads to a bridle path for the unsuspecting bridegroom. Anyway I told Larry it was the first I'd heard of it, and I was about to head down to put you in the picture when the girl showed up.

I needed to check on a few things, which is why I got Bright Eyes to drop me off here.”

“On arrival?” I asked.

“I found the Duchess ensconced in our spot at the bar. Not the most welcome sight, since I was expecting some flack from the previous night and I wasn’t keen to be on the receiving end, but since I was supposed to meet up with the Twins, I thought it was going to be a case of cop the serve and get it over with.”

“And?”

“The serve, surprisingly, failed to arrive. She was unusually cordial, so I let sleeping dogs lie until the Twins turned up, when I expected that they’d be wide awake.”

“Predictable,” I agreed.

“Except for one minor detail. The Twins failed to arrive. By the time The Duchess took herself into the kitchen arrivals were, except for a certain individual with ambitions towards a walk down the aisle, sort of thin on the ground. That's the way it stayed till close to closing time, when somebody suggested that it might be time to adjourn upstairs.”

“Which you, of course, did,” I suggested.

“Well, it’s not like I had a great deal of choice at the time. After all, there were no other options on the horizon.”

“References to impending marriages?” I asked.

“Completely absent. And that's the way it stayed while we got down to it. It was afterwards that the matter was raised. I’d mentioned that The Duchess had been unusually cordial earlier in the evening, which was when she came out with it.”

“The *it* being?”

“The fact that she’d dropped in to see The Duchess in the afternoon, just after she’d run into The Twins outside the newspaper office and had given all parties the good news.”

“Which explained the Twins’ absence in the evening.”

“Spot on. I was forced to drop by their place in the morning to set things straight, but I’m getting ahead of myself. Olga thought a double wedding would be extremely romantic, and Bernelle thought it was as well.”

The news tied in with remarks on the road between Denison and Airlie Beach.

“Anyway there was no way I was going to commit myself to anything, as you’d understand, and when I was interested in seconds.”

“You got the cold shoulder,” I suggested.

We were looking at a variation on my experience.

“Exactly. Anyway I gave myself a couple of hours’ sleep, in any case, and around sparrow fart while she was asleep I snuck off for breakfast at the bakery and went round to set the Twins straight. They weren’t exactly impressed about it.”

“Hardly likely, under the circumstances. So that line of things is still fine?”

“For the moment, though I don’t think it’s likely to last much longer. I have a suspicion they’re eyeing off some bloke down at the Yacht Club. You can picture the sort of thing I guess. Middle-aged bloke with a yacht who needs a couple of deck-hands. I have a suspicion they’re not getting on too well with Clark Kent, so there’s every chance they could chuck in the jobs at the *Sausage Wrapper* and run away to sea.”

“Where there are plenty more fish. And the newly unemployed? Where did things progress after you’d been to see the Twins on Friday morning? You weren’t in evidence when I got back from Airlie.”

“Needed some time to nut out a few things, and I knew if I went back to base she’d sniff me out. For instances like that, there’s the bowls club. Get a strategic

point at the bar and you can keep an eye on all approaches and nick off around the back if you need to. Blokes do it all the time.”

“So that’s been your base for the past couple of days,” I guessed.

“Correct. I’ve been able to send out scouts to sniff around the place, so I know the lie of the land. For instance, an hour ago I got Paddy, you know who I mean, Irish bloke who lives around the corner, drops in here for a beer from time to time for a quick one on the way home from bowls. While he was here, he took a quick shufti around and established that Olga’s inside.”

“Which explains the change of entry point,” I suggested.

“Bang on. After this, I’ll piss off, and she’ll be none the wiser. You haven’t seen me, by the way.”

“You were with her last night?”

Unless I’d been mistaken, things had appeared to be operating as normal the previous evening.

“Until it was time to head upstairs I was,” Jeffrey agreed. “That’s where the arrangements I’d made in the morning when I called in to see the Twins kicked in. They hadn’t been over-impressed when Olga pulled them up outside the office and started telling them about weddings, so when I explained I needed somewhere to hide they agreed to put me up last night, but only for one night.”

“So you came in here last night, carried on as normal...”

“When it was time to head upstairs I slipped her the key. I’d already suggested when the time came she’d best head upstairs to get herself ready because it might get tongues wagging if we were seen heading upstairs together. The Twins left about ten minutes earlier, and I’d hardly spoken to them all night, so I was sure she’d swallow the bait.”

“So she pissed off upstairs, and you pissed off through the side door. Spent the night with the Twins, then hid out at the bowls club till just now. Tonight?”

“What you don’t know can’t get you into trouble. The fuss’ll blow over in a few days, and then we can get things back to normal. Give you a bell in the morning

before the cricket starts, and you can let me know what happened tonight. If I were you. I'd head inside now. If anyone asks you haven't seen me since last night. Now I'm off."

"As the gorgonzola said to the Danish blue."

Wandering back, I found Hopalong and Sandy in earnest discussion over the dinner options on Maddy's menu. Indicating that my preference ran to Death By Garlic and a bottle of Wirra Wirra I plonked down two twenties and headed in to scope out the scene as directed.

There were matters of interest that needed investigating.

I expected to find Dagwood and Blondie on the premises, and as I passed through the doorway that links the Dining Room to the Lounge, there they were. Over at the bar I spotted Bernelle, her mother and Gloria.

Bernelle waved as I stopped to confer with Dagwood and Blondie.

"So how'd we go?" I asked as I squatted beside the table. Unoccupied seating was noticeably absent. "Just by the look of things over at the bar, someone looks fairly happy."

"So she should be," Blondie volunteered. "We were on the phone to Roger first thing in the morning. Had to call him at home, but he was expecting that. When we told him we had someone who could guarantee all Bernelle's expenses he couldn't believe it. At first. When I explained the sponsor was Bernelle's boyfriend, and he's won the Lotto recently so he could definitely afford it, he realised that we weren't kidding."

"Since the only issue, as we told you last night was whether we could cover the costs," Dagwood added, "that sealed it. He was on the phone to Bernelle within the next half hour, so by the time you were kicking off at the cricket this morning Bernelle was kicking up her heels."

"It was so exciting," Blondie went on. "After the call she burst through the door, screaming. When we'd calmed her down and explained how you'd helped by guaranteeing her travel costs."

“So,” I asked. “When does she head off? Tomorrow afternoon? Monday?”

“Actually,” Blondie pointed out, “if Roger had anything to do with it he’d have her down there already. He’s really confident she’ll take it out. We persuaded him since you were tied up with the cricket all weekend it’d be best to wait till Monday so you can have some time together before she leaves.”

It was a nice thought, but I suspected by the close of play on the morrow the only thing I’d be capable of doing would be pushing up Zs.

I also suspected this Roger dude had ambitions regarding regular rogering of a certain party. If that was the way it panned out, a brief spate of regular rogering would probably be followed by a march down the aisle, two-point-something kids, a house on acreage out Kenmore way and a root on his birthday if he was lucky. At least that was how it looked based on my experience.

“So, the itinerary from here on? She flies out Monday afternoon, when does she head to Sydney?”

“She’s got three days in Brisbane, working with top hairdressers and modelling agencies and flies to Sydney on Friday. There’s a big do on Friday night and then the final judging happens Saturday, with the winner announced on national TV Saturday night,” was Dagwood’s summary of the itinerary. “Anyway, you’d better get over there to congratulate her instead of talking to us.”

That was the plan in any case as there was other information that needed to be gleaned so, thanking them for their efforts I left Dagwood and Blondie and headed towards the party at the bar.

“I hear congratulations are in order. Yes, thanks Magpie,” was my opening salvo, the latter in response to a well-known bar attendant’s inquiry about liquid requirement. “And whatever the ladies are having, of course.”

Once liquid replenishment had been declined, the response was as expected, Bernelle having maintained a state of high excitement since a phone call around nine-thirty.

“Under other circumstances I’d be suggesting we crack out the bubbly, but since I’m...”

“Tied up with the cricket, Gloria and I are off to the movies. We're about to go, so it’s lucky you came in. I was wondering whether to go looking for you, but we’re running late. Bye, Mum. I’ll call in to see you tomorrow afternoon when the cricket’s finished,” was Bernelle’s parting remark, leaving me with her mother.

“So,” I began, “that worked out well. You must be very proud of her. From what I hear there’s a good chance she’ll take out the national thing and be jetting off to London for a year. Chance of a lifetime.”

“It might be, and I’m very glad for her. It means that things I’d been hoping would come about aren’t going to happen.”

Further details regarding the matters under notice were not forthcoming.

“Whatever happens,” I observed, “happens for the best. That’s the way I look at it anyway.”

“Indeed. When you see Mr Gordon Jeffrey, you might let him know that I'm not very happy with the way I've been treated. I’d like to give him a piece of my mind myself, but he’s hiding somewhere. Still, never mind, I’ve found out where those two hussies live, and I’ll be calling on them tomorrow morning if I don’t see them here tonight. They're probably hiding as well.”

Given earlier conversations I suspected the Twins were establishing a strong link to a member of the yachting fraternity, and would be ensconced at the Yacht Club, but pointing this sort of thing out would hardly have been diplomatic. Of course, should an irate Slav-descendant appear on their doorstep there was every chance the result would be an increased willingness to provide assistance to Jeffrey, if further assistance was required.

“In any case,” I cut in, “there should be Death By Garlic and a bottle of Wirra Wirra landing on a table outside, so I’d better head out that way. If I see Jeffrey.”

“You can tell him it’s over,” Olga instructed. “Of course, when I see him I’ll have more to say on the matter. I had hoped things had changed, but it seems.”

“The leopard can’t change its spots,” I observed. “Nor the zebra its stripes.”

With that, I was gone, heaving a mighty sigh of relief on several fronts.

There had been no word regarding Waddles or Wally, and I thought it was safe to assume no news was good news.

Bernelle was on her way out of town, and Olga had accepted the state of play. She mightn’t be exactly overjoyed, but that, like all things, would pass.

I arrived back at the table to find a bottle of wine waiting. There was no sign of the meal it was going to accompany, but that would no doubt be forthcoming.

“Lucky you ordered the wine,” Sandy pointed out. “It made explaining that your chair was taken quite a bit easier.”

As I looked around the gathering, I noted that there were no more than two or three unoccupied chairs. Table service and lack of incentive to move towards the bar resulted in a sedentary gathering. I imagined questions regarding unoccupied seating would have been frequent.

“So,” I inquired as I helped myself to a glass of red, “what’d you pair end up deciding on for dinner? Not the Death By Garlic?”

Sandy’s liking for highly flavoured dishes would have made the menu item in question a prime suspect.

“I looked at it,” Sandy explained, “but then I spotted the special was a prawn vindaloo. I asked the girl how it was, she said it was *very hot*, and that was that. End of issue. Of course, her idea of *very hot* might be different to mine.”

“So he asked her to bring a bottle of Tabasco *just in case*,” Hopalong interjected. “I pointed out to the girl he obviously didn’t think it’d be hot enough.”

“Scoffing bastard. But you always need the condiments. Very important, the condiments.”

“The zebra cannot change its spots. Nor the leopard its stripes. Once a scoffing mongrel, always a scoffing mongrel.”

The arrival of three platters and a bottle of Tabasco sauce removed the need for further elaboration. A quick sniff was enough to determine Death By Garlic was as advertised, but I was unlikely to be kissing anybody in the near future and it would ensure vampires were kept well and truly at bay.

A quick taste was enough to allow Sandy to determine that his Vindaloo could have been hotter. He added a liberal helping of chilli sauce to remedy perceived shortcomings.

Should that seem excessive, I only need to point out back in the days when we were sharing teacher accommodation a standard sized bottle of Tabasco would scarcely last a week.

He would, more than likely have added the fiery flavour enhancer to his corn flakes if he'd been partial to that form of breakfast cereal.

Hopalong, familiar with Sandy's chilli fixation, was hardly likely to repeat the procedure to the same extent, having labelled Mr McNab's chilli-enhanced dishes as *ring-burners* but, given the quantity of additive Sandy had deemed necessary, felt it was advisable to add a drop or two to the plate in front of him.

As he did so, I noticed D'Artagnan emerge from the alley connecting the kitchen to the storerooms behind the main section of the premises. He scanned the crowd in the beer garden, obviously looking for something.

I turned my attention to Death By Garlic as Hopalong tried his first taste of the Vindaloo. D'Artagnan, having failed to locate whoever he was seeking, moved towards the waitress who had delivered our meals. A portion of prawn propelled itself from a certain scoffer's mouth, followed by a *Holy shit!*

The waitress pointed in our direction.

As noted The Duchess had been forced to enlist extra staff for the evening, and the girl in question was, presumably, a backpacker recruited from diagonally across the Palace intersection. That was the usual source of casual bar and wait staff.

D'Artagnan moved towards us, gathering pace as he went.

“Excuse me,” he began, “I am very sorry. There has been a terrible mistake.”

I looked at my plate. If there was a mistake, I doubted that it related to Death By Garlic. Sandy, unconcerned, took another mouthful of Vindaloo and rice.

Hopalong waved his hand in front of his face in an attempt to deal with heat-related issues. D’Artagnan grabbed the platter.

“It was the girl. When she told me there was some bastard who thought the Vindaloo would not be hot enough she said it was somebody from the cricket crowd. I thought she meant some bastard from Townsville. *Right, you arsehole!* I thought. *I give you hot enough!*”

D’Artagnan, like all members of his profession, became prickly when he felt his culinary abilities were being maligned.

Saturday nights were busy.

An extra fifty diners would place additional pressure on the kitchen staff.

The Duchess’ decision to add a special to the extensive menu and insistence that it should be a curry was guaranteed to get right up D’Artagnan’s nose.

A report regarding the adequacy of the Vindaloo heat level sparked a snap.

The Duchess took considerable pride in her collection of chilli sauces. Pride of place went to a bottle labelled *Pleasure and Pain* and a substantial portion had been added to the platter in question.

An offer to replace the offending platter with a nice steak was accepted by the offended party.

D’Artagnan moved to remove the plate.

“Hang on a minute,” Sandy cut in, his fork darting towards the plate.

D’Artagnan looked concerned as the dish was sampled.

“Not bad,” was Sandy’s initial reaction, followed about fifteen seconds later by “Very nice, in fact. Sort of lingering after-burn. You can leave that one here. I’ll look after it. You can take this one back instead. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, you understand. It’s just that the extra heat here is very nice.”

D'Artagnan retreated, plate in hand, shaking his head ruefully.

The incident was, I learned later in the evening, the culmination of a series of crises in the kitchen sparked by the addition of fifty random orders to the regular Saturday night chamozzle.

From the start, D'Artagnan had been unimpressed by His Lordship's lack of foresight and forward planning.

Had D'Artagnan been in charge, he would have done something like a pig on a spit that could be prepared in advance.

The equipment was on the premises and looking after it could be assigned to those responsible for the Sunday roast.

I couldn't help but agree.

The option would also have appealed to the Dipsomaniacs, who would have seen a substantial roast as perfectly acceptable blotting paper.

His Lordship, on the other hand, was interested in the revenue that could be created by persuading the visitors to order meals from the regular menu and wash them down with an appropriate wine rather than several gallons of beer.

As far as the Duchess was concerned, while extra revenue was useful, increased business was likely to interfere with her need to mix and mingle with the public. Saturday nights tended to be more relaxed affairs than Fridays since people were able to arrive and order earlier than on a working day, so while both nights delivered the same number of meals, on Friday these were produced in a burst from seven till nine, Saturdays saw them spread out between six and ten.

As a result, people in a hurry to eat on Saturday tend to arrive and order early. Those less concerned by a delay tend to have a late lunch and approach matters in a more leisurely manner.

The additional business, in other words, presented a significant move away from the regular flow of things, exacerbated by the need to move some of the kitchen staff to the cricket ground to cater for lunches.

On the other hand, with The Duchess out overseeing lunch at the ground, D'Artagnan enjoyed a relatively stress-free lunchtime. He had not been a happy camper when he arrived at work in the evening and found her back *in situ*.

The sniping had started early and continued through to the time the offending platter had left the kitchen with D'Artagnan following fairly closely in its wake.

His return to the kitchen was duly noted, as was the insertion of a replacement meal at the top of a hefty pile of orders awaiting attention.

“Where the fuck have you been and what the fuck do you think you’re doing?” was hardly the most diplomatic way of beginning the next exchange.

Once the explanation had been given, *so you tried to poison some poor bastard and kill him by wasting a good serve of my very best chilli sauce!* was hardly likely to defuse the situation.

Finally, when the identity of *some poor bastard* was revealed the explosion rated about a seven on the open-ended Richter scale. It left few of the inhabitants of the Lounge and the Dining Room unaware there had been a significant falling out amongst the kitchen staff.

In the beer garden, we were blissfully unaware of these developments, but His Lordship was in transit through the Dining Room when the eruption occurred. His appearance in the kitchen gesticulating and pleading *Betty! Betty! Don't swear! There are people out there from Airlie Beach!* produced an even greater upheaval as The Duchess burst into the Dining Room.

It was at this point that the denizens of the beer garden became aware of the ruckus as a voice boomed over the top of the usual pub hubbub. *Airlie Beach? Who's from Airlie Beach? Don't you bastards say fuck in Airlie Beach?*

With all hell breaking loose, His Lordship's attempt to defuse the situation was to suggest D'Artagnan absent himself from his post for the rest of the night.

He would, of course, be paid up to his usual knockoff time.

While this alleviated the atmosphere in the kitchen, an extremely pissed-off Frenchman, rather than removing himself from the premises launched himself on

a bender which was progressing well when I suggested to my companions that, with the meals out of the way and the bottle of red down to a final glass, indoors seemed to be the place to be.

Our adjournment to the Lounge coincided with the return of the Crustaceans. It also brought sight of Olga in intimate conversation with Mr Ballmer.

Unfortunately for all concerned, the Crustaceans had been on the receiving end of a substantial thumping on the rugby field. In itself, the result was bad enough but, as those in the know were aware a loss was usually followed by riotous consequences.

A victory usually resulted in the team sitting down in a subdued manner trying to figure out what had caused this rare and unexpected development.

The match had been a bruising encounter, so the team bus had been delayed and the rest of the team forced to wait for two hours while players had their wounds patched up at Casualty.

The players were well and truly into post-loss celebration mode before they boarded the bus for the three hour piss-stop interrupted journey back to Denison.

Walking into the Lounge I saw Balls in conversation with Olga, D'Artagnan in drinking mode and Crustaceans' captain Mad Mick, crawling through the front door on all fours, having enjoyed an extremely fluid trip.

