

TO THE CROSSROADS

To most people, news they were twenty million richer would spell the end of mundane financial worries, which is, after all, is the theory behind television advertising of lotteries and the like.

To an extent, they would be right, but money, as has frequently been pointed out, cannot buy happiness. Unfortunately 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 became 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 been removed my worldly goods from the flat, placing them in storage until new accommodation was found.

While the search was conducted we set up headquarters in Airlie Beach, commuting to do the rounds of real estate agencies and carry out inspections. Ferrying services were carried out by Captain Headrush and when he was unavailable, our liaison officer, Hopalong Cassidy.

Given Airlie's party town status, our accommodation had been designed to allow revellers returning around the crack of dawn to sleep without any vestige of daylight penetrating to the inner depths of the bedrooms. While we usually returned before midnight, the opportunity to sleep in meant it was usually well after nine before we were on the blower to Mr Cassidy to organize a rendezvous for the northward journey.

Given the best part of an hour required for a vehicle to make its way to wherever we'd chosen for brunch, and the time that elapsed while it made its way back, it was usually noon before we arrived in Denison and set about the activities that needed to be carried out.

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 was more difficult than we'd anticipated.

Building was one possibility, but deciding on a design, finding contractors to erect it, and the delay while the edifice went up meant buying a ready-made residence seemed the way to go, so we started doing the rounds of houses on 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 still found the privacy problem 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 somewhere that could provide quarters for him and his intended once she'd completed her enlistment in the British military.

On top of that it didn't seem right to take prime farming land and either render it unproductive or subcontract someone else to do the farming. While it might be possible to leave responsibility to whoever undertook the task I had a feeling that, however much I tried to avoid it, I'd end up intrigued by what was going on and end up doing something that would end up resembling regular work.

Having ruled out the farm option, we considered a virgin stretch of country and developing separate encampments around a central hub.

We could, the thinking went, 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 exactly 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 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 and I was mildly surprised when the gentleman, 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 suitable. 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 main north-south highway and the route into town. There was significantly larger 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 realize this was exactly what the doctor ordered. There were fifteen rooms large enough to make comfortable bedrooms with en-suites, thus preventing bathroom queues. Advantage Number One.

Above Reception, the manager's quarters would be suitable for a married couple and a couple of offspring, and behind Reception the Restaurant could serve as a communal living and dining area. Advantage Number Two.

The kitchen was large enough to handle our catering requirements and came equipped with a variety of 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 to the Palace and retreated to the beer garden, leaving instructions Hopalong and Sandy were to be informed of our whereabouts when they lobbied on the premises. Once we'd eliminated the need to walk back and forth we settled down to consider the possibilities.

"We've got fifteen rooms to start with," Jeffrey observed. "Take out two for you. You've got all 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 still 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, so 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 a collection of CDs and a burner I *can* put together some disks 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 the cocktail line and we'd have a classy little establishment and no pimps, shoe salesmen, or professional virgins allowed," Jeffrey opined.

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* and 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 our spot in the side bar with just enough time to organize a round of refreshment 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. "We've got urgent business and this bastard is going to have to be sober to drive us to our new living quarters for a quick squiz before we come back to celebrate. 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 the 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. 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 finally 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 and was 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 a 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 get a discussion about what we're going to do to the place started 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, however, 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 one of the motel rooms. 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," suggested Sandy, "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 and 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 as well. Who do you reckon would be a likely starter?"

"Dunno," was Hopalong's contribution, "but 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 a fish while you're being carried around in style."

Unfortunately no one present was able to come up with a suggestion before Hopalong's chariot pulled up and 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 in the middle of 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 opined, "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 of refreshing liquid 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.

"Now 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* move into the vacant position of chauffeur to the multitudes 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 post-grad stuff by correspondence? You could take leave, get supply work here and there, study all you like 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, "be needing someone to get 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, I think."