The time and effort required to stand meant he was rolling onto his back trying to peer up dresses when his girlfriend arrived to take command of the situation.

His Lordship and one of the few Crustaceans still capable of holding a vertical position without the aid of external objects hauled Mick to his feet and decanted him into the vehicle waiting outside. Mick's girlfriend, the Lovely Susan, was supervising when a voice from the other side of the room boomed out. The source was none other than our old friend Mr Nuttall.

“Surely you're not going home with that?” was the query.

“I am,” she responded as she turned to face the world at large in sheer and strangely demure defiance. “Not only that, when we get home I’ll be making love to it.”

By this time, with the party starting to hit its straps, I’d wedged myself into a spot at the bar beside D’Artagnan and had been filled in on the finer points of the Chilli affair.

In the stunned silence that followed that last statement, I ventured the opinion that the area was dangerously quiet. *Since that’s the case*, I suggested to D’Artagnan and the rest of the crew in the corner, *I might just slip over to the juke box and remedy the situation.*

For some reason, the company that supplied the juke box and I do not agree on the subject of music. Given the machine’s proximity to the kitchen, The Duchess maintained a degree of supervision over the contents, and had whatever material she disliked removed from the playlist.

Unfortunately, everything that was removed from the machine was replaced by something drawn from the dreck that tends to dominate commercial radio.

That wouldn’t have been so bad when they threw some Steely Dan and Bruce Springsteen into the mix, but the disks in question were removed quickly after a casual remark about a band named after a dildo from a William Burroughs novel and the discovery that The Duchess had a strong aversion to *Born In The USA*.

As a result, the only thing on the machine I play is a selection of George Thorogood’s greatest hits. As I turned towards the juke, D’Artagnan, aware of the likely consequences spoke up.

Apart from definite opinions on culinary matters he had equally strong views on music, a strong preference for the gypsy jazz of Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grapelli, and an aversion to loud electric blues guitar.

“Herston, please, I beg you,” D’Artagnan slurred, “it has been a ferry trying day. Please, no George.”

Since the presence of George on the evening's soundtrack was likely to cause distress, and given my status as a caring and sympathetic human being,

I relented. As I did so, I noted that Nuts moving towards the juke box.

I knew Nuts was a fan of The Doors.

Previous experience suggested when Nuts took control of the music the Doors generally followed. I also knew that the juke box was a totally Doors-free zone, and I wondered what selection Nuts would make.

As the opening bars of *Bad to the Bone* broke out across the side bar. I turned to D'Artagnan, raised the bent finger of scorn and remarked, *George by remote control!*

His mission accomplished, Nuts moved away from the juke box, heading for Balls and Olga at the other end of the bar.

The furniture arrangements in the Lounge were such that his route took him past where I was standing.

"Nuts!" I called. "A moment of your valuable time, if you don't mind."

"Yeah," was the response as he turned in my direction.

"I didn't know you were a George Thorogood fan. I thought it was a case of The Doors or nothing."

"Usually it is. But if there's no Jimmy Morrison what can you do? You've got to go with someone who'd do a fair job of *Roadhouse Blues*, haven't you?"

He paused for a moment.

"I mean he'd probably do a good version," he went on, raising the stubby in his hand to a position where it could serve as a microphone. "*Well, I woke up this mornin' and I got myself a bee-ah!*" he roared in a voice that sat remarkably in between Jim and George.

The performance was too much for D'Artagnan, who rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Gentlemen! Farewell. I am unable to withstand this noise any further!"

“Who the fuck was that?” Nuts asked.

It was a question that needed to be answered with a question.

“What did you have for dinner this evening?” I inquired. “It wouldn’t, by any chance, have been the prawn vindaloo?”

“Well,” Nuts conceded, “I did look at it. I ended up with Death By Garlic.”

“A wise move, given the fact that if you’d gone for the Vindaloo after you’d played George Thorogood he might have done the same thing to you as he did to this poor bastard.” I pointed to Hopalong.

“Which was?” was Nuts’ unsurprising response.

“Empty half a bottle of *Pleasure and Pain* chilli sauce into his dinner. Heard about temperamental French chefs? He’s one of them. *Been there, done that, wrote the rule book, got the T-shirt and waiting to star in the movie.*”

Nuts moved off towards his opening partner.

I addressed the other residents of The Crossroads.

“Nine-twenty. What do you reckon? Time to head off? Or one more and then it’s time to head off?”

With Bright Eyes away on child-bridegrooming exercises we would be relying on the taxi service to deliver us home. There was likely to be a rush around ten, so it was a case of leave now, or soon, or expect to be arriving home some time closer to eleven.

“I’ll call the cab,” Sandy volunteered. “There’ll be time for another beer if you grab one now.”

As Sandy moved into the phone booth I negotiated a resupply with Magpie. Olga left her chair and headed towards me, producing a key and dangling in front of my nose.

“If you see Mr Gordon Walter Jeffrey, you can thank him for his generosity.”

Behind her I could see Balls stand and move towards us.

“I will,” I replied, though I suspected that the message was going to cause any distress whatsoever.

“Ready?” Balls asked.

As the pair of them disappeared towards the stairs that lead to the rooms on the upper floor the movement attracted the notice of Michael Brooks, conveniently seated with a couple of other members of the Denison side.

“Well cut me off at the knees and call me Shorty” he remarked. “Bet he’s got a big middle stump!”

Sandy appeared at my elbow.

“Major turn up for the books. Taxi bloke said he’d be straight down. Bottoms up.”

Ten minutes later I was paying the fare, expressing the opinion that I’d had enough and forty overs at the bowler’s end tomorrow meant I’d be retiring for the night without further ado.

Cricket Day Two

When I surfaced I could have rattled off a good half-dozen activities that would be preferable to standing around a cricket field, but although nobody asked I was still considering things I would rather be doing as I passed through the rain room and towelled myself dry.

A substantial breakfast similar to the previous day's had just been demolished when the phone rang. *Moderation. Herston speaking* was my response although I was reasonably sure of the caller's identity.

"Herston," a familiar voice replied. "What's going on? More to the point what went on last night?"

"At the moment nothing's going on. Nothing's coming off either. I suspect if one was a fly on the wall you'd have witnessed a few things coming off in a room upstairs at the Palace. Things may even be going on there as I speak."

"Meaning?"

"Just before we left I was asked to thank you for your generosity leaving the key to that room with a certain party. Shortly afterwards she was sighted making her departure with Barry Ballmer, noted Dipsomaniac and former employee of her ex-husband. Your problems in that area may well have been resolved."

The news was greeted with a degree of relief.

"All the same, I'd keep a low profile until the Dipsos' bus is safely on the road, remembering she might be inclined to wander out and check out her conquest's form on the cricket field."

"No dramas. Nothing else to report?"

“Plenty to report, but that’d be best done over the next day or three. Dunno where the Olga-Ballmer situation’s headed, but I’m sure all will be revealed in the fullness of time.”

Once I’d hung up, slathered on the sunscreen and made my way to the playing field in time to see the Dipsomaniacs’ bus turn off the highway onto the access road I didn’t have long to wait for the revelation.

As the players trooped off the bus it was obvious Balls had been the subject of much ribald abuse. The most moderate comment I heard was an inquiry as to the date when Balls would be making an honest woman out of her. I wandered across to where the subject of the abuse was standing.

“Got a shot away last night?” The direct approach seemed the best.

“Four shots, actually. Which is four more than any of these bastards managed, as far as I can tell.”

“You’ll love this, Herston,” was Nuts’ contribution to the discussion. “He was late coming down for breakfast. You can probably guess why. Anyway he’d just got his bowl of corn flakes and was in the middle of sitting down looking like the cat that got Tweety Pie when Psycho chimed in from the other end of the table. *Stand for a rooter!* That’s what he came out with. Every bastard stood up. All at once while he was still sitting down. Shit, I laughed.”

“So, Baz,” I asked, “when’s the big day?”

The response was *Don’t you start* but it was followed by news Olga was thinking of relocating two hundred kilometres north of where we were standing.

“To which your response would be?” Inquiring minds needed to know.

“Doesn’t worry me,” Balls shrugged. “Won’t last if she does. They never do. Tell you what, but...”

“What?” I asked.

“If she did it’d get right up Butler’s nose.”

“So you wouldn’t be making any objections if she did. The news’ll be music to the ears of one of the blokes who lives here.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the beer truck on its way in. While there was a good half-hour before the scheduled resumption I knew from experience that standing around chewing the fat wasn't going to guarantee a punctual resumption.

With forty overs to go, as far as I was concerned a punctual resumption was what it was all about, so I headed for the storeroom, grabbed an armful of stumps and headed out to make sure requisite preparations had been carried out.

The journey out and back gave me time to consider the possibilities.

Three hundred plus was going to take some chasing under any circumstances, and with what amounted to a representative team, on paper it should have been just about insurmountable.

On the other hand, the run rate was round about where it needed to be. There were at least two decent fast-medium bowlers to come into the attack, and while Ankles couldn't bat to save his life he was a classy leg spin bowler. But there were five bowlers who would have to send down two each, although two of them had already been called into action with fairly economical results.

With Big Al retired, I figured Denison would need to see at least one more bat retire, and if two more could go close to retiring the rest could probably put about another hundred together, all of which would add up to around three hundred.

If we got that far, the final session could well be interesting.

Those musings looked after the journey out to the middle and back, and with warm up activities going on around me I wandered past the score book, checked the list of bowlers, noting Brown Dog and Rum & Coke would kick things off and wandered over to the truck, where His Lordship was temporarily unoccupied.

"No sign of Hopalong," I remarked.

"No," His Lordship agreed. "Told him last night I'd need some help later, but I'm down to bat number eleven, so he should be able to take his time getting here. Phone calls from England and all that."

"Still, things would've been fairly quiet so far?" I hypothesized.

"About half of them were over for a heart starter when I pulled up."

It didn't take much figuring to put Nuts, Balls, Psycho and Angry among that number. Probably Pretty Boy as well, since his name had failed to make its way onto the bowling schedule.

I took a wander around, exchanged greetings with whoever was so inclined and ended up back at the beer truck, where the tray offered a reasonable vantage point to sit and wait for five to ten to roll around.

Comings and goings around the beer truck provided a couple of opportunities for a chat while I was waiting, but when an alarm call on the mobile suggested Mickey's big hand was pointing to the eleven I set out to ensure the requisite prompt resumption.

Still, I was in the middle at the bowler's end before the Dipsomaniac eleven took the field, and they were almost in the same area before Scum Dog and Sunset made their way onto the paddock.

I wasn't surprised to find Brown Dog handing me his cap.

He would, under ordinary circumstances, have been operating at first change. Balls and Nuts were *two each* candidates and would probably be sending down their seconds around overs twenty-nine and thirty.

With Scum Dog on strike, Brown Dog's over went for four, a two off the third, singles off the last two, and, as expected, Rum & Coke arrived for over eleven, which produced a single and a Scum Dog boundary off the final delivery.

Sunset managed a couple off the second ball of Brown Dog's second, but the next one jagged back rapped him on the back pad. I thought the ball was going down the leg side but the boisterous appeal may have done something to Sunset's state of mind.

A short-pitched fifth delivery was fairly tamely hit down Ming's throat just in front of square leg.

That wasn't quite what the *close finish* scenario required, but on the other hand, the incoming bat, Damien *Spider* Webber was probably the best bat in the side, and if he managed to get a start was quite capable of tearing an attack apart.

But if he was going to do that tearing apart routine he needed a start, and he's a notoriously nervous starter. At one stage, it was believed he had a weakness against the short ball, and was subjected to a regular repertoire of chin music when he arrived at the crease.

While that came off regularly, as it will, even when you're not dealing with a nervous starter, the barrage continued through most his time at the crease, so he had plenty of opportunities to work on that side of his game.

While he still got out early against short pitched bowling, regular run-a-ball hundreds against such tactics suggested the problem lay in getting started rather than getting peppered.

As such, there was a marked contrast between Spider and the bloke at the other end. Nothing, but nothing worried Scum Dog, who wandered through his day to day life with the calm insouciance of somebody who doesn't give a stuff.

Spider, on the other hand, was the sort of bloke who'd check his guard three or four times after a play and miss. That may have been his personality, but it wouldn't have been helped by his day job in an accountancy practice, acting as the interface between Denison's taxpayers and the machinations of the Australian Tax Office.

Mail on the supposed weakness may or may not have arrived at a Townsville destination, but if it had it wasn't acted on.

The first ball Spider received was a fizzing leg-cutter that caught the outside edge of the bat and flew through a vacant third slip for a couple. Scum Dog worked a two through the off side in Rum & Coke's next over, followed it with a single, and left Spider to face two balls, the second of which produced a single and brought him back to face Brown Dog, when a sharp bit of fielding from Psycho ruled a second out of the question.

He wasn't happy, and it showed when the batsmen met in the middle of the pitch.

In answer to Spider's concern, Scum Dog shrugged, made a casual suggestion, and headed back to the non-striker's end.

Brown Dog's third over could only be described as a thoroughly luckless doing over of an unfortunate batsman. Six balls, a random mixture of off- and leg-cutters produced six plays and misses, and the resulting maiden meant that while the run rate was around the asking rate, without Big Al's 55, things were looking particularly green around the gills at 1 for 82 off 13.

The batsmen met mid-pitch at the end of the over, and as I passed I caught a Scum Dog suggestion that he'd try to farm the strike for a while, which also served to lift the run rate as a couple of fours and a two that he couldn't quite turn into a three came off Rum & Coke's third, but left Spider to face Brown Dog again.

As I passed the huddle, Spider was expressing his frustration at his inability to distinguish between the two deliveries. The Scum Dog response, delivered with an *in that case this is the way it is* shrug, was to suggest that attack was the best form of defence.

"Well, if you get right down the track you can hit it before it gets the chance to do too much."

The first ball found Spider on the charge, and while he didn't middle it, he managed to chip it over mid-on for a three.

Scum Dog worked the second for a single, and ball three sailed over mid off, running away to the boundary. When the next went the same way, it looked like Spider was on the way. Ball five produced a solid defensive shot that would've been unimaginable two overs before, and the final delivery went behind square leg for a single.

Rum & Coke didn't present the same threat, as a solid forward defensive stroke was followed by a boundary and a single, with Scum Dog taking another to retain the strike as Ankles came into the attack. Over eighteen, as a result, delivered a bag of flighted leggies with a wrong 'un thrown in for variation.

Three singles kept the scoreboard ticking over as the batsmen took their time adjusting to a sharp decline in pace.

It was safe to assume the four quickies and Ankles were going to be the eight over options, and while Ankles got his four in and Psycho ended up getting a fourth somewhere before the thirtieth, the rest of the bowling for the foreseeable future was going to be entrusted to the five bowlers who had to be given two each.

The first of them was The Godfather, who sent down a brisk set of medium pacers that Scum Dog despatched to the boundary twice with a two thrown in for good measure. With his total on 44, the question of getting the strike on 49 raised its head and with drinks on the horizon the remaining deliveries were defended away.

Like the previous day, I'd decided drinking during the day would be limited to a maximum of two beers at lunchtime. With a maximum of eleven overs after lunch I suspected I could get away with three if necessary, but couldn't see where the necessary could come from, and maybe a couple after the game before I headed off to the cave to hibernate for a day or three.

Heather Brooks wasn't there when I got to the score book, but a very happy looking Zero was. He was examining the details in the score book with considerable interest, though I wasn't sure how much sense he was eliciting from it.

Here was the avenue by which I could spend a ten minute break without going anywhere near the beer truck.

"You're looking happy today Zero," I remarked. "Big bus trip yesterday?"

"No. On the way home I have only two, three beers. I go straight home off the bus. *Listen you bastards*, I tell them, particularly Mick, *tomorrow I must play cricket. Against Townsville. And I must bat, so today I do not drink. Understand?*"

"What did Mick say?"

"At first he was not happy, but I say *Maybe just one*, and he goes away. Later when I insist only one more, he says *make sure I am right to beat those bastards*. So I think he understands. I look at the scorebook, and I think it will not be necessary

for me to bat, Huxley retired hurt for 55, Hewitt on 44. Webber 21. Brooksy says I must bat, but I do not think so. I think it looks good."

"If it was an ordinary game it would. For a start, they still need more than two hundred off thirty overs, which is still run a ball territory. There's not that much batting after Brooksy, Aravinda and The Duck when you take the quality of the bowling you'll have to deal with into account."

"If Hewitt, Huxley and Webber do their job, I think will not be necessary?"

"In an ordinary game, yes, but this isn't an ordinary game. This one's set up so everybody gets a go. It's a sort of compromise between pub cricket when the game's an excuse for everybody to have a couple of dozen beers, and the serious stuff. For a start, just about everybody gets a bowl. With twelve on the teams that's a bit trickier than it might be with fifty overs, so the rule here is that you can leave one bloke out of the bowling, but everybody else must bowl two, and no one can bowl more than eight."

"So I bowl four."

"If you'd been able to stay yesterday, you might've gone eight. You have to make sure that everybody has a bowl before the good bowlers come back."

"Otherwise everybody might not get a go," Zero agreed.

"So they're limited to four overs first up. So your five good bowlers bowl the first twenty, then your five other bowlers bowl ten before the good blokes are back to finish off. That middle ten is coming up. Even if we, sorry, *they*, score a hundred off this next ten there's still another hundred to get."

"The batsmen will be, how do you say it, well set. And Huxley can come back."

"He can, but he can't do that till you've had a bat. If Scum Dog gets past fifty, he'll have to retire as well, and he can't come back till after Huxley. Spider'd come back after Scum Dog if he gets that far. But none of that can happen until after you've had a go."

The news didn't go down as well as it might, but that was more than likely fear of the unknown.

“Anyway, even if you get out first ball that means that Huxley and whoever else has retired can come back a bit earlier. Relax. Enjoy it. Have a couple of beers like you do on a Saturday. Watch the game, it'll be interesting, and there's the chance it'll end up being close and you'll more than likely be involved towards the end. Anyway, how did the Rugby go yesterday? It's not as if the boys were too coherent when they got back to the Palace last night.”

A match report took up much of the rest of the allocated time for the drinks break and shortly thereafter I found myself back at the northern end for Ankles' second over.

The bowler might have been the pick of Townsville's leg spinning fraternity, but you wouldn't have known it from the way Spider laid into him.

Nine off his own bat and a single to Scum Dog made for a productive over, but there was a definite threat that the slightest miscalculation could bring disaster.

A second from The Godfather yielded a three to Scum Dog and a couple of pairs to Spider.

With Scum Dog on 48, it was obvious the scenario for the upcoming Ankles over was a single to Scum Dog followed by even numbers from Spider, though it took the Dog two balls to get the single, and the need to avoid odd numbers turned easy singles into dots and threes into twos, but four more took Spider to 38 as Scum Dog got set to take full toll of Ming's first over.

Avoiding the odd numbers meant the over wasn't as expensive as it could've been, and a two, a four and a six took care of all the even number options.

There could've been three singles as well, and the two could have yielded three if they'd pushed the issue, but twelve runs was par for the course.

Brooksy arrived at the non-striker's end with Spider not far from the golden over, after which it'd be up to Brooksy and Aravinda to guide the tail through the top order bowlers, which meant Spider needed to take his time getting to the magic 49 while Brooksy got himself set.

Ankles added a few complications by working through his variations. He'd mainly been bowling leggies, but in the space of six balls he ran through the rest, going around the wicket for a couple of deliveries and limiting Spider to a two and a four and luring him down the track with the last ball.

A smart piece of glovework from Retread saw him on his way back to the shed for 44, with the total on a healthy 2/162 and the match delicately poised, as the saying goes, coming up to the halfway point of the innings.

According to the conventional wisdom of the TV commentariat you expect to end up with around double the score at the end of thirty overs, and since we were well short of that mark and about halfway there already, things should've looked reasonably rosy.

Losing Spider, however, wasn't part of the preferred stream of events, and with two batsmen yet to face a ball at the crease, things could have gone into a serious tailspin.

With Ming on for his second Brooksy and Aravinda rotated the strike, adding three singles to the total, and the end of the over saw the inevitable consultation.

Given the fact that Aravinda was widely regarded as a serious tonk merchant, the most obvious ploy would've involved giving him as much of the strike as possible, but that raised the possibility of dismissal since Aravinda seemed constitutionally incapable of keeping the ball on the ground.

There's a lot of air out there, he'd been known to remark, *and besides they've only got nine blokes to field, so a lot of it's vacant space.*

While there was something in the argument, Denison players knew the way he bats and two on the boundary around cow corner, and two deep in the covers were regulation settings likely to produce a wicket, assuming the bowlers could pitch the ball where it would collect a not-quite-middled hoick across the line or a lofted front foot drive.

Besides, Aravinda inevitably added when pressed on the wisdom of the aerial route, *the grass on these fields is so fuckin' thick that if you hit the thing along the ground you'll never get value from your shot.*

Personally I thought the aerial option was the result of shortcomings in the weight transference department and an inability to lean into the shot by bending the front knee, but I'm not a moderately successful Denison A Grade cricketer, so what would I know?

J.C. came on to bowl Over 26, and Brooksy took a single to hand over the strike, and we were off again. With Aravinda at the crease, a Denison captain would have set a deep field in front of square on both sides of the wicket, and more than likely dropped mid-off and mid-on back as well, but that was another bit of mail that'd been lost in transit, so Aravinda had a while to blaze before Nuts, Balls and whoever else was involved with the Dipsomaniacs' brains trust woke up.

Mind you, Aravinda took a ball or two to settle in.

A solid back defensive, a single out on the off side, single to Brooksy to give the strike back, then *Whack*.

Aravinda didn't quite middle ball four, but got it away behind square for four, but the next one disappeared towards the highway, clearing the boundary by a good ten to twelve metres.

Having rolled his arm over the previous evening, Balls only needed to bowl one more to use up his allocation.

He escaped relatively lightly, keeping Brooksy on strike for the first two, sneaking a dot ball down the leg side while I was feeling generous and only getting hammered off the final three, with a total of eleven off the over.

J.C.'s second went the same way, except that it took Brooksy three balls to get off strike, and the other ten came as boundaries rather than four-two-four.

You didn't need to be psychic to work out what came next.

With two overs before bring back the top bowlers time, and one before drinks, the choice between Nuts and his brother was straightforward. By letting him know a couple of overs beforehand, Psycho would have time to warm up, something that more than likely wouldn't have occurred if he was reintroduced to the attack after the break.

Given a choice between beer and calisthenics, the beer would've won by the length of the straight.

The preceding overs had also given Nuts time to adjust his tactics.

With Brooksy on strike the field came up, aiming to cut off the single. Psycho obliged by pitching the ball up outside off stump, so half the over went by without any damage. Brooksy got the single off the next, and a quick conflagration was followed by a fast yorker that removed middle stump while Aravinda attempted to launch it into the tomato field that lay on the eastern side.

I gave momentary consideration to calling the drinks break there and then, but as The Duck approached the middle I approached Nuts, signalled to Brooksy to join us and suggested that we make this session the eleven-over one.

"Has to happen eventually. Now or after lunch or whenever. Fine with me."

The reaction was one I found bemusing. Had I made such a suggestion the day before Brooksy's reaction would've been to go for whatever option was most likely to stir the possum, but here he was, the epitome of *whatever suits you is fine with me*. Nuts was of the same mind.

The Duck arrived, Psycho bowled, the ball was blocked and Nuts made his way back to the bowling crease about ten minutes earlier than he'd anticipated.

Not that lack of a warm-up had much effect on his routine military mediums. Three balls to Brooksy yielded a two, a dot and a one, while The Duck got off the mark with a two from the penultimate delivery before blocking the last.

I found myself accompanying Brooksy as the players made their way towards the drinks dispensary, hardly surprising given we were both starting from the same end of the pitch, and recent developments were an equally unsurprising topic of conversation.

"Acquiring a bit of diplomacy in your old age, mate," I suggested as a starter. "Recent development, like in the past eighteen hours or so?"

"You have to let them think they've had a win occasionally. Not often, mind, but occasionally. Anyway I saw Drake warming up over there, and reckoned he's be better coming out for an over rather than sitting on his arse for ten minutes."

"It solves the problem of the missing over from last night," I suggested.

"That too."

A glance around revealed the vast majority of Dipsos had gathered around the beer truck, and tactical discussion was unlikely to be overheard as we made our way towards the scorer.

"It also means that when we give them a serve they're less likely to be looking for it."

"Animal cunning," I remarked. "It might be a tad subtle for this mob. From my experience, the standard operating procedure involves hitting them before they hit you."

"That's true, but there is such a thing as a false sense of security. Speaking of which," Brooksy added as we reached the card table that served as the scorer's bench, "we need to lull them into that sense of false security before Zero comes in to bat. Looking forward to it? Looks like you're ready."

Zero was seated beside the scoring table, pads on, gloves and bat by his side.

"Yes, and no," was the reply. "The boys tell me I need to put on pads now because when you get out no other bastard can bat, but I tell them *Bullshit* and they no listen."

"Actually," Heather chipped in, "they were telling him that there was only one set of pads in the gear bag that'll fit him, so he'd better make sure he gets them."

"Anyway," Zero went on, "I tell them Murphy's Law. If I put on pads now, I not need them later on. If I wait I will need. So I put them on now to be safe."

"Could be something in that," I remarked. "What's the total?"

At 3 for 206, with Big Al and Scum Dog to come back, you'd have had reason to be confident but, as Brooksy pointed out, Psycho was back in the attack and more than likely to bowl out his eight from here on.

"Overheard 'em out there a couple of overs ago. His brother reckoned that he couldn't bowl any worse than he did last night, but if he did it was a smart move to get his overs out of the way early so he couldn't do too much damage."

"Nice bastard for a brother," I suggested.

"It worked. His last over was better than his first spell, and if he can get the breakthrough..."

"Anything else you overheard out there? Keep this up and we'll be calling you Radar or something."

"They're saving the spinner till the tail comes in as you'd expect. Possibly keep one from Psycho up their sleeves if they get the breakthrough, and they'll look at Angry and Brown Dog to finish."

"So what's the plan? See Psycho off, have a dip at Rum & Coke and try to take on the spinner?"

"Two to get Drake started. Get him to have a go after that. Same for Typhoon, Craven and Muscles. Dunno how His Lordship's going to go. Judging on his effort with the ball you wouldn't be hoping for much. Then it'll all be up to Zero..."

"I try to ask the boys to show me how to bat," Zero interjected, "but they say No."

"As they should've. That's what I told them to do."

The remark caused raised eyebrows all round.

"Look, for a start if they gave you an hour's practice they're not going to be able to teach you to bat. That takes time. You weren't here yesterday when their spinner was batting, but he's been playing the game for, what? twenty-something years and he still can't bat. No, you're better off doing what you did yesterday, stick with what you know, and if it comes off good. If you get out first ball that just

gets Big Al back earlier. You've already made your contribution. Anything extra's a bonus."

The expression on Zero's face expressed extreme doubt.

"For a start," Brooksy explained, "we needed someone to be the twelfth player and we needed him before the toss. Might've been able to get away with adding someone afterwards, but that would've prevented me from doing a couple of other things."

While Zero probably didn't get what the Denison captain I was referring to, I was ticking off little niggles in my mind. Yep, without that twelfth player being written in from the start, a good bit of Brooksy's point-scoring wouldn't have been possible.

"So then we got a couple of overs out of you. For what? Nine? Ten? Whatever it was it was less than what would've happened if we'd bowled Hewitt instead. Would've been nine or ten wides, even with Herston being charitable. Plus what came off the bat."

Zero nodded. This much made sense to him.

"It worked well enough to give you four overs instead of two. That was two overs someone else didn't have to bowl, and would've gone for a sight more than nine or ten too. So if you hadn't bowled, with the other blokes bowling they'd have made well over three-fifty. Then there are the runs you saved in the field. What do you reckon, Herston, would've been a good ten?"

I nodded.

"But wait, there's more. Because you were playing and we hadn't been able to persuade you to bat in the local comp, when I said we wanted you to bat that meant their number twelve had to bat too."

"He," I pointed out, "faced two maiden overs . Prevented their retired batsmen from coming back to face a ball."

"Exactly. So if you add all that up without your contribution we would've been chasing more than four hundred. So whatever you get with the bat, like I said, is a

bonus. I'm going to try to bat through to the end, and if I'm still there I'll give you a couple of pointers when you get out there, and we see how things are going. You'd help out too, wouldn't you Herston? Like you did when he bowled?"

I nodded.

"Anyway, that's got to be close to the ten minutes. Time to head back? Get 'em to hurry that last bit of the beers?"

As I made my way back to the middle there was plenty of time to reflect that Brooksy was definitely intent on maximising his points score, and even if he hadn't had the odd personal score to settle, everything he was trying was a contribution to a possible Denison win.

His mail about the resumption proved spot on, and Psycho's fifth over yielded three singles and a two as the batsmen settled back in.

Rum & Coke came on from the other end, and the conference before the over seemed to have resulted in agreement that Brooksy would turn the strike over while Drake had a go, Brooksy's single off the first ball was followed by a dot, a two, another dot, a four and a three. We were about half way through Psycho's next over, and The Duck had just pulled one through the leg side after a first ball two when Brooksy decided to raise the stakes.

"That front foot's getting close, Herston," he remarked as Psycho passed on his way back to the top of his mark. "Bears watching."

The following delivery was short, producing an air swing on its way through to Retread and a further observation on the positioning of the front foot. Another short one followed.

This time bat hit ball and midwicket had another *fetch it* mission. Psycho was muttering on his way back, and I glanced in Brooksy's direction, shaking my head.

While three deliveries had the bowler hitting the crease, he wasn't in immediate danger of overstepping, and I wanted to avoid stirring the possum. The final ball didn't go quite as far, being intercepted just inside the boundary by Rum & Coke on his way round from fine leg and limiting the score to two.

Brooksy, however, couldn't help himself.

"That's three where he's been right up there," he remarked. "Like I said, bears watching."

While the observation failed to elicit a response, it evidently, as subsequent events indicated, found its mark.

Brooksy kept up the strike rotation with the second ball of Rum & Coke's next over, but things came to a grinding halt as the third caught the edge and was well taken by Nuts at slip.

Typhoon got off the mark with a single from the second ball he faced, Brooksy played out the over, the batsmen met mid-pitch.

When Brooksy reached the non-striker's end he remarked Drake's dismissal hadn't been the preferred option but the contribution was valuable.

"Fifty from me, ten from Typhoon, another ten from Cravo and Muscles, and we'll be right up around the target. There's a way to go, but it's definitely gettable."

The first ball of Psycho's penultimate over passed the edge of Typhoon's bat and produced the observation that the front foot was getting close, and this time Psycho lived up to his moniker.

"You want to stay down this end, smartarse," he responded. "Get down there and you'll get what for."

"Mate," I interjected, "don't worry. How many times have I umpired when you've been bowling?"

"A few."

"Tell me if I'm wrong, but have I called you without warning you you're getting close first?"

"Don't think so. Can't remember."

"More to the point, never mind Mick here, have I told you you were getting close?"

"No."

"So there's no problem, is there?" I thought was a reasonable conclusion to draw.

"Fuckin' oath there's a problem. It's standing right over there, and it's name is Mick Fuckin' Brooks. He doesn't want to get to the other end, I can tell you."

My attempt to smooth things over had failed to produce the desired result since the next ball was a searing bouncer Typhoon didn't have much difficulty evading but had Retread at full stretch in an attempt to avoid conceding byes.

He got a finger to it and deflected it on the leg side, preventing four byes but conceding a single one. If they'd pushed it there was definitely two for the taking, but it seemed Brooksy was up for the challenge.

The third ball was much the same as its predecessor though I suspect Retread was more prepared this time around (you didn't need to be a mind-reader to see it coming) and got it in the right glove. Brooksy had swayed out of the way, and had then, rather pointedly, inquired after the welfare of the bowler's big toe.

The response was a yorker, aimed at the batsman's big toe. Brooksy, expecting that result was down the track clipping the low full toss behind square for four. Again, you didn't need to be psychic to spot what was coming, and the bouncer was hooked over fine leg's head for six.

"Another one right there would go down rather well," was the assessment as the batsmen completed a perfunctory run aimed at getting himself into optimal niggles territory.

Psycho responded with a raised fist, Brooksy demonstrated a bat could be a handy deterrent.

The protagonists returned to their respective ends for the final delivery.

Under most circumstances, you'd expect another bouncer, and it seemed Brooksy did, but for some reason the ball was pitched up, and cannoned into the back pad, resulting in an appeal that would've blown out the bowler's dentures if he'd had any.

There was, however, one slight technical difficulty, apart from the fact that the ball was arguably just going down the leg side.

"Which one would you prefer?" I asked. "The *Not Out* or the late no ball call? I think under the circumstances it might be best to call *Over*."

"Fuckin' what?"

"That ball, your front foot landed about here. Now remembering I was going to point that out to you and suggest that the mark goes back about that much do we stick to the script or do I call the no-ey and have another delivery? Under the circumstances, it might be best to avoid the re-bowl option."

"What about the LBW?" Psycho persisted. "How was he?"

"I thought it was just going down the leg side, which is why I preferred not to call the no ball. Now here's your cap and let's get on with the game."

The confrontation had obviously got to his brother, however.

Not that Nuts conveyed this directly. A shouted *Ankles! Next one that end!* left no one in any doubt as to his displeasure.

"Think that's about thirteen-nil," Brooksy observed as I reached the other end. "Typhoon out of the firing line and that bastard out of the attack."

Typhoon looked much more comfortable against Rum & Coke, taking a two off the second ball, while two subsequent singles rotated the strike and left Brooksy at the right end to welcome the spinner into the attack.

With fourteen to go and a tad under ninety required we were well over the run a ball equation, but at four wickets down, Brooksy at the crease and Big Al and Scum Dog to come back, that shouldn't have been a problem.

The key question was what would happen with the leggie at the bowling crease.

If he was dealing with a tail-ender, he'd send down a stream of leggies with the occasional well-disguised variation thrown into the mix to take the wicket if he couldn't accomplish that through flight and turn on the stock delivery.

Against a 'keeper like Brooksy, or a top order bat (and Brooksy was good enough to bat in the first four) that mightn't have been successful. He'd probably pick the difference as the variation went in, and would probably be a better chance of scoring off whatever Ankles was going to throw up.

Ankles opened with the leggie, however, and Brooksy treated it with respect.

He followed it with the top-spinner, which was worked away through the leg side for two. Another leggie could've produced a single, but there wasn't a second on offer, so Brooksy stayed put.

Ball four was the wrong 'un, which brought another two.

The leggie that followed was worked into the covers for a single. Typhoon edged the final delivery behind point for a possible single, and since Typhoon would be facing Rum & Coke at the other end, Brooksy was happy to take it.

Rum & Coke was back for his last, which started with a dot and a two through the covers to Typhoon, but when he tried to repeat the shot an outside edge was snapped up in the gully, where Balls was loitering with intent.

Typhoon's seven wasn't the ten Brooksy had been counting on, but Craven was capable of getting a few, and Muscles could hold up an end though he tended to take his time scoring runs.

Craven made his intentions clear from the outset. Two off the first one he faced, swing and a miss off the second and the last one could've gone for three, which would've left him dealing with Ankles next over, so they settled for two. Brooksy didn't have much difficulty with a four, a two and a single off the last ball, holding the strike as Brown Dog came back for one more before drinks.

Brown Dog started with a couple of dots before Brooksy got one through the covers for four and worked the following ball for a single. Craven took a single straight off, and try as he might Brooksy couldn't get the single he needed off the last ball, so that it would be Ankles versus Craven when we came back from lunch.

With ten overs to go, sixty-five to get, six wickets effectively in hand and quality bowlers in operation things looked likely to go down to the wire. I called *Over* and

turned, heading off towards the shed. I'd barely gone ten metres when I heard a familiar voice call my name, turned and sighted Nuts moving at a jog-trot in my direction. I slowed down to give him time to catch up.

"Handled that well," he remarked as he arrived within conversational distance. "If you'd called that no-ball I reckon the next one would've been a beamer straight for Brooksy's nut."

"Consistency, mate. Just did what I'd said I was going to do. Warn him when he was getting close to overstepping, which I would've done if the ball hadn't hit the pad. It was going down the leg side. Slightly, but down the leg side. Would've missed leg by, what? That much."

"Thought of signing up as a diplomat?" They tell me there's a vacancy."

"Yeah," I responded, "Ambassador to North Korea or somewhere."

"Psycho would give those mad bastards a run for their money, I can tell you. Bastard swings a mean wooden train. I know from personal experience. Anyway, well done. Owe you a beer."

With everybody making a predictable beeline for the tucker table, I wandered across to the score book, an area vacated by everyone except Heather Brooks and Zero, padded up and not happy. Brooksy arrived about thirty seconds later.

"You can take those pads off," he told Zero. "Be a good hour before we go out. Get 'em off. Don't play your innings before you get out there. Another reason I didn't want you having a hit beforehand. If you'd started back at the last break, you'd probably still be there. You'd have been stuffed by the time you got on the paddock. Lunch, Heather?"