"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 the lot of you 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, but around the time the deal was completed and we'd taken possession she burst upon the scene 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. Not only that, 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 Jeffrey's reaction. "A standing prick has no memory. And Mr Cassidy, who is still on his feet is widely 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 fulfill 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 fairly 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 off-duty 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 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 on 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, still have plenty of time to study and 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 matter of 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 over *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 outside. 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 the responsibility for ensuring all available fridge space was permanently stacked to the brim with potables.

Since we would be needing 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 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 juke box in the bar.

Since the device held a hundred disks, there were some decisions to be made regarding 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 *best of* was going to provide useful mental stimulation.

Having assigned the four of us to our various responsibilities, there was the matter of working out what we were going to do with the remainder of the rooms.

Starting with fifteen rooms, once we had allocated bedrooms for Jeffrey, Sandy, Hopalong, Bright Eyes and myself and 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 themselves, 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 actual allocation of living quarters.

Bright Eyes, given student status, needed to be comfortably away from distracting influences and would logically have been allocated Room One if she hadn't claimed it immediately.

Hopalong, we reasoned, was more or less Mr Handyman on 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 (given the likelihood that incoming calls would be coming from overseas) which probably indicated Room Three or Four, but the shed that housed the mowers and other mechanical equipment were behind the smaller block, so Three was the logical spot as far as he was concerned.

Proximity to the bar was a prime consideration as far as Jeffrey was concerned, so Four was a logical fit as far as he was concerned.

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 it wasn't too difficult to figure 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. The contents of these rooms was discussed at length in the cool of the evening as we gathered beside the pool. Once preliminary schemes were decided upon, increasingly elaborate sketches were drawn up, showing the intricacies of our collective vision.

One room was to be decorated in the *classic French 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, while, having left 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, and 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 any wine bottle," I went on. "What do they all say? Enjoy wine in moderation! We'll be knocking over plenty of bottles in 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 fairly easy to come up with, though there was a dissenting voice. *Moderation. Private property. No admittance unless invited* was the message 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," were his opening remarks. "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 farming land.

"Ordinarily," Mad Bob replied, "you'd be right. But I've got to the point where I have to decide whether I'm going 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 always 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 I can produce. 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's a couple of people I can call in if I need a casual for a couple of hours. Low costs, guaranteed returns. Way to go as far as I'm concerned."

"Sounds like it. So what's on offer?"

"Two-and-a-half hectares of prime agricultural land, complete 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 playing and coaching complex which could be offered to the local Primary School representative team, coached, after my resignation, by the inimitable Scum Dog, my offside for the previous few years.

Leaving the coaching side of things was my only regret about leaving the education system, and this was a way of making up for it, as well as maintaining a degree of involvement. Looking at the field we could set up a small 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 viewing areas removed 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 was installed 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 concrete about it. Knowledge of Crescent City culture suggested the optimum time to visit would be during Mardi Gras, which had passed, or Jazzfest, the two-weekend extravaganza in late April and early May.

Should we fail to find our way to Jazzfest 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.

Unfortunately, by the time I started looking accommodation wasn't easy to find, and 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 right in the heart of the French Quarter. An attempt to book two places on the tour, however, revealed it was fully booked, and I made a tentative booking for the following year while asking 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 and asking if I was still interested. A phone call got us booked in, negotiations with the airlines would get us across The Pond a couple of days before Jazzfest started, and I decided a layover in L.A. would give us time to deal with jet lag before the festing kicked into high gear.

Jeffrey had visited New Orleans several years ago, and needed no encouragement when the subject of a revisit was raised. There was a little streetwalker on Bourbon Street who never failed to bring a touch of wistfulness into his voice when he recalled their all-too-brief encounter. If she had succeeded in doing that, and if the physical contortions and muscular control Jeffrey had described were half way true, she must have been some lady.