As the two of them headed over to join the queue I pulled up a chair and seated myself beside Zero.

"Not eating, mate?" I ventured.

"No. Nervous. This is not like Saturday cricket. Very important to win, I think. Brooksy very determined."

"Well, if you look at it that way, there's probably only two games that matter in Saturday cricket. It's a four team comp, so you only need to win the semifinal and the final. So, yeah, the vibe here'll be different to what you get on a Saturday. We're playing Townsville, so we're behind the eight-ball from the start."

Zero nodded, and I went on.

"I mean, look at the numbers. We've got, what eight, nine thousand people? Hundred and twenty thousand up there. That's about fifteen to one for starters. A team picked from the whole of Townsville should always beat a side from here. Just on the numbers."

"So your skill does not matter?"

"Of course it does, and that's where it gets worse. Just about everyone out there bar the wicketkeeper has played rep cricket for Townsville. What rep players have we got? Brooksy. Spider could probably make the Mackay side if he lived in Mackay, but there's no one else as far as I can see. So add those things together, and it's going to be hard to win on the score book. But there's more than one way to get a win."

"How?"

"Well, for a start, Brooksy's got a little points scoring thing going. Anything he can put over them is one point. Anything they can put over him is one to them. If you ask him, he'd probably tell you something like twelve-nil. When you go out to bat there'll probably be a couple more scored."

"So I must make runs. That is worrying me."

"No, mate, that's where you're wrong. As soon as you walk out you're making it easier for the bloke at the other end. These blokes have been playing cricket for years. Give them a problem on a cricket field and they'll know how to tackle it. Mightn't always *work*, but they'll know what to try. What happened when you came on to bowl? Something they hadn't seen, and they didn't know how to handle it."

"But when I bat."

"You go out and do what you know. Treat it like softball. You stand where their batsmen stood against you. Make their bowlers work out what to do, Don't get me wrong about this, but it's like when you're playing pub cricket and a woman comes in to bat. What do you do? Bowl flat out? Not sure whether you should. You go out there to bat, they'll have to figure out what to do. If you get a single, they've got to change, and if the other bloke gets a single and you're back on strike, they've got to change again. Just like having a right hander and a leftie batting. Every single, the bowler has to change his line."

"I still worry," Zero stated. "I stop worrying when game is over. I not wanting to let the side down."

"Mate, doesn't matter. You've already done your job. Soon as Brooksy got you to play you'd fixed one problem. When you bowled, that saved him from bowling Hewitt. When he got two more out of you, that was two overs someone else didn't have to. Then you took wickets, and they were good wickets. Good batsmen. You'll be fine."

I glanced towards the beer truck.

Brooksy, burger in hand was talking to Psycho, and, wonder of wonders, both of them were finding something funny.

"Look over there, and Brooksy's talking to a bloke who was trying to kill him half an hour ago. They're laughing. Come over for a burger."

"I not think I can eat anything," Zero insisted. "Too nervous."

"A beer then, something that'll help you relax. No? Well in any case if you sit here on your Pat Malone, you're just going to worry. C'mon. I've got to grab something to eat now the queue's died down. Over we go."

Zero followed me across with some reluctance, but at least he followed me.

As we moved towards the tucker table, I noticed Balls detaching himself from the group he was chatting to and head in our direction.

"Zero, pleased to meet you. I'm Barry Ballmer, what's your other name? You know, not the nickname?"

"Hira, Hira Yamaguchi."

"Mate, really pleased to meet you. Would've been looking for you when the footy blokes got back last night but I had other fish to fry. Just wanted to thank yer. Really interesting out there, it was. Good to see something different once in a while. When're you batting? Looking forward to it. Feel like a beer? My shout."

I left a nonplussed Japanese teacher to sort those matters out as Balls looked over his shoulder.

"Nuts! Get over here and talk to the little Jap. Make sure he doesn't get away. Gotta buy 'im a beer."

Nuts detached himself from the group and wandered across, hand extended. Balls headed for the bar, and I took my time helping myself to what was on offer while The Duchess looked on.

"Big one last night?" I asked. I hadn't had a chance to get an assessment of the evening's takings in the catering department. I knew what the bar trade would've been like, but I'd left well before the end, so I had no idea how well the patrons had kept up the pace, but, on the other hand, I had fair suspicion.

"They can come back whenever they like. Maybe not quite next week. It'll take a while to restock, but once we have..."

"So it should become an annual event?" I suggested. "Equivalent weekend every year?"

"Would be wonderful," was the response. "See what you can do about that. If you need money, you can count on us to sponsor it. To a reasonable amount, of course."

I could've stayed where I was, but the sight of Brooksy moving towards the Zero-Nuts-Balls conflag prompted me to do the same.

"Now," Brooksy was stating as I came within earshot, "no giving trade secrets away, Zero. Tell the bastards nothing. Make 'em wait and find out."

"All the same," Balls said, evidently continuing a conversational thread that had preceded Brooksy's arrival, "I'd like to get an over when he comes in to bat."

Any chance of that, Nuts? Save you from bowling your brother. Be interesting, I reckon. Looking forward to it."

Nuts was noncommittal about the prospect, and the two of them wandered back to where they'd come from.

"See, Zero?" Brooksy remarked once they were out of earshot, "Nothing to worry about. They're already thinking about what they'll do when you get in. More they think about that, the less they're going to think about the important stuff."

The rest of the break passed with little controversy, but considerable ribaldry, laughter and general character assassination until a glance at the time revealed we were ten minutes out from the resumption.

Brooksy headed off to round up Craven and batting requisites, instructing Zero to stay right where he was and not to think about padding up until the batsmen were on their way out to the middle.

With two minutes to go I headed out, followed by the batsmen. Under normal circumstances, the etiquette of the game would've had the fielding side take the field first, but Brooksy stopped twenty metres in from the boundary for a tactical discussion while the Dipsomaniacs got their act together.

Much of the discussion would have been dedicated to the approach to Ankles, who'd presumably be bowling the first over after lunch.

Part of the issue, I guessed, was that Brooksy, on 42, needed seven before magic over time. If he had been on strike you'd have assumed he'd have taken about five from the early part of the over, get himself down to the other end on forty-seven, take a single and have a dip at Ankles' last over.

Either that or take the single and give Craven a chance to have a serious go at the spinner.

Since he wasn't going to face, the options were either to work the singles or tell Craven to have a go at the other end.

There's no way of knowing what the plan was, and it may well have been the work the singles option, but Ankles' first delivery saw Craven dancing down the wicket, looking to loft the ball over the bowler's head. Ankles saw him coming, dropped the ball slightly shorter and induced a skied outside edge that produced a two rather than the intended four or six.

The next got slightly more respect, and a single got Brooksy to the striker's end. He took another off the third while Craven decided it was *heave ho* time and was stumped off the fifth.

With Muscles on his way to the crease, Brooksy had a problem. While Muscles could bat, and had frequently been used as a stabilising influence when his side lost a flurry of wickets, attacking wasn't his strong suit.

If Brooksy was going to be there when Zero came in, there would have to be some adjustment to the standard *modus operandi* if winning the game was part of the equation. I wasn't able to eavesdrop on the conversation as Brooksy beckoned Muscles over for a chat before he took guard, but the *You're sure?* from Muscles could be taken as a clue.

In any case, the final ball was blocked out, Brooksy faced up to Brown Dog's last and all would shortly be revealed.

Over Forty-two revealed a single to Brooksy, an edge through the slips for two and a more convincing cover drive for three from Muscles and a last ball single to Brooksy. 6 for 286, Brooks 45, as a helpful informant on the sideline informed us.

Ankles came on for his last, Brooksy took two off the second and a single off the third, leaving Muscles with the strike

There was another *You sure?* as the batsman took guard, and as the ball left the bowler's hand, Muscles left his crease.

Under normal circumstances, Muscles played a slog about every third season, but where lack of practice might have presented a problem, sound technique got the front foot close to the pitch of the ball and the bat came through in a booming straight drive that would easily have reached the boundary if the stumps at the bowler's end hadn't got in the way. The ricochet was enough to produce another

two, and the next ball went much the same way but managed to stay away from intervening furniture. Four.

You'd have expected the final ball would see something similar, but Muscles stayed in his crease, worked the ball into the covers and took a single to retain the strike.

Since he had four overs to go, it was obvious Angry had to come on for the forty-fourth and the remaining even numbers. There were just over forty left in the *runs required* compartment, and it was obvious Muscles was under instructions to get as many as possible as soon as possible.

He missed the first, then slammed the second over mid-off for four, attempted to repeat the shot and holed out off the third with Pretty Boy taking the catch at deep mid-off.

A brief expression of disappointment to my right attracted my attention as Muscles trudged off and His Lordship hove into view.

"Not part of the game plan?" I suggested.

"No. Dot or even number, single, single. That was how it was supposed to go."

With that, he headed off to confer with the incoming batsman. It was a tricky little situation. If His Lordship could get a single off the next delivery or the one after, a further single would take Brooksy to 49 and the strike, but there was no guarantee that His Lordship was going to survive.

As it turned out the first delivery he faced suggested he didn't know a great deal about batting against bowling of the calibre on offer, and the second, a scorching sandshoe crusher that would've bowled most batsmen who weren't playing first class cricket, and quite a few who were, uprooted leg stump.

With Zero on the way in and one ball left in the over, there were problems all round.

For a start, Brooksy headed towards the approaching figure while the Dipsos' celebratory huddle dissolved into dissension.

A member of the fast bowling fraternity was calling for a repeat of the wicket-taking delivery, while, interestingly, the contrary viewpoint was being put by the batsmen who'd been at the crease when Zero was bowling.

"Look," Balls stated bluntly, "we know the little bloke's never played cricket at all. Don't need to bowl flat out. Just stand at the crease and roll your arm over. Should be enough."

"Bullshit," Psycho counter-asserted. "Flat out. Yorker! Middle stump skewering the keeper! Way to go!"

"Now hang on a minute," Nuts cut in, "stop and think for a bit. I know you've never actually done that, but this needs what you'd call a considered approach. So you bowl the little Jap. What happens? You get the big tonker back in, and you've got Brooks at the other end on 48. He'll have to go the tonk next over anyway, and that'll bring the other bloke who retired back in. We take the next over as it comes. Brooks'll want the strike for all of it and then we want the Jap there for the whole of the next. Give him a single towards the end'd be even better. Like Balls said, just stand at the crease and roll your arm over."

There was the predictable expression of copulatory dissent from his brother, but Nuts went on.

"We've been caught out a few times this game."

You're spot on there, was my silent observation on the matter.

Brookesy and Zero had made their way to the striker's end where Brookesy was demonstrating the correct way to ground the bat when turning for a second run. Given the fact Brookesy would be looking for even numbers next over it seemed like a wise precaution.

"Most of them have involved the little bloke. He's not a bad bloke, and as Balls said at the lunch break it'll be interesting to see how he goes. As far as winning the game goes, they need about forty, and there's every chance a chunk of them'll come off this next over. If they don't, fine, but we know Brooks'll be going for the doctor. So apart from seeing how he goes, our best chance to win the game is to keep the Jap out there and keep him on strike, got it?"

While there were nods all round, there was also one notable dissenter.

"Right! That settles it," Nuts had come to a decision. "Angry stands there and rolls his arm over this ball. Brown Dog does the same when the little bloke's on strike. Work as usual to the other blokes and just rock and bowl when the Jap's there. We're bowling Angry out this end, and Brown Dog's got, what another two? So if it gets to the stage where we have to bowl the last over at the other end, and the Jap's still in, Balls gets his wish and bowls it. Right?"

With Brooksy making his way towards where I was standing the cluster broke up. I found Angry standing beside me ready to bowl.

"Dunno about this," he remarked. "More than likely be a wide."

"If it is," I suggested, "I'll only call it if it's way off line. Off the pitch. You'd have no problem with that Mick? Looks like they're going to bowl from a standing start while Zero's down there, so you might as well give 'em some leeway."

"You're the umpire," Brooksy responded. "Call 'em the way you see 'em. You've let plenty go past that I would've called."

The delivery was lobbed around a decent length and a good thirty centimetres outside the off stump. Zero took a swing but mistimed things completely. While he didn't miss it by *that* much, he seemed disappointed with the failure to connect.

I called *Over* and set off for the other end, passing close enough to the Brooks-Yamaguchi conference to hear "I'll call for everything and remember, be ready to run two if we run. No ones, no threes. Then see how you go when I'm gone."

The *no odd numbers* factor came into play first ball. Brooksy collared the second, sending it winging away to the boundary, and it was a matter of finishing the over. The third, flicked through midwicket could have brought three though they settled for two and the fourth, edged down to third man produced a much hairier pair.

Had the umpire at square leg been a disinterested party it may well have still been seen as a line ball decision. It certainly looked line ball from twenty metres away.

The Duck at square leg wasn't likely to be adjudicating against his skipper in the circumstances.

The *Not out* didn't go down that well, however, and the fifth was short, pulled away through mid-wicket and picked up on the bounce by the boundary-rider. There was an easy single on offer, but two would have been risking another run out appeal. In the end, they stayed put. As Angry ran in for the last ball, I saw Brooksy moving onto the front foot.

Angry saw it too as the ball pitched well short. Brooksy, quite possibly expecting the reaction, uppercut the ball which flew down towards third man. They ran one, turned for the second, paused, ran, looked again and with the ball on the way back to the 'keeper, settled for two.

With five overs to go and thirty runs needed as Big Al came out to resume his innings we were right on the run-a-ball requirement.

Unfortunately, (or fortunately if you were barracking from the Dipsos) Big Al wouldn't be facing and, as indicated, I was aware of the game plan. You wouldn't have needed to be Einstein to figure that one out, of course.

Angry did exactly as the captain required in stand and deliver mode.

His previous effort had been a foot outside off, and it seemed there was no way he was going any closer. The first two balls brought a swing and a miss. The third, pitched in the same area and coming through at the same height, was carted away on the off side for what would've been a comfortable two. Big Al, however, wasn't interested in the second.

As Angry set out on the long march back to his mark, the batsmen met in mid pitch. While the conversation was out of earshot, the topic under discussion wasn't difficult to guess, though the yorker that Angry speared in wasn't going to result in any of the options they'd been discussing.

Big Al took a wander as Angry marched back again, and when he came back to face up, asked for a guard again. Everybody had taken either middle or middle and leg, so I didn't think this was totally necessary, but when they ask for it you comply.

I was still bemused as Mr Huxley carefully marked a point on the mat, replaced the chalk behind the stump and took guard with the point he'd just marked visible in front of him.

Not that far in front, but definitely not where he was standing although his bat was in line with the mark.

Angry charged in, Big Al took a substantial stride forward, and the bat scythed down on top of the mark, collected the ball before it pitched and sent it rocketing back at the bowler around head height as it passed him.

It was uncomfortably close to head height and head position as it passed me, still on the up.

What goes up must come down, but gravity failed to complete its mission before the ball crashed into the back of the amenities block. Six.

Now, presuming the game plan involved pitching the ball in the blockhole to keep the batsmen at their current ends, it should come as no surprise that it went out the window for the final ball of the over. It was short and would have gone through at head height but for Big Al's hit or be hit factor.

It, too, cleared the boundary and kept going. Brown Dog, fielding at fine leg took two minutes to retrieve it, and as far as I could tell the pill had finished its journey uncomfortably close to the highway.

That interval gave Big Al and Zero plenty of time to confer, and while they did so, Nuts headed off to intercept Brown Dog on his way back. They were way out of earshot, so I couldn't catch the conversation, but it seemed from where I was standing that landing six deliveries in about the same area and giving Zero room to swing meant that once he got used to the bounce there was a fair chance he'd hit one, and if he managed to do it early in the over Big Al would be able to carve a fair chunk out of the remaining deficit.

The first one landed just short of a length and flew under the swinging bat. Having induced one play and miss, Brown Dog presumably intended to repeat the dose by pitching it up a little further next time, but the blade swung through a little

lower, caught the edge and, more by good luck than good management, ran away in front of third man, evading a diving Psycho before crossing the boundary.

Ball three maintained the same line, but this time landed where the block hole would've been had the bat been taking guard that far outside off, and the next went through the same space. Two more dots.

Dealing with a softball style cross-bat swing, that seemed the perfect line, and ball five was headed in the same direction when something remarkable happened.

I hadn't been taking too much notice of any by-play between Big Al and Zero, and neither had anybody else. As the ball made its way back to the bowler Big Al had been miming a front foot shot, fair enough under the circumstances, but when the ball was bowled, lo and behold Zero copied what had been demonstrated at the other end, but he didn't quite get it right.

The front foot went towards the line, the bat swung through straighter, but not quite where it should have been, and the resulting edge flew through where fourth slip could have been. It was intercepted by Psycho, and while things must have been close at that end Zero managed to scramble back for two.

The following ball brought a dot, but the six runs off the over brought the ask close to single figures with three overs to go, which meant Angry had a problem. While I hadn't seen the ploy used before, Big Al had given himself a marker that could be used to intercept suspected sandshoe crushers before they pitched, and Big Al had demonstrated what was likely to happen as a result. Yorkers were not going to be a good idea.

A Nothing short from Nuts suggested we were going to be seeing the ball up around a good length, and I suspected the stumps were going to be given a wide berth as well.

Having been lenient on the width right through the game, I couldn't really change my tune all that much as the first three deliveries flew past the bat to be taken by Retread almost in front of Nuts at slip.

As Angry charged in for the fourth, I noticed that Big Al wasn't quite facing up where he had been.

Under normal circumstances with the batsman taking guard on middle you'd be able to see a bit of off stump, and the rest of them would have been obscured by Big Al's impressive bulk. Now, as Angry hit his delivery stride, I caught a glimpse of leg stump.

Whether Angry had spotted the move or not, the delivery followed a different line, but the front foot came forward just inside the new line, the bat came through, and a leg glance delivered a boundary.

With two balls to go, anything down that line was likely to yield more of the seven runs needed, but Angry tried anyway, got away with it, so decided it was worth another go and paid the price with another boundary.

With the score on 8/337, two overs to go and Zero on strike, Balls wandered across to hand his cap to me. I'd already heard Nuts discount the possibility of his brother bowling an eighth over, so this came as no surprise to me.

This development while well and truly telegraphed in advance, seemed to have come as late-breaking news as far as Psycho was concerned.

"My fuckin' over," was the opening salvo as he attempted to reclaim what he saw as rightfully his.

"Look," Nuts replied, as a voice from the boundary advised that there were two runs required for a win. "That's the situation. First up, you'd more than likely to knock the little bloke's block off. No, don't shake your head. You know that if I asked you to do what Angry and Brown Dog have done when he's on strike you'd tell me to fuck off. They need one to tie. We know he can handle medium pacers, so we see how he looks against spin. If Ankles still had an over left, he'd be on. We need to keep him on strike this over, so shut up and fuck off to deep backward square."

He turned his back and set about adjusting the field, He didn't want a single conceded and, as a result, Psycho was the only fielder more than twenty metres from the bat.

The first three deliveries, flighted, landing around a good length and spinning inwards caused Zero no end of trouble, and after the third Big Al summoned his

partner for a mid-pitch conference that included much bat swinging and several demonstrations involving footwork. Nuts had also consulted the bowler, and while this was done in muffled tones I did catch the words *donkey drops*.

Ball four, as a result, was tossed up further, and while the stumps were in no danger there was always the possibility of a mishit should Zero connect.

That failed to happen, and Balls loped in to bowl again.

As he did, Zero went down the wicket and found himself able to swat the ball away on the leg side. He cleared the infield, set off for a run, and with Psycho about to collect the ball, Big Al, obviously banking on the throw going to the 'keeper's end called Zero back.

Psycho, however, had other ideas. He must have figured the big bloke was the slower of the two and with nothing to lose had a ping at the bowler's end. I saw it coming, and was on my way into position to adjudicate on any run out when the return, hard and flat with the trajectory of a heat-seeking missile hit the stumps with Big Al a good metre and a half short.

Even though I wasn't in the best position to make the call it was clearly out, so up went the finger. I was more than slightly bemused to note that the incoming batsman was Mick Brooks.

"So what happened to the Scum Dog?" I inquired as he arrived at the bowler's end for the final delivery of the penultimate over.

"Last seen heading off towards your swimming pool singing *I can feel a head job coming on*. At least that's what I've been told. Happened while I was batting, so I couldn't do anything about it. One of his playmates turned up, and he was telling her about the etchings you've incorporated in the pool decor."

"Gross moral turpitude," I suggested.

"That too," Brooksy agreed. "You'll probably find a used franger in your spa when you get there. Don't call him the Scum Dog for nothing."

I nodded. "Tried his mobile?"

"Turned off. Sent a runner to fetch him back. Not that I thought we'd really need him, but we can't have the bastard spearing the bearded clam while the game's still on."

"No shagging during cricket hours," I suggested.

Cricket hours, however, were about to come to an abrupt end.

Having connected once, Zero tried the same tactic, missed, and being well out of his crease was a goner provided Retread took the ball cleanly, which he duly did.

With no sign of a returning Scum Dog, there was nothing for it but to explain the missing batsman situation to Nuts and the rest of the Dipsos, who'd assumed Scum Dog would be making a belated appearance. As he wouldn't be, there was nothing for it but to call stumps. There were the regulation handshakes and *Good games* all round as I gathered up the items that needed to find their way back into storage.

By the time I'd stowed the stumps the post-match festivities were well and truly underway and there was no way I wasn't going to join in. As I grabbed a beer, I noted His Lordship in conversation with Brooksy, Nuts and Balls and might have joined them if it wasn't for the presence of Olga in the same vicinity.

I thought of joining them since gathering the latest intelligence about plans for the future might be a good move, decided against it because deep down I didn't want to know and was contemplating which of the other clusters I could join when His Lordship waved me over, and the issue was settled.

"I was just suggesting to Barry here," His Lordship announced, "that we make this an annual event."

Hardly surprising really, as the possibility had been telegraphed at least once and His Lordship knew a golden-egg-laying goose when he laid eyes on one.

"Fine with me. You'd need to make it the equivalent weekend, though. Get too much later in the year and you're going to run into complications, but I can't see why it can't work out."

"I was going to suggest a trophy. You know, give the teams something to play for, and a man of the match award, of course," His Lordship added.

"Make it two," Brooksy suggested. "One for each side. Captain to pick the best player on the other side. That's the best way."

"Anyway," His Lordship laughed, "we won't be needing the trophy right away. What with the tie and all that. Still, we could do the man of the match thing for this game. It'd be easy enough to get a trophy from Bill down at the Craft Shop. Any ideas?"

"Easy enough from where I'm standing," Nuts observed. "The little Jap. Has to be, even if he wasn't here for the whole game. Did more than anyone else to determine the result."

"If you're talking about someone who helped to determine the result," Brooksy began.

"It might be a good idea," I cut in, "to change it from a Man of the match thing to an *outstanding effort* sort of thing. Make it less formal. I mean, look at it, there were, what, five blokes who retired with the bat. About the same who took two or three wickets. Keep it to one bloke on each side and you're sure to get the other contenders' noses out of joint."

"When it comes to someone who stood out from the pack," Brooksy agreed, "yeah, you'd have to say Zero was it. I like it. Wouldn't have to be an award for something that happened on the field, either."

"Like some bastard who disappears for a shag and isn't available to bat?"

"Yeah," Brooksy agreed. "Or something that happened at the pub. Agreed, Nuts?"

"Cool with me."

"So, fellas, you're going to want to be hitting the road before too long. You want me to make an announcement about the trophy, Zero the hero, that sort of thing?"

"Go ahead," was the consensus.

Climbing onto the back of the truck His Lordship called for attention.

"I won't keep everybody very long," he began, "but I've just had a chat to the two captains and Dave Herston. We've decided that this game needs to become an annual event. So around this time next year there'll be a rematch."

There were *Hear, hear's* all round.

"Betty and I will be donating a trophy, which will be held at The Palace until the boys come down to take it."

"From our cold dead hands," Brooksy interjected. "Won't happen."

"Bullshit," was Psycho's contribution. "This time next year it'll be heading north on the bus. You'll have a vacant space in the trophy cabinet, Brooksy."

"Well," His Lordship suggested, "there's a way around that vacant space thing. We'll have two trophies. The winner gets the Cup, runner up gets the Plate."

"I like that," Balls observed. "Winner and runner up. If it's a tie."

"The trophies stay where they are," I suggested.

"Anyway, now that we've got that sorted out, there's just one more thing. We've looked at something like the Man of the Match thing, but as Herston pointed out there'd be, what? Eight to ten blokes who'd be in the running for a single award, even if we made it one on each side. I think you'd all agree that there's one bloke who's made an immense contribution to the way things have worked out, so I'd like to announce that the first Outstanding Contribution trophy will be ending up on Zero's book shelf, When I've managed to buy it, that is."

"Now," Balls requested, "if we could get the members of both teams over that way for a photo. Herston, you too, Give them time to pack the piss into the esky for the trip home."

Photographs and general conviviality meant it would be at least half an hour before the bus set out on the northward journey.

I left them at it and strolled cave-wards. Ninety-nine overs at the bowler's end and a succession of big nights preceding same had certainly succeeded in taking their toll.

There was, one thing that needed to be done before the hibernation began. Standing at the door to my sleeping quarters I recalled Brooksy's suggestion that we'd be finding a used prophylactic in the spa.

Given the likelihood that the post-match festivities would relocate to the pool area I thought it might be worth taking steps to avoid potential embarrassment.

"Whatever you're doing in there, Pete," I suggested, "it might be a good idea to give it a break. The game's over, and there's a fair chance you'll be getting some company in the not-too-distant future. No used frangers in the spa if you don't mind."

I headed off, leaving behind me the protests that certain parties *wouldn't do that sort of thing*.

Bullshit, I thought, *there aren't too many things you wouldn't do, you bastard, and leaving conspicuous evidence of sexual excess isn't one of them*.

Sunday Night

While I was inclined to head straight for the cave, roll the rock across the entrance and hibernate for three days there were drawbacks to operating on that scenario immediately.

For a start, there was the subject of food. I'd had a substantial lunch, but needed sustenance if I wasn't going to wake up with the munchies half way through the night. With that in mind, I thought it would be best to establish what everybody else was planning for the short term before setting any of my own plans in concrete.

When I arrived at Reception, I discovered Bright Eyes back from Airlie Beach and discussing her weekend and plans for the immediate future with Sandy.

“Bright Eyes was inclined to head down to the Palace for the Sunday roast, but I've told her I doubted she'd find many volunteers wanting to join her.”

I nodded.

“That's what I suspected,” Sandy continued. “Which raises the small matter of eating tonight. I could throw a curry together, but the easiest option would have to be something from the fish shop.”

“True,” I replied. “That one gets my vote. Still, it might be best to wait till The Scoffer gets back here. He's dropping the pub ute back to the Palace, and The Duchess or someone is supposed to be dropping him back here. In the meantime, I'm ready to put my feet up for a bit.”

Before I could put my feet up, however, there were things that needed to be done. Once half a dozen bottles of mineral water had been checked into a more convenient situation I found a pair of shorts, changed out of the umpiring togs, grabbed the half-empty bottle from the fridge and wandered back poolside.

A bit lasted no more than fifteen minutes. At that point slamming doors and the sound of various voices heralded the arrival of Hopalong and Jeffrey.

“Aha!” was Jeffrey’s opening remark. “Have I got news for you? The worm has turned, and the swallows have come home to roost. Hang on while I grab a beer and all will be revealed. Anybody?”

Hopalong and Sandy indicated they could handle a beer, while I waved the mineral water to indicate I’d be right for the time being. The gesture was evidently misinterpreted since Jeffrey returned with beer for all concerned.

Faced with the inevitable, I weakened and waited for the latest developments to be revealed.

“Ran into the tug boys Friday arvo,” Jeffrey began.

How this related to anything at all wasn’t clear, but I refrained from comment confident that all would be revealed in the fullness of time.

”And?” Hopalong evidently did not share my confidence.

“I was informed, with everything that’s going on this weekend they volunteered to do the kitchen at the pub on Sunday and were wondering whether I’d be free to give them a hand. Well, not *a hand*, but they wanted someone who knew the ways things work to check things went back the way they were supposed to.”

“From the days when they gave you a hand in there I’d have thought they knew the ropes.”

“They do. After I left, the job went to Athos, Porthos and D’Aramis, and they’d been giving them a hand. With the catering at the cricket and everything else, the boys from the kitchen asked if they’d be right to do it on their own.”

Nobody in the vicinity expressed surprise at the arrangement.

“They knew that if there was anything that wasn’t exactly right when The Duchess walks in there at ten tomorrow morning the kitchen boys will be on the receiving end. Big time.”

A further round of nods indicated that the drift had, indeed, been caught.

“Anyway, I said I’d be in there about ten-thirty, and when I got there they were just starting. Wouldn’t let me do anything but got me to keep an eye on what they were doing. When the pub opened, The Duchess was in the bar swanning around when I heard her say *Looking for Jeffrey?* Luckily I hadn’t had to say too much, so she didn’t know I was in there.”

“Why?” Hopalong was unable to let the narrative reach wherever it was going in its own good time.

“You know what it’s like. Sitting in the office, you can hear everything that’s said in that corner where every bastard heads when they want to have a discreet conversation.”

“Well,” Jeffrey went on, “it’s the same in the kitchen. After she’s asked whoever it was if they were looking for me, Olga’s voice answered that she *wasn’t looking for me, as such*, but that if she did happen to run across me she had a large chunk of mind that’d be heading in my direction.”

“So that if The Duchess knew you were in the kitchen, she’d have pointed Olga in that direction,” Hopalong guessed. “Pity about that. You look like you could do with a bit of her mind.”

The response was ignored as the narrative resumed.

“So when The Duchess asked *Why?* they ended up sitting in that corner, right where a smart lad could drop a few eaves without hitting himself on the foot. The long and short of it was that Olga put The Duchess right in the picture as far as my little subterfuge from Friday night was concerned, and they both agreed that I was an arsehole.”

“A widely held view,” I remarked. “But a better class of arsehole.”

“Olga went on to point out it had all worked out for the best. If I hadn’t nicked off the way I had she wouldn’t have been able to entertain Barry upstairs last night.”

“Because if you hadn’t sent her upstairs with the key,” I guessed.

“She wouldn’t have had it in her purse, and if she couldn’t disappear upstairs with your mate he wouldn’t have suggested if she felt inclined there was space in his unit she could occupy.”

“Which is something that would get right up her ex’s nose,” I felt obliged to point out.

“Yeah, vindictive bitch. Anyway that started The Duchess asking about young Bernelle. *Where was that going to leave her?* That kind of thing. Which is when Olga came out with the fact that Bernelle has already won that Apprentice Hairdresser of the Year thing, and is supposedly a shoe-in for the national title, so she’ll more than likely be off to London and Olga would either have to find a flat-mate or pay all the rent herself.”

“Whereas if she moves to Townsville.”

“It’s rent free with this Ballmer, at least as long as that lasts. Well, not quite *rent free*. You’d guess there’d be a certain amount of fucking involved. But more or less. Besides the only job she’s been able to find here was at the roadhouse. Ballmer reckons that there’s a vacancy in the office where he works, so she can fill that while he’s filling her, if you catch my drift. There’s a unit near the Casino and Olga can check it all out after she drops Bernelle at the airport at ten tomorrow.”

“So, in other words,” I suggested, “the whole thing’s wrapped up. Speaking of things that are wrapped up, do we put you down for fish and chips? Hopalong?” There were signs of assent from both.

“I’ll ring that through, if you like,” Sandy suggested. “Bright Eyes’ll head down to collect them when they’re ready. Only thing is the size of the order.”

“Easy,” I replied. “Use the standard formula when you’re ordering for more than three or four people.”

“Which is?”

“Number of heads. You, me, Jeffrey, Hopalong, Bright Eyes. That’s five. Times one and a half. That’s seven point five. Round it up to the next whole number. Eight. One for good measure makes nine.”

“What about chips?”

“Heads divided by two and round up. Add one for good measure if you’re feeling hungry. Three or four scoops. Whatever you think is a fair thing.”

“The final question, of course,” Sandy concluded. “Crumbed or battered?”

“You know my thoughts,” I responded. “I prefer my fish without any trace of domestic violence.”

“Meaning?” Hopalong interjected. “Preferably in the Queen’s English.”

“Not battered, though I’ve been known to make the occasional exception when it’s beer batter.”

The poolside consensus was that crumbed was the better option, and, should Bright Eyes decide to differ, a single battered fillet would suffice. Sandy departed to take care of the order while I turned back to Jeffrey to let him finish recounting his adventures.

“After Olga had dropped these bombshells? Anything further to report?”

“Not a great deal. The Duchess pointed out it was time that she headed out to look after the catering and asked whether Olga was headed in the same direction, which she was. Oh, and she also pointed out that Hopalong was looking after the beer truck which suggested I’d be able to get a lift back here if I needed one, since I figured that if His Lordship’s playing cricket with a bunch of drunks he’ll be drinking and the truck can’t drive itself home.”

“Olga took up the offer?”

“After she’d asked whether the catering needed another hand, yes, which made my plans for the rest of the day clearer. Finish in the kitchen, head up the bowls club, get a lift back here or down to the pub depending on who was ready to go when I was. Could’ve stayed at the pub but discretion is the better part of Valerie. Though all of her is nice, of course.”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” I suggested.

“So anyway Paddy was being collected by his missus, so I got a lift to his place, walked to the pub and got roundly abused by The Duchess for my troubles. Par for the course, more or less.”

Sandy’s return signified that the administrative details were in hand, so from there it was a matter of sporadic small talk until Bright Eyes’ return turned the topic of conversation to the subject of drink.

“Something in a Clare or Eden Valley Riesling,” I suggested.

I headed indoors in search of a bottle and glasses.

Figuring five heads meant five glasses and five glasses meant an empty bottle, I grabbed a second one to be on the safe side. As it turned out Jeffrey opted to stay with beer, so the reserve bottle wasn’t called into immediate action.

Once the mountain of fish and chips had been demolished, Hopalong rose to his feet.

“Since there’s nothing left, I guess I’d better look after the washing up.”

With that, he collected the fish and chip wrapping, bundled it into a ball and headed towards the wheelie bin.

“I’m waiting to hear from Liz, so that’s it for me tonight.”

“After a weekend in Airlie it’s time to start looking at the next assignment,” Bright Eyes announced. “See you in the morning.”

Sandy indicated he’d be casually winding down after the report card ordeal and would be having a quiet night with a book, leaving me by the pool with Jeffrey and a substantial portion of the second bottle of Riesling for company.

I was considering whether to return the remaining Riesling to refrigeration when a car pulling into the driveway signalled the arrival of reinforcements.

A minute or two later Bernelle appeared out of the darkness. The arrival prompted a departure as Jeffrey shuffled off discreetly.

“I told you I’d be out here this afternoon. Sorry I’m late. Mum disappeared through the middle of the day and I couldn’t finish packing till she got back, and then it was dinner time, and we had a mother and daughter talk over dinner...”

“It’s time to toast your success,” I suggested, reaching for the glass that Jeffrey rendered redundant when he opted for beer. “Really, of course, we should be cracking a bottle of bubbly, but...”

“I’m driving,” Bernelle pointed out.

“After a long stint behind the stumps I’m shagged out, so after you’ve taken care of this glass and I’ve topped mine up there’ll only be one glass left. After that, I guess, it’ll be time for bed.”

“I can’t stay. You know why. Besides I have to get up early in the morning...”

“I’m not expecting you to. As I said, I’m just about totally stuffed, so I don’t think I’m up to anything in the way of strenuous activity. Anyway, what’s the latest on this trip away? When does the flight leave?”

“Ten-forty. I want to be there well before that.”

“Know what you mean. The last thing you’d want would be to turn up half an hour before departure time, find that the flight’s been overbooked and have to wait till the next one.”

“When I spoke to Roger this afternoon, he said that they absolutely have to have me on the ground in Brisbane by four o’clock so that the announcement makes it on to the TV news tomorrow night.”

“With the first bulletins going to air at five, four o’clock would be the absolute latest,” I guessed.

“That’s right. Roger told me if I missed the plane not to bother catching the next one because they’ll have someone else for the TV cameras.”

“So you won’t be missing the plane. Check-in should open two hours before the departure time, you’d want to be right on the spot to be on the safe side. So that’s eight-forty. Rush hour in Townsville with people going to work, dropping the

kids at school and all that shit. You've got to go right across the city to get to the airport so you'd need to be somewhere around the race course by eight."

"It takes two hours to get to Townsville."

'So you'd need to be on the road by six. You can probably bet on being held up along the way. Be too early for them to be starting road works and that kind of thing, maybe, but you get caught behind a slow vehicle, held up at the scene of an accident or whatever. You'd be looking at leaving by five-thirty. Five to be on the safe side. I can see why you're not planning on staying the night. The last thing you need is a repeat of Friday morning."

The astute reader will figure the agenda underlying these remarks. The affair, such as it was, was effectively over and there was a reasonable exit strategy for all concerned.

As I refilled my glass that was the end of the bottle.

With the end of the bottle it would be time for bed.

When I went to bed, Bernelle would be going home. I was merely providing a window through which she could make a graceful exit.

"I don't have to leave straight away. I can stay for a little bit. If you're ready to go inside, maybe I can hear a little bit of that ***Forever Changing***."

"***Forever Changes***. While you're in Brisbane you might be able to track down a copy."

Picking up my glass, I rose to my feet.

No one could deny I'd provided the opportunity for a swift and easy exit. If someone had declined to take advantage of it, that wasn't my problem, though if, someone missed out on their excursion it was likely to be a major drama.

"So what have they got planned for you when you get there?" I thought that it was wise to provide continual reminders about tomorrow's events.

“Roger’s sending someone to meet me at the airport, and I go straight to where they’re making the announcement. They’ll have all the other finalists there as well. They’re all from around Brisbane, so.”

“You’ll have to act surprised. All the rest of them will think they’re still in with a chance. Once the announcement’s been made?”

“I go to the hotel, check in, and then it’s off to Roger’s fashion agency for a new wardrobe.”

“Which means packing would be a straightforward affair,” I guessed as I put my glass down. I wasn’t quite sure which way events were likely to head.

“So even if you don’t take out the national title, you’ve picked up clothing that’s probably worth a grand, at least. After the new wardrobe?”

“I’m off to a beautician, and then it’s off to dinner and a fashion parade and some interviews for breakfast TV in the morning. They can’t do that live because they want the footage from the fashion parade cut in with the interview and they have to do that ahead of time.”

Arthur Lee’s voice lilted across the room. *Yeah, said its all right, I won’t forget...*

“I won’t forget,” said Bernelle as she motioned towards the bed. “So if you’d like to lie down I can do something to help you go to sleep.”

Fine with me. Go ahead, do your worst. Good luck.

Such sentiments could not, obviously, be voiced. Nobody apart from me knew how close to extreme exhaustion I was, but I did what I was told.

If I was going to get a back rub or something, fine. Anything that didn’t involve actual physical exertion would be nice. Anything that did would be a problem.

“Just lie back,” I was told as someone undid the button at the top of the pair of shorts.

Now here, I thought, is another turn up for the books.

Thursday night, what’s looming on the horizon was *yucky*, Friday night things were entirely different. That was on the end of a massage, of course.

Something came up and needed to be investigated, but it wasn't planned that way. Now, two days later we've got a situation of unzipping with intent.

Sensing that I was needed to allow various items of clothing to be lowered, I complied.

As the process was completed, I continued musing on the track that developments were taking.

So Thursday night we had a case of *No action till you've popped the question.*

By Friday it was *you've been good to me so I'll be good to you so here's a little something for unexpected developments.* Now we're *loitering with intent of receiving swollen goods.*

I watched as attempts were made to generate swollen goods. The item under examination could only be described as a flaccid fixture.

So what caused the change?

I recalled a reference to a mother and daughter talk and wondered about the content. Olga had, after all, been known to use sex for personal benefit.

That had been the whole motive behind throwing herself at Jeffrey, and her tryst with Barry Ballmer could hardly be described as altruistic generosity.

I suspected advice had been offered. There may have even been a suggestion practice would be advisable.

If a practice session was going to take place certain developments were a necessary prerequisite. I did my best to bring them about, conjuring up visions of massed apprentices in ranks, delivering oral stimulation while an instructor barked out a rhythm.

To no avail. As much as I meditated on matters of the flesh, the only result was sound sleep broken when I awoke around midnight needing to void the bladder. The room was deserted. Bernelle had let herself out. The door was locked, What transpired after my earlier meditations I would never know.

Once calls of nature had been answered, it was time for a serious and lengthy hibernation.

Visitors, Welcome And Unwelcome

The game plan involved rolling the rock across the cave and hibernating until, at some point in the indeterminate future, I felt the need to hibernate no more.

That's not to suggest the whole of the spell in the cave was going to be spent in a deep slumber. Occasional visits to the plumbing would be needed, dehydration would be countered with mineral water.

Once the sleep factor had been eliminated there would be reading and quiet contemplation at least until pasta night and more than likely extending all the way to Friday night.

The first item on the agenda was sleep, and plenty of it.

Discussions the previous afternoon had produced agreement that I was not to be disturbed under any foreseeable circumstances so when I detected signs of movement outside the living quarters I paid them no mind.

Someone opening the door to the music room was a different matter.

Probably that scoffing bastard getting ready to start ripping out the bathroom next door, I thought as I rolled over.

From the time we'd bought the property I'd suggested there was no need for two sets of bathroom facilities in my quarters and that the installation next door could be removed and replaced by something.

I had not determined what the *something* should be.

At the moment, the bathroom was the repository for containers that had stored items that now filled the office next door.

Hopalong had been threatening to do a run to the dump some time in the future, and suggested he'd be able to borrow the pub's truck.

He felt Monday morning would be an appropriate time.

Don't you fucking dare, had been my response and faced with what I thought was deliberately provocative behaviour the best policy was to turn my back and wait for the interloper to remove himself.

After all, once he'd removed the boxes he'd need to deliver them to the dump and return the truck to the pub.

At that point, all that would be required was to slip the security chain into place and resume hibernation mode safe in the knowledge that all master keys were rendered ineffective. When the expected ruckus associated with the removal process failed to happen, I was slightly puzzled, but paid it no real mind.

I could sense another presence in the room.

The interval that followed was probably considerably shorter than the half hour it felt like. I lay there feigning deep slumber and waiting for the presence to remove itself.

As time passed, I became increasingly irritated.

I'd heard the door open, and there had been no sound indicating an exit.

In the end, I felt I could no longer ignore the intruder's presence.

"If you wouldn't mind removing your scoffing presence, you bastard, I wouldn't mind if the door doesn't hit your arse on the way out," was, I thought, a reasonably diplomatic expression of my point of view.

"I won't be going anywhere," an unfamiliar voice intoned. "at least, not until I've found out what Little Tony wants me to find out."

I rolled over to investigate and found a gentleman of continental extraction pointing a firearm towards me.

The penny dropped with extreme rapidity. Little Tony was my acquaintance from Randwick races and the information concerned the current whereabouts of Waddles and Wally.

As I got out of bed, I reached for the shorts which had found a resting place on the floor the night before.

“None of that. Just keep your hands on your head and move towards the door, When you get there you open the door, and the hand goes back on the head. Don't try to make a run for it because my mate's outside and he tells me he's never shot a man in his jocks before. Still, first time for everything.”

Given an absence of choice, I followed directions and the intruder followed me.

“That's it,” a voice behind me informed his colleague. “Three others, just like the girl said. Still, there could be someone else lurking somewhere. Hang on here while I take this one back to the office and then we check the place again. Doesn't look like there's anyone else here, but Little Tony'll want to be sure, so we check things out and then we start asking questions.”

The latter part of the remarks were obviously intended to suggest the required information had better be forthcoming.

I soon found myself joining Bright Eyes, Jeffrey and Hopalong in Reception

“Pretty kettle of fish,” Jeffrey remarked as I entered. “Next time you see Mr Waddington tell him I said to thank him for the skid marks on the y-fronts. Just as well you're wearing your brown jocks.”

“That's the four of them,” Intruder Dude instructed. “You keep an eye on them while Silvio and I give the joint a good going over. Once we've finished that it's Question Time. Hopefully we won't need to get nasty about it. Furniture wouldn't look the same splattered with blood.”

For the next little while there wasn't a lot said.

Silvio and Intruder Dude conducted a thorough search of the premises.

Desultory conversation in the Reception area established the trio had started by detaining Bright Eyes who had, under pressure, revealed Jeffrey, Hopalong and I were also located on the premises and indicated the whereabouts of the master key.

One by one rooms on the premises had been checked

Once the four residents had been detained a further thorough search ensured the rest of the premises were not concealing further inhabitants.

That investigation took longer than I thought was strictly necessary.

If the interval wasn't intended to unsettle and render us more willing to tender the required information, it certainly felt that way.

Eventually, Intruder Dude and Silvio returned to the rendezvous.

"See?" Jeffrey inquired. "Nobody here but us chickens. Told you. Believe me? Nope. Please yourselves."

"We will," was the reply from Intruder Dude, who seemed to be stepping into the role of Chief Interrogator. "At least, we will once you've told us what we want to know."

"Which is presumably where Waddles and his jockey are hiding. Pity we can't help you," I remarked.

"Go to the top of the class," Jeffrey observed. "Don't take your books. You won't be there long."

"Rather not be there at all," I replied. "Looks like we're well and truly up shit creek."

"In a barbed wire canoe without a paddle," Jeffrey added.

"OK," we were instructed. "Cut the comedy. Time to be handing over serious information. You first."

He turned towards Bright Eyes.

"Where are they?" was the inevitable question.

"Honestly, I've got no idea. I met Scott Waddington, if I've got the name right, twice. Once when we picked up the red convertible and the next day at Randwick races. Since then I haven't laid eyes on him. This other guy you're looking for?"

"Wally Matthews," was the Interrogator's response. "The stable jockey."

"Don't even know what he looks like. Sorry, but that's it. Nothing more I can tell you."

Given the direction the questioning was taking, I guessed Jeffrey was next in line before the spotlight was transferred to Hopalong and finally to myself.

In that case, I could monitor whatever information was imparted, figure what could be divulged and how much information might suffice.

Obviously I couldn't offer details about what had happened after Waddles and Wally left Townsville since I hadn't heard from either of them since.

So do I mention Perth and the Gulf?

Obviously not. Mention the travelling salesman?

Could do, if necessary.

If the script unfolded as outlined, he'd have dropped Waddles and Wally at the Rising Sun taxi rank.

They'd be able to ask questions among Townsville's cabdrivers and might be able to track the two of them as far as their respective departure points. So, should I go so far as to mention the motel?

I was pondering the point when the arc lights turned towards Jeffrey.

This needed to be watched since Jeffrey knew a fair bit of what had transpired.

"So, Jeff, what about you? What can you tell us?" Interrogator Dude had moved on to the next in line.

Silence.

"Come on, Jeff," Interrogator Dude continued. "Out with it. Where are they?"

Silence.

"We're not fucking around now. Out with it."

Silence.

"Look, Jeff. We're serious. Out with it."

Silence.

If the process didn't take up half an hour, again, it felt like it.

The only clock in the room was behind me, and since I'd finished work I'd felt no need to invest in a watch, so I had no way of measuring the passage of time.

After several more terse requests for information, Hopalong weakened.

"It's no good," he observed. "As you may have noticed, he's not going to say a thing. You know why? Because he's a pigheaded bastard who doesn't like anyone abbreviating his surname."

Interrogator Dude raised an eyebrow. "I thought Jeffrey was his first name"

"So do a lot of people until they get to know the bastard. If you want to know, his name is Gordon Walter Jeffrey. So you can see where he's coming from unless you don't mind being called Gordon."

The eyebrow raised itself again.

"He's been known to answer to Gordon. Not often, but it has happened. When he's in an exceptionally good mood. Happens once in a blue moon. Try Walter or Wally and he'll just clam up. If any bastard decides to abbreviate Jeffrey he really gets the shits. If you bastards weren't carrying firearms he'd probably have abused the shit out of you, but since you are, he's just cracked a shitty. Thanks for getting us all killed, asshole. Been a pleasure to be associated with you. Not."

This last remark was directed in Jeffrey's direction, but Hopalong's remarks were far removed from what the trio were expecting. Presumably their script had us quivering in our boots and volunteering a flood of information.

I sensed a degree of uncertainty as to where to continue from here.

"You've got some idea about this Waddles," the leader pointed out to him. "You've been making deliveries to that motel on the hill as you're coming into town."

That, I thought, means that I can be straightforward on anything up to the departure.

Hopalong looked unsure about where to go next. I suspected it almost might be time to jump in.

“We know you were doing it because you told your girlfriend about it on Thursday night. You didn’t say Waddles and Wally, that’s true.”

So, I thought, there’s the security breach that landed us in the soup.

“Yeah. Knuckles and Buckets were the names Herston gave me.”

I nodded and kept running through permutations of permissible possibilities.

“Thought it was bullshit from the time he came out with it, of course. Stories about blokes who’d raced off some other bloke’s missus and got the daughter up the duff. Bullshit. Only happens in penny dreadfuls. Not in real life. No, I acted dumb and played along..”

“Herston couldn’t have done that job himself?”

“Herston doesn’t drive. Probably the only smart thing he’s done in his whole life.”

It was obvious the threat of physical violence was prompting an unprecedented outburst of A Grade scoffing.

“Since he’s been pissed for most of the time I’ve known him. No, when he needs a job done here’s Muggins who gets the privilege of running here and there across the countryside...”

“So, when you were out at the Shoreline Motel” the chief interrogator cut in, “did you see the people you were taking these videos and the rest of the stuff out for? You do know this Scott Waddington?”

“Of course I know the bastard,” Hopalong scoffed. “If you’ve ever seen the mongrel you’d know exactly what I mean. He’s like Retravision.”

The reference to television commercials in the late eighties flew straight over the inquisitors’ heads.

“Too big to ignore, If he’s been anywhere in sight I’d have spotted him. Blot on the landscape. Used car salesman, Pah!”

The presence of a handy spittoon would have enhanced the dramatic effect. Lacking such an object, scoffing mode was resumed.

“No, I did what I was told. Took the videos, and the bourbon, and the seafood and all the rest of the shit out there, handed them in at the office exactly the way I was told to and went on my way.”

“We've called in there on our way here,” Interrogator Dude pointed out. “We've identified the people out there as Scott Waddington and Wally Matthews and we know that they left there on Thursday afternoon with a travelling salesman called.”

Now that I knew how much had been unearthed to date it was obvious that it was time for Herston to throw in his two bob's worth.

“Well,” I began, “it's like this way. Yeah, Waddles and Wally were here. Almost exactly a week ago, and they lobbed on the doorstep with as much warning as you three. They wanted to stay here, but that was never going to happen, even before your boss called. We didn't invite them. They invited themselves.”

This was obviously more along the lines they were expecting.

“Once he'd called it was a matter of getting them somewhere to lie low while someone worked out what to do next. I did that. Nobody else. Me. The folks out at the Shoreline owed me a favour or two, and I thought that if we stuck them out the back there, it might give them enough time to work out what they were going to do next.”

The assembled heavies nodded, so I went on.

“Now you'll notice that I've been saying *they*, not *we*. The deal was supposed to be that we'd get them whatever they needed and deliver it out to them. If they could lie low, they'd be safe. I know Waddles. There's no way he's going to allow himself to be cooped up in a motel for too long. Eventually, cabin fever's going to come into the equation.”

Again, it seemed this information matched the results of their own researches.

“So as far as I was concerned it was a matter of keep them supplied and wait for that to happen. I did what I could to make sure nobody was at risk in case someone like yourselves turned up, and, eventually, Waddles let me know they'd

found a lift to Townsville. I didn't make the arrangements. He did. Like I said all I did was wait till he got the shits with where he was and moved on to wherever he was moving on to. So that's what you know already. I can't give you anything more."

"These messages. How did you communicate with Waddington?"

"As you might guess," I explained, "there were mobile phones involved. We had my friend here buy two as presents for his sister's kids. Prepaid jobs. One for me, one for Waddles. I suspected you guys might be able to monitor the phone line here, and in case you'd planted bugs on the premises I made sure that any phone calls were made over on the other side of the cricket field."

"This mobile phone? Where is it now?"

I paused for a moment. Should I come clean? Pretend it had been lost? In any case there was every chance that Waddles would have disposed of the one he'd been using, so it was best to appear to be being straightforward.

"In my room. I could have grabbed it when you got me out of bed, I suppose, but to be honest, since I haven't heard from Waddles since Thursday, I haven't been bothering about keeping it with me. It's not like there's going to be anybody apart from Waddles calling the number and given the likelihood something like this was always likely to arise if Waddles were to call, I'd prefer not to take the call, if you know what I mean."

As I spoke I thought I heard a car pulling up somewhere nearby. Not in the driveway, since there would have been wheels on gravel.

Not in the car park, for the same reason.

It was a case of a sound that had been there and then disappeared. I went on.

"So, if you like, I can go and get the thing. Or I can give you the directions and one of you guys can go down and grab it. No difference as far as I'm concerned."

"If we get the wrong one? Your own mobile for example?" It seemed that some people were inclined towards extreme pickiness.

“My mobile is where I can lay my hands on it easily. Not that I use it much. Can’t stand the things, to be honest. If you go into my room you’ll find it in clear view on the bedside table. You probably can’t miss it. The other one you’ll have to look for.”

“Why?” Someone was running true to revealed form.

“When you’ve got hold of both of them,” I explained patiently, “you’ll notice that the two of them are remarkably similar. Hardly surprising since they both came from the Post Office. So one has all my personal contacts and that sort of shit on it. That’s on the bedside table. The other one’s only got one number on it, so if I were to grab it by mistake, if anyone tries to call me.”

I shrugged in a manner intended to suggest the outcome of such an attempt would be unsuccessful.

“For reasons that make sense if you take a gander at the situation that we find ourselves in, if I never hear that other one ring again I won’t be devastated. That’s why it’s at the bottom of the bottom drawer under a pile of papers and other shit. Where it’s been since Friday morning, so if it hasn’t run out of charge by now it won’t be too far off. Anyway, having said that, you know where to look. I presume you’re not going to let me go down there to get the thing.”

Reactions suggested that I was right on the money.

“After all, I might have a gun or a can of capsicum spray or something in there. Since there are three of you here, it’s not as if you can’t have one bloke go down and rummage around in my room and still leave two of you watching the rest of us.”

With one of his offsidiers despatched to fetch the objects in question I turned to the chief inquisitor.

“So once you’ve got that phone you can go on from there, can’t you? As far as I can tell you know as much as I do about where Waddles and Wally are holed up, so there’s nothing I can tell you. I guess if you were to go to Townsville and talk to every bastard who drives a cab you could find out where one of them dropped them off. If you kept asking questions there’s every chance you might be able to

track them down. You could charge up that phone and see whether the bastard's silly enough to answer it. Last I heard he was going to chuck his away, but for all I know."

"You can talk about that to your friend Little Tony. He'll be calling here within the next quarter hour to see what we've come up with, so you can tell him what you've told us. If he's satisfied with that, fine. If not."

A finger across his throat wasn't a gesture intended to inspire confidence.

"Still, we'll worry about that when the time comes. We can't call him, and if he decides to take his time calling here, there's nothing we can do to speed things up. When Silvio gets back with those phones we can have a look at things, but apart from that it's a matter of waiting."

He shrugged and an uncomfortable silence ensued, broken by the sound of footsteps.

"That'll be Silvio" the chief inquisitor remarked without bothering to turn his head.

His companion beside the door, whose function in life seemed to consist of pointing a firearm in the direction of bodies that needed to be intimidated, did likewise. At least that was the case until the door opened and the expression on Hopalong's face changed.

Then they looked around.

But it was too late.

In the hands of a Hollywood director the next ten seconds would have been morphed into forty seconds of to-and-fro ultra-violence.

But the realities of unarmed combat in everyday situations are another thing entirely.

Threatening Bastard By The Door Dude found himself reeling backwards as a redheaded female flew through the door, followed by a male of unknown origin. His weapon found its way into his assailant's hand with a speed that would have made a sceptic opine it was all done with mirrors.

Inquisitor Dude, under the impression his colleague by the door was adequate security under the circumstances, had placed his firearm on the table behind him. As he reached backwards, he found himself propelled in the opposite direction as the second intruder filled what had previously been his sole and exclusive personal space.

By intrusion plus fifteen seconds, the pair of roosters who'd previously been in total command of the hen house found themselves under severe restraint.

Intruder #2 barked out "Got 'em Mick. You can bring the other one in now."

At that moment, the phone rang.

"Don't just stand there," Dude Who'd Assumed Command directed. "Answer the bloody thing."

I was closest.

As I picked up the phone the door opened.

Enter Silvio, hands cuffed behind his back and under close supervision.

"Moderation. Herston here. I guess I'm talking to Little Tony." It seemed like a fair guess. "I'm afraid if you're looking to talk to Silvio and the boys they've been unavoidably detained."

"If it's someone connected to these bastards," New Dude in Charge instructed, "tell him to call back in half an hour. No, make it an hour there are a few things that need to be tied up."

"Sorry, mate. If you happened to overhear what I've been told to tell you I'm wasting my time, but in case you didn't I've been asked to tell you to call back in an hour, by which time we'll have someone on hand to answer any inquiries you might have."

Replacing the handset, I turned to identify the recently arrived cavalry.

By this point, three disarmed heavies had been securely restrained, and there was time for formal introductions.

The first figure through the door had appeared awfully familiar through the flurry of action and was the woman known as Elaine Forsayth or Liz Fothergill or possibly something else entirely, who was in the process of establishing intimate and reassuring contact with a one-legged member of the scoffing fraternity.

So there were not going to be many introductions coming from that direction.

New Dude in Charge reached out his hand. “Dave Griffin, and this is Mick Hollis. We’ve been delegated to make sure young Liz gets safely set up in her new arrangement. Looks like it’s lucky we were here.”

Once the introductions were out of the way, he excused himself.

“Got a few phone calls to make. Mick’ll just make sure those three are under control, and I’ll be outside so if you’d care to.”

“Move towards the bar?” I suggested, indicating the dining room. “Don’t know about anybody else but I feel the need for strong drink. I’ll just switch the phone through, so there’s no need to come back here when it rings. That way you can join in the conversation when Little Tony calls back.”

Once we’d retreated to the bar the story unfolded.

Liz had called on Thursday night while I was wining and dining in Airlie. During the conversation, Hopalong mentioned he’d been ferrying supplies to the Shoreline, and suggested the people in hiding out there were in a spot of bother.

Liz indicated an impending departure, but was unable, for security reasons, to provide details. She would call when she was on the ground in Townsville, Mackay or wherever she was able to break radio silence. Hopalong had been content to sit and wait and decided, given the lack of concrete detail he’d say nothing at all.

“When I got off the flight in Townsville I realized there was a slight problem. If I was going to call I’d need an Australian mobile, wouldn’t I? So I told Dave, who was there to meet me, that I was going to find a pay phone. He asked why, and I explained I wanted to call Jack, and Dave said I could use his mobile once we were away from the airport. Said that would be far more secure.”

Mick obviously knew something about security matters.

“So once I’d got my bag, and we were in the car, I asked for the phone, and he said *Not yet* because we had a couple of transfers to make that’d put anyone who was following us off the track. We drove ‘round to the Air Force base, transferred to a chopper, which dropped us between Townsville and Ayr. Mick was waiting with the car, and once we were on the other side of Ayr I was allowed to make that phone call.”

“The phone here didn’t ring,” Jeffrey remarked.

“Exactly. But I wasn’t calling here. I was calling Jack’s mobile, because there was every chance he’d be delivering things to that motel. So I left a voice message and waited. After all, he could have been in the shower, but at half past ten that wasn’t likely. Maybe he was driving and couldn’t answer right away.”

“Whereas he was,” I suggested, “being monstered by a couple of heavies from the Mafia or whatever. When did you start to suspect?”

“Straight away,” was the response. “After all he’d told me all about your big win at the races, and that people tied in with the race horse were on the run from the Mafia. He’d mentioned he was taking things out to this motel on the edge of town, so when he didn’t ring back straight away...”

“When he’d had time to pull over to the side of the road, or whatever,” Jeffrey observed.

“I started explaining things to Dave. He’s with the AFP, or something like that, and I suggested there was the possibility of trouble on the horizon, He was on the phone to his bosses while I tried Jack again. Every time his phone didn’t answer I left a voice message. By the time we were on the other side of that township with the name starting with G.”

“Guthalungra,” Hopalong suggested helpfully.

“That’s the one. It was obvious something was seriously wrong, so we started making plans. The local police here checked with the motel and were told that there had been three gentlemen asking questions about a couple of guests...”

“The ones that Hopalong had been making deliveries to,” Jeffrey suggested.

“Which made it likely you guys were in some danger. So we met a car from the local police in the car park at the roadhouse, and worked out the arrangements once Dave and Mick had transferred some of the stuff they’d need out of the boot, and unmarked AFP cars have some very interesting stuff in the boot. Did you notice that there hasn’t been much traffic going past here for the last twenty minutes or so?”

“I did,” I remarked. “I think I heard your car pull up outside. Not a screech of tyres, or the crunch of tyres on the gravel. More like something cut out and then there was nothing.”

Liz nodded. “That was the plan. You’ll be interested to know someone detected a gas leak outside here. That’s what the papers will say on, is it Wednesday? So they called out the Emergency workers.”

“Heard the siren going in town,” Jeffrey remarked. “Wondered what was going on. Didn't think it was going to help us any, but there you go.”

“So the Emergency workers blocked off the road a couple of hundred metres away. That stopped traffic coming out of town for a start. The police cut off the road to the north and south, and when that was done, and all the traffic had been cleared out of the area, we pulled up outside here.”

I nodded.

The gradual decline in traffic noise mightn’t have been obvious but once it was gone, with the AFP car pulling up outside, you could notice the difference.

At least, I thought I did.

“Once we’d pulled up, Dave and Mick had one of those \microphones that’ll pick up a conversation from about a hundred metres away.”

“Yeah,” Jeffrey observed. “Snooping bastards.”

“Snooping that may have just saved your lives. Anyway when we came into the conversation when you were talking about mobile phones, and giving one of them the directions to your room and where your other mobile was hidden. That meant we had the chance to take one of them out, so we left the car..”

“One thing,” Hopalong wondered, “while you were away from the car, how did you know what was going on. Once you were away from the microphone, I mean.”

“You noticed the headsets Dave and Mick were wearing? The signal from the microphone was patched through to the Operations Room in Canberra, and the Operations Room are in touch with Dave and Mick through the headsets. You wouldn’t want the feed from the microphone going straight to the headsets. Too distracting. Anyway now you know...”

“How the cavalry arrived,” I concluded as Dave Griffin wandered into the room, “and speaking of the cavalry, where do we go from here? I guess our friends won’t be staying on the premises too long.”

“Actually,” Dave pointed out, “they’ll be on site for a bit longer than you might expect. More of that later. We’ve got a couple of loose ends to tie up. Have you four, not counting you Liz, nobody knows you’re here at the moment, and you’ve got that holiday planned, so you won’t be here that long.”

The suggestion was news to a certain member of the party, but Dave went on.

“Until we’ve got these three off the premises, you’re going to be a bit limited with what you can do. The story is we’ve traced the gas leak to the motel here, and it’s safe to let the traffic back onto the highway. You’ll notice a police car and a few SES people hanging around outside, but the main question is what happens to you four. It’s got to be four, not five. You’re not going to be able to stay here, because of the gas leak that’ll be front page news in your local paper whenever it comes out.”

“Wednesday, that’s paper day,” Jeffrey pointed out. “Pig’s arse I’m going anywhere. Staying right here. Or maybe the pub.”

“That’s out of the question, sorry,” Dave countered. “Do you have anywhere that’d be the logical evacuation point for this place?”

“Sure,” I said. “The shed over the other side of the cricket field. Logical choice.”

“Pig’s arse,” was Jeffrey’s rejoinder. “Told you. Not going anywhere unless it’s the pub.”

“You might not have to,” Dave pointed out. “If you’re happy to lie low here for a couple of hours, fine, but we need to have a car and four people over at this shed for the next couple of hours. Anyone?”

There wasn’t exactly a rush of volunteers.

“Doesn’t have to be four of you,” Dave indicated, “One’ll do, as long as it’s someone who can drive a car around there. We’ve got a couple of blowup dummies in the boot of the car..”

“See?” Liz remarked. “Told you it was surprising what these guys keep in their boot.”

“So if someone can drive round there and stay for a couple of hours..”

“That’ll be me,” volunteered Bright Eyes. “I’ve got plenty of reading for my next assignment, and I can do that over there just as well as I can do it here. Maybe better. Fewer distractions.”

“So, Miss,” Dave suggested, “if you’d like to come with me I’ll show you how to inflate the dummies, and you’re on your way. Be back to fill the rest of you in shortly.” The party diminished by two.

When Dave and Bright Eyes had departed, Hopalong turned to Liz.

“Holiday?” he asked. “What holiday?”

“I couldn’t tell you over the phone,” Liz explained. “But for security reasons I can’t officially arrive here for a fortnight. We need a time gap to wait while certain events stop being front page news.”

“Certain events relating to overseas terrorists. In London?” I suggested.

“What you don’t know, can’t hurt you. You can guess what you like, but you didn’t hear anything from me. We don’t want people guessing if someone happens to bear a resemblance to somebody who’s been in the news. So I have to go somewhere for a fortnight.”

She turned to Hopalong.

“How does a fortnight on Dunk Island sound? All reasonable expenses covered. If a fortnight’s not long enough, the fallback involves Lizard Island. Sound fair? Sort of a honeymoon in advance.”

With that objections became less than the dust under her chariot wheels.

“When do I start packing?” was Hopalong’s reply.

“Not until Dave’s finished with us. His job is to make sure I’m OK, and he’s got to be thorough. No loose ends. You’ll see when he gets back.”

Since we were going to see when he got back, there seemed little else to talk about. Some five minutes later, the man in charge was back in our midst.

“Right,” he said, “here’s how it plays. Jonelle’s sitting over beside the cricket field for a couple of hours’ quiet reading. No one’s going to get to her because the road’s blocked off with an SES worker on the road block. We think a gas pipe or something goes through there, but we’re not sure. You two are over there as well.”

He pointed towards Jeffrey and I.

“What about me?” Hopalong cut in. “Where am I?”

“You’re about to disappear to pack a few things for Liz to take with her, but you’ll shortly be finding yourself in the back of an ambulance on your way to a medical evacuation flight. There’s an army chopper in transit that’ll be diverted to pick you up. Be here in half an hour. Once Liz and I are back in Townsville we’ll rendezvous and then you’re on your way to Dunk. Liz told you about that? Good. So if you wouldn’t mind throwing a few things into an overnight bag.”

Hopalong and Liz departed, and Dave turned towards Jeffrey and I.

“As far as you two are concerned, you’re over the other side of the paddock. If anybody drives past they can see you, or what they think is you. If we didn’t have that in place, there’d be some picky bastard asking where the hell you pair got to when the road was closed and the building evacuated, and he was five minutes late for something or other. Liz will be giving your mate Cassidy the same drill I’m

about to give you pair. Jonelle's heard it already, and you can pass the same message on to the other bloke who lives here. He won't be back till after we leave."

"You're leaving?" It was only natural that the question should be asked.

"When we've got an extra couple of escorts from Townsville. You won't want to know the details after that. We'll take your three friends with us. You shouldn't have any more trouble in that direction. Now, as far as Liz is concerned."

He paused, seemingly intent on gaining our undivided attention.

"You've probably already gathered that she's been involved with some high level stuff back home and, effectively, she's under witness protection. Never mind how, or why, or whatever. What everyone here needs to remember is everywhere she goes, she's got a panic button. If the shit hits the fan, one signal from that and the big guns come to the rescue."

"Reassuring," I suggested., "surely there's a catch?"

"Two," I was told. "First is that the big guns are probably going to be no closer than Townsville, and they'll take time to get here. If Al Qaeda or some mob like that turn up on your doorstep, you're in deep shit till the cavalry arrives. You fluked it this time. Next time?" He shrugged.

"Our friends out the front?" I asked. "I'd have thought they would be a more likely threat?"

"When your mate Little Tony calls back we'll more than likely have that side of things taken care of. In cases like this people can usually be persuaded to see things from our point of view. By the time these three turkeys are let go, we'll have enough material to hang a shitload of charges. Deprivation of liberty here would just be the start. We'll have all sorts of other information that'll help us with a range of other inquiries."

"I thought there was this *omerta* thing?" I suggested. "What if they don't tell you anything?"

"You'd be surprised what we can put together in this sort of situation. For a start they're blown as far as their boss is concerned, so when we let them go

they're likely to end up sleeping with the fishes, so there's every chance at least one'll become interested in the witness protection program."

"I thought there were two things?" Jeffrey remarked. "The cavalry being two hours away was one. What's the other?"

"When the cavalry arrive, if she's still alive, that's the last you'll see of young Liz. If she's still with us at that point, she'll be whisked away, and she'll be on her own. So if you do anything that puts her safety at risk, that's the last your mate sees of her."

"When you put it that way," I remarked, "things become remarkably clear cut. So what do we do when she and Hopalong get back?"

"When she's back it'll be because it's safe for her to be who she's supposed to be. You just do what you were going to do as if none of this has happened. As far as anyone knows, this place had an unexplained gas leak. Cassidy discovered it. The fumes left him unconscious, and he needed to be medevaced. Liz was on her way out here to join him. She'll ring tonight looking for him. You'll tell her he's in hospital in Townsville, and she'll join him there. After he's recuperated for two or three weeks the two of them will be back here, ready to get on with the rest of their lives."

"Which will unfold as if none of this had happened," Jeffrey suggested.

"Precisely," Dave replied. "Because none of it did. Now, it must be about time for that phone call."

Wandering back into Reception, I was greeted by the sight of three less than impressed and decidedly deflated heavies. Mick had them under close supervision.

"We thought of taking these guys and sticking them in one of your rooms until the guys from Townsville arrive. They'll be another two hours, but if we were to do that they'd be missing out on the chance to tune into the conversation when their boss calls back, so we reckon they're better here. No need for the two of you to hang around, but remember, once you're gone from here you lie low in your rooms. Remember, according to the authorised version you're on the other side of the cricket field."

While Jeffrey took advantage of the invitation to relocate, I decided to stay put in the interim, at least for as much of the interim that included a phone call.

In the meantime, I filled in the background detail that explained the presence of the trio in the corner.

When a call came, it wasn't the one we were expecting.

I listened as Dave explained the premises were temporarily evacuated and that he was here checking on the gas leak. Reaching for a note pad he offered to take a message and pass it on to the regular inhabitants once the all clear had sounded.

“Who was that?” I asked as the handset was replaced in its cradle, thinking it was lucky I hadn't answered the thing myself.

“Bloke called Roger,” Dave replied. “Ringing STD judging by the pips.”

I had momentary visions of someone doing their best to acquire one of the other forms of STD in the company of a certain apprentice hairdresser.

I put them to one side reflecting that I'd prefer not to know the ins and outs of the casting couch if I wasn't going to be in charge of same myself.

“What did he want?” was a predictable question under the circumstances.

“Wanted to know a few things to tie in with the publicity for the quest. Nothing that pertains to this matter, I hope?”

Putting those concerns to rest was a convenient way of filling in the time until the phone rang again and brought an expected participant into the arena.

“So you're not bothered by this? I mean, your girlfriend and all. Now, from what you're saying, she's more than likely off to London. Bright lights, big city and all that.”

“Mate,” I replied, “if that's the way it pans out, that's the way it pans out. It's not that things progressed too far, anyway. I mean I've only been back from the States for a bit over a fortnight, and...”

A trill from the telephone spared me the necessity of further explanation. Dave picked up the phone.

“Tony, old mate,” was his greeting, “so glad you took the time to call back.”

Dave turned towards me.

“Speaker phone?”

I nodded.

“Got your mates here with me and Dave Herston as well, and I can put you on the speaker phone if you’d like. That way everyone can hear. No? You’d prefer I didn’t. Fine, your call. Most important thing is to put you in the picture. After that it’s your call. I’m with the AFP. Antiterrorism section, if you want to know, rather than the boys you may’ve had dealings with. Well, the situation’s this. Your three boys stumbled onto the edge of one of our operations, and we’d have preferred it if they hadn’t, to be quite honest. You can probably appreciate that. Yeah, I know it’s a bastard, but shit happens, you know?”

I found myself wishing the speaker phone was in operation, but it was, after all, Little Tony’s call.

“Anyway, the situation’s this. We’ll be hanging on to your boys for a couple of days. More than likely till Friday. Yeah, I know we’re not supposed to be able to do that, but we’re talking counter-terrorism. Under the Act we’ve got a few strings that wouldn’t normally be on the bow. Of course, we could always go for straight criminal proceedings. Deprivation of liberty comes to mind for starters and head office could probably come up with a few more when they put their minds to it. Betting ring stewards at Randwick would definitely be interested in circumstances surrounding a race last Saturday week.”

The man was obviously an experienced negotiator who wasn’t used to holding back.

“So all going well,” Dave went on, “we’ll be turning them loose in Brisbane, maybe Sydney, more than likely on Friday or Saturday. No, can’t be any earlier. It’ll take a good day to drive the car down to Brisbane and the boys down that way will be wanting to take a good look at it. That’ll take two days, more than likely. So that’s Friday, by the time they’ve put everything back together.”

There was a fridge behind the counter. I grabbed myself a cool drink as the conversation continued.

“No, you don’t want legal counsel. Trust me. That’s why we’ll be letting your boys go without charge once we’ve got enough stuff to act as insurance. To be quite honest, just between you, me, the wall, your three boys and Dave Herston, we’d prefer not to have this matter go through the courts. As you can appreciate in your line of work, there are things you’d prefer to keep out of the spotlight. You understand? Good. So you won’t have anyone sniffing ‘round here looking for this Waddington bloke and his mate the jockey.”

Good, I thought. Now we’re getting somewhere.

“Yeah,” Dave went on, “I’ve got Dave Herston here with me, and he’s quite open about the fact that the two of them were here, very briefly on the premises, and in the town long enough to make up their minds where they were going next. No, Dave didn’t have anything to do with their departure, so you wouldn’t expect him to know too much about where they were off to. Sure, if you feel inclined, you can go on asking questions in Townsville and see if you can pick up the trail there, no problems in that regard. It’s just here that should be a *no go* zone at the moment.”

All of which were developments that warranted a substantial tick of approval as far as Herston and Company were concerned.

“Between you and me, I’d put the whole thing down to experience. Face it, you made a little mistake last Saturday week, and if you hadn’t the whole situation wouldn’t have arisen.”

I couldn’t, I reflected, have put it better myself.

“Want to talk to Dave Herston? Not at the moment? Fine, but when you do call back, remember we’ll be monitoring the line so you might want to be careful about what’s said. What’s that? A few racing tips? Fine, as long as you don’t mind them going a bit further.”

With that, the call was concluded.

“You’ll probably be hearing from Little Tony later in the week, but I wouldn’t be too worried about that. By the time we’ve finished with these three, we’ll have enough up our sleeves to make things very difficult for Tony and his mates, and if they know what’s good for them they’ll let sleeping dogs lie.”

‘No problem this end,’ I remarked, ‘now if you don’t mind I’ll be heading back to my room. I’m Fifteen, if you need me. Jeffrey’s in Four.’”

As I headed back to the cave, I passed Liz, who’d obviously seen Hopalong off in the ambulance.

“I’ll be trying to catch up on a few Z’s. As you may have gathered I was rudely awakened, and there’s a bit of a backlog to catch up on. Have a good time on Dunk and we’ll see you when the pair of you get back. You’ve had a look upstairs? Plenty of oom for the pair of you and two point something kids, if you want to take advantage of it.”

Having pointed her in the general direction of her future living quarters, I headed off.

A couple of hours later a tap on the door indicated the all clear had sounded, and I was at liberty to contact Roger re. whatever it was he wanted to consult me about.

“Thanks for your help. We’ll be off, and with a bit of luck you won’t be seeing us again. That’s the plan anyway. When Liz and her bloke get back, remember none of this happened. You had a bit of excitement with a gas leak serious enough to land Cassidy in hospital for observation, but nothing to really worry about.”

The phone rang a couple of times before someone deigned to pick it up.

When someone did, I formed the distinct impression that I’d reached the secretary. “My name’s Dave Herston and I was hoping to speak to Roger,” I began.

“Speaking,” was the reply.

For some reason, I suspected that the respondent preferred to be on the receiving end when it came to a question of rogering.

Bernelle’s virtue, it seemed, was safe.

“You rang earlier this morning..” I prompted.

“Yes. About the publicity for the Quest. We’re making the announcement later today and talking to Bernelle, lovely girl, I formed the distinct impression here was a human interest angle that might interest the current affairs people on TV.”

“Sorry. We’d rather not. Happy to cover expenses and all that, but no publicity if you don’t mind.”

The disappointment at the other end was palpable.

“Look.” I went on, “We’re in a tricky situation here. I’d like to help, and I’ve seen enough examples of kids from the country missing out on things because money turned out to be a problem. You can rest assured I’ll help with expenses. At the same time, I don’t want every hard up case for miles around beating a path to the door. Generous benefactors who prefer to remain anonymous, fine. Anything beyond that could be a problem. There are a few other issues that I’d prefer not to go into.”

With that issue addressed there was one more thing that needed to be done, so I headed past Room Four. Unsurprisingly, the occupant was less than impressed by recent developments, particularly the parts involving police presence on the premises.

“Unavoidable, mate. Especially since someone had to meet Liz in Townsville, get her down here and make sure the security arrangements are right. After all, we don’t want Osama or some of his mates knocking on the door.”

“I know all that, but it’s the principle of the thing. If Hopalong hadn’t blabbed about running messages we wouldn’t have had those three goons on the doorstep, and they could have dropped Liz off, taken a quick squiz around the place and fucked off. Anyway, as it is, it’s lucky they turned up.”

“All we need to do is make sure we’ve got our story right. Keep it simple. So Cassidy was getting his breakfast together when he was overcome by the gas leak. That’d just about fit?”

“We ask Sandy whether he smelt gas earlier, when he was getting his.”

“Sandy’ll probably tell you it’s been a while since he got his, but that’d be right. Hopalong won’t know anything since he was unconscious.”

“Knew fuck all in the first place. So who found him?”

“Since I’m on the record as planning to cave myself for a substantial chunk of the week, it’d better be you or Bright Eyes. You, I think. You bullshit better.”

The compliment was accepted graciously.

“So I called 000 and raised the alarm. The girl on the switchboard told me to leave the place open and get the fuck out, so I roused you and Bright Eyes, and we did. Drove round to the shed at the cricket ground and waited till the all clear. What’d we do while we were there for the three hours?”

“Bright Eyes had some reading to do for her assignment,” I suggested. “She’s always got reading to do for her assignment. Since she had two dummies over there with her, maybe we’d better ask her what they were doing. In case someone noticed them from the highway,” I suggested.

Subsequently, outside the door to Room One we learned that Jeffrey had laid down on a bench and gone to sleep.

“I figured that I needed something that’d explain a lack of movement,” Bright Eyes explained. “So when I inflated one dummy I laid it out on one of the benches. I figured that one’d be Jeffrey. The second one I sat at one of the tables and arranged for it to slump over the table. You’d brought a book to read, but the pressures of the weekend meant you fell asleep as well.”

“Sounds good. Since we were both unconscious, there’s no need to fill in the finer details.”

After we’d run through the details again, just to be on the safe side, that was it.

“So what now?” I asked. “All the excitement’s over. We’re under instruction to lie low for a couple of days. So we sit around and wait till Sandy gets home and ask him whether he smelt gas, I guess. In the meantime, I’m off back to bed.”

As I spoke a car turned into the driveway.

The occupants were the Twins, obviously on a mission of some journalistic import.

“You talk to them,” I said. “You’re the one who discovered Hopalong on the floor.”

The Twins were the first in a string of visitors who called by to *check everything was OK*, which, of course, translates as *find out what the fuck is going on*.

When I’d made it into the sanctuary, I found sleep was impossible. At the same time I was disinclined to venture out and answer questions, so I needed something to fill in the time.

The music catalogue was, virtually, finished, and, lacking anything better to do I sat down at the computer and started typing.

What I typed started as a straightforward account of recent events, and then morphed, over time, into the current manuscript.

Not that it’s ever likely to see the light of day. National security issues will see to that.

On the other hand, at some point in the future, a set of circumstances may arise that result in another account, and, then, some of the material gathered here might be useful

Jumping To Conclusions

Sandy's return just after three that afternoon prompted a major crisis.

He'd come straight from work, partly because Monday was a sufficient shock to the system, and he was disinclined to prolong the agony, but largely because news of a gas leak at The Crossroads had spread around town like wildfire. The flow of visitors continued unabated, so there was no opportunity to disclose the real story, even if we'd received specific instructions to keep the actual details to those who were there at the time.

Having been informed Hopalong had been hauled off to hospital in Townsville *So, how is the scoffing bastard?* shouldn't have been entirely unexpected.

Of course, the rest of us had a fair idea of what he was likely to be engaged in, and felt no concern whatsoever.

Faced with the question, Jeffrey shrugged to indicate complete ignorance, prompting Sandy's departure to see if he could find out over the phone. I wasn't there at the time, and the first I knew of this unexpected development was a knock on the door, followed by a rapid entry of a concerned Jeffrey.

"What'll we do? He's ringing the hospital, and no way Cassidy's going to be there. Mind you, he's probably playing Doctors and Nurses right at this moment, but no one's going to tell Sandy that."

"Relax. Dave'll have had that all covered. They've probably had some cover story. Allegedly put him in the secure section of the hospital. The one where they put the crims from the jail when they need hospital treatment. Either that or the Psycho ward. In either case, they won't be allowed to divulge details to any Tom, Dick or Sandy over the phone."

The thought produced a chuckle.

“The Psych ward, eh? Always said the bastard’d go mad from scoffing.”

Further musings on the matter were, however, cut short by Sandy’s arrival on the scene.

“What’ll we do?” Sandy asked, highly *agitato*. “The hospital said they couldn’t discuss the case over the phone. Liz is in transit somewhere between London and here. She’ll need to know.”

“When Liz gets here,” I pointed out, conveniently neglecting the fact Liz had, in the words of more than one old blues man *done been here and gone*, “she’s bound to ring. She’ll more than likely be ringing from Townsville. Where Hopalong is. She’s got a bit more status than any of us, being his fiance and all that. Relax. She’ll probably end up telling us how the bastard is rather than *Vicky verka*,” which was the way things panned out.

“A more important consideration is what we do about eating tonight,” was my way of diverting attention from a difficult subject. “I mean we could go to the pub for a counter meal, but I don’t feel like explaining the story about what happened here about fifty times. Remember, we had fish and chips last night, and Luciano’s closed on Mondays.”

“I could do a curry, but do you think that’s wise after a gas leak? Using the stove, I mean.”

“You’ve got a rice cooker, remember?” Jeffrey cut in. “And an electric fry pan. No need to use the gas. It’s probably best to give the gas range a break for a couple of days. Do it in the restaurant rather than the kitchen, just to be on the safe side. Got everything you need? Bright Eyes can do a grocery run if you need anything.”

The words, though Sandy failed to recognize them as such, of a past master of diversionary tactics.

With that minor hiccup out of the way it was a case of every man about his own business until it was time to assemble for dinner.

I headed back to the room and took up where I’d left off on the draft of this narrative before a knock on the door at five reminded me the first of the evening

news bulletins was about to hit the airwaves. I switched on the TV, turned down the volume and resumed typing while I waited for the coverage of the Apprentice Hairdresser of the Year award.

Sure as eggs, around five-thirty there they were announcing the winner.

The announcement was made by a gentleman who resembled the runner-up in a Liberace-Look-Alike contest. I recognized the voice.

As predicted, the winner was Bernelle Butler, who managed to feign the right mixture of shock, joy and amazement when the announcement was made. After that performance, she was probably also looking at a career in acting.

The item had barely finished when the door burst open.

“Holy Dooley,” Jeffrey announced, “I’ve seen some raging faggots in my time, but that one just about takes the biscuit.”

“I presume,” I remarked as I closed the computer file, “that you’re referring to Roger, who happened to call here earlier today, if you recall. When I’d first heard the name from Blondie I thought we were talking about some bloke who’s have young Bern gnawing the ‘nana within the first ten minutes and end up making the beast with two backs till well into the midnight hour. At least that’s what springs to mind whenever that particular name comes up. Roger the Lodger the sod. Roger Ramjet and all that.”

“Fat chance, That one’d have to be queer as a fish milk shake. Freckle puncher if ever I saw one.”

“*Punchee* might be more accurate. That was the impression I got over the phone this morning. More likely to be a rogeree than a rogerer, I thought, though, at the time, I’d expected we’d find out that he was a bloke with an unfortunate speech impediment, a wife and three lovely kiddies.”

“About as much chance of that as I have of flying to the moon. Ready for something from the bar while we wait for the next bulletin?”

For all my good intentions, it was obvious there wasn’t going to be any form of productive activity for the rest of the evening.

I joined Jeffrey on a stroll to the Restaurant, where we turned on the TV and engaged in the usual round of whimsical character assassination while Sandy started dinner preparations.

Just after six-fifteen we were waiting for the next coverage from Brisbane when the phone rang. Sandy was busily engaged in culinary activities, and Bright Eyes was yet to arrive. Jeffrey looked at me.

I shrugged.

He'd been doing public relations all afternoon. It was my turn.

“Moderation. Herston here. What can I do you for?” was my new standard gambit when answering incoming calls. The caller informed me that she was Liz, and apologised for not calling earlier. Obviously while Jeffrey had been engaged in public relations she'd been indulging in public relations.

“So, Liz,” I went on playing along with the party line, “how are you? But more importantly, where are you? Townsville? Excellent! Hold your horses. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars or, specifically, do not leave Townsville. We had a little accident this morning. As far as we can tell Hopalong's in Townsville General. Relax, he's in there under observation. Should be fine. Sandy tried to call earlier, but they wouldn't discuss the case over the phone. You'd be in a different category being his fiancé and all that. You'll find out how he is and keep us posted? Excellent! Tonight or tomorrow morning. Whenever. 'Bye.’”

“There you go,” I said to the assembled multitude.

Bright Eyes had arrived, more than likely summoned by the trilling telephone.

“Liz is in Townsville. She'll check how the scoffing mongrel is and let us know.”

“You should have pointed out to her,” Jeffrey suggested, “that he's probably in the Psycho Ward. Gone mad from scoffing. Probably wasn't a gas leak at all. More than likely passed out due to an interruption of oxygen to the brain after a long scoff. It's a wonder it hasn't happened before.”

“Good grief,” was Bright Eyes’ contribution to the developing topic. “The poor guy’s in hospital, and you’re still into him. Don’t you ever leave off?”

“Why should we? Yeah, why should we? Absent friends and all that. Why should he get away scot free just because he’s not here. Up him for the rent, the bastard. Silly as a bagful of arseholes. Wouldn’t know if you were up him with an armful of chairs.”

As the curry hit the table, I cracked a bottle of Gewurztraminer.

The conversation descended into general ribaldry as we scanned the various TV channels for further coverage of Bernelle’s triumph. Around seven-forty-five, the phone rang again. After I’d answered I was able to report on Cassidy’s condition.

“Liz says they’ve got him in a private room,” I started.

“Probably don’t want him scoffing over every bastard,” Jeffrey observed. “Still, with a room to himself there’s every chance he’ll be exercising the B.V.J.P. if they’re not keeping a close eye on him.”

“What,” Bright Eyes inquired, “is a B.V.J.P. when it’s at home? No, wait, I don’t think I want to know.”

There was a consensus around the table that ignorance in these matters was bliss, but Bright Eyes was, strangely, undeterred.

“No, really, what is it? It’s a new one on me?”

“Do you mean,” Jeffrey suggested, “that on your frequent child-bridegrooming expeditions you’ve avoided entanglements with that portion of the anatomy that could be loosely labelled the Blue Veined Junket Pump? That it’s a new one on you?”

“I should have known,” Bright Eyes replied, lifting her eyes skywards. “Why did I ask?”

I decided it was time to come to the rescue.

“Liz goes on to say that he’s resting quietly.”

“See?” Jeffrey responded, “They've been at it already? Sound out of breath did she? Probably been at it ever since she arrived. Or ever since she came, rather.”

“Jeffrey, he’s under observation,” Bright Eyes pointed out. You’d have expected the girl to know better.

“I’ll bet he’s under observation. Kinky bastards. I’ll bet the wardsmen are all lined up, twangin’ the wire like it’s going out of style.”

At this point Bright Eyes admitted defeat and retreated to her assignment. It was the end of the evening news cycle, the Traminer was almost terminated, and a wave of weariness washed over me.

“Right, you bastards,” I stated as I rose. “Time for this little black duck to hit the cot. For the next two days unless we have an emergency I am *incommunicado* as far as the world’s concerned.”

It didn’t, of course, quite work out that way.

In the wake of Bernelle’s success, and despite assurances from Roger when I raised the matter with him we received a wave of phone calls from producers of current affairs shows looking at a human interest story about philanthropists from a northern town who had been so supportive of a small business-sponsored entry in a certain national quest.

Since their dictionaries did not seem to have an entry for the word **no** in the end the best we could do was to sool the whole great wing of the bastards off to Dagwood and Blondie. After all, they were the official sponsors.

At the end of the week, the judging delivered the predicted result.

On a Monday two weeks later we were in front of the TV again, having just watched the ***Midday Show*** report on Bernelle and her imminent departure for the hairdressing fleshpots of London.

This was supposed to transpire at an indeterminate point in the future, but the press coverage had gone through the roof.

She has, in the short space of a fortnight, become a media sensation, to the extent that one women’s magazine had her on the front cover with an invitation for

the readership to decide whether she should remain Bernelle Butler or change her name to Marilyn Mundsén.

Bernelle or Marilyn? YOU decide.

Sheesh.

Some of us, of course, were missing.

Sandy, informed of the screening, hoped to catch it from the comfort of the staff room, provided it came on during the lunch hour or one of his few spares.

Hopalong and his lovely paramour, effectively honeymooning on Dunk, and more than likely drunk on Dunk, had been instructed to watch it. Bernelle, of course, was in Sydney, having just appeared live on the programme.

Olga was in Townsville, hopefully still keeping Balls company. Long may she stay there.

The report itself looked very good indeed.

Starting with a panoramic sweep of the less scenic approach to the town, the voice over informed *Australia appearances can be deceptive. Most travellers, faced with this aspect, drive straight past, but those who take the trouble to drive in find plenty of attractive beaches and the people have a sense of community so strong that one group of anonymous benefactors pooled together to make sure an apprentice hairdresser does not miss out on the opportunity of a lifetime.*

This was followed by a short interview with Dagwood, who intimated the anonymous benefactors are *quiet types who have done a lot to the town.* Asked if they meant *for the town*, he was quite definite.

No, they'd definitely done plenty to the town. Thanks, Dagwood.

The footage was followed by Bernelle live in the studio, a virtuoso performance with a string of episodes of blonde that had the studio audience beside themselves.

Soon after ,she flew out, but rang the night before she left with profuse thanks for everything, suggesting that I come over to London to visit some time soon.

Despite assurances that I'd find a bed any time I arrived. I had to turn down the offer, rather more diplomatically than you would turn down a bedspread. Overseas travel, I explained ruefully, had little appeal for me these days in view of what happens when you get home.

She said she knew what I was talking about.

No, as far as I'm concerned, from here on it's the quiet life, lived with a rhythm and blues soundtrack on the outskirts of town with the occasional visit to the side bar of the Palace, whenever a change of scenery is indicated.

And so the affair of the Olga, the Lovely Bernelle and the Mafia reached a satisfactory conclusion and the world had, at least temporarily, been righted.

Not, of course, that this state of affairs was likely to last.

Never expect any extended period of tranquillity when there is a Jeffrey to fit into the equation.

For sure, somewhere around the corner, fate is slipping the lead into the boxing glove.

All I could hope for was that the relative calm would last longer than a day.

Don't make plans.