While Jeffrey's interests on the trip were going to centre around physical activity, after years collecting music, with a particular 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 gamut of musical styles on offer, and 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, so our colleagues were hardly likely to object when I suggested we'd be leaving them to themselves for two months, give or take a week or two.

With arrangements made with 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.

Parcels were posted home under plain wrappings before we headed to New Orleans, arriving with a day to settle in before the musical smorgasbord was sampled. There was a private dinner on the Thursday night, then 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, returning 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 spent sampling live music, investigations that 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, but turning out something that tasted the way it should was quite another, and if I was going to turn out something close to the real thing when I got back home I needed more than just the right ingredients. 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 late, settle down to a solid brunch and set out for whatever I'd pencilled in on the music/culinary circuit. 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 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 female chauffeur's outfit in the history of Western civilization, was a statuesque blonde wearing gold lame hot pants that could well have melted titanium, recently liberated from Year Nine Cit. Ed.

With the re-entry formalities concluded, the next item on the agenda was taking delivery of a red Mercedes convertible, and 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 to all and sundry, due to his ample proportions, as Waddles, a former habitu  of the Palace until shortly 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, resulting from a combination of accurate information and what was frequently described as *sheer arse*, 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 but such conveyances were regarded with deep suspicion by the local bookmakers.

Faced with the situation where everything he owned ended up very short regardless of the quality of the field Waddles started investing in tried fillies and mares, and giving them a couple of runs in the area before retiring them to stud. In theory, this practice of matching moderately successful brood 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, break, 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, so as soon as his name appeared in the race book and Waddles or any of his associates 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 ear.

Once we'd decided on a preferred conveyance, a word in Waddles' shell-like appendage 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 necessarily be looking at an *actual Mercedes as such*, but if you give me a couple of weeks 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. verified he had succeeded, and so we collected our luggage from the carousel, and with Bright Eyes in tow, hailed a cab 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 at the suggestion of our host, we repaired down the road to the *Wagon Wheels* for further liquid sustenance.

Having left the *motor vehicle industry* to one of his minions, Waddles wanted to catch up on news from the North and inform us of 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 betting, 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 was likely to be forthcoming at the first given opportunity from his impressive jowls. 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.

Since the sun was barely over the yardarm, it was no surprise to find the bar almost deserted. As we found our way to a quiet corner, our host placed a roll on the bar, remarked it was his shout, asked for *the usual, and whatever these gentlemen are having* and departed in the direction of the gents *to make room for some more piss*.

As he wended his way loo-wards, strategies discussed while crossing the Pacific kicked in. Experience suggested once we entered the bar, he would insist on shouting. This tendency to play the *grand seigneur* had frequently been noted.

We also guessed the venue, wherever it was, 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 subsidizing his drinks.

We also suspected the bankroll would be a bundle of \$100 bills with a fifty wrapped around the outside as *drinking money*.

Knowing the bar attendant would more than likely be out of sight, or at least have her back turned while the round was assembled, we doubted there'd be anyone who wasn't part of our circle nearby.

There was, therefore, a better than even chance we'd be able to extract a couple of bills from the roll of notes without their absence being noticed, provided we could keep his attention away from the bundle.

Since he would almost certainly be telling us all about his punting exploits, as long as we kept shouting, he wouldn't notice. In case the bundle looked a little thin, a business card or something similar slipped into the middle would make the absence of a note or two a little 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, placed underneath the roll, and identified as the source to pay for the first round.

Unaware of what we'd planned, Bright Eyes watched with amazement as Jeffrey extracted two hundreds 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.

With 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.

“So since I bought the first round, 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 which turned out to have a heart the size of a pea when the pressure went on and jockeys who, if they drove the way they rode, would be flat out getting out of the car park.

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 listened, gradually worked her way through the nonalcoholic drinks on offer; and after two and a half hours of boredom, inquired whether, since we seemed to be planning to take ourselves to Royal Randwick tomorrow, 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; and Bright Eyes volunteered to take a look around the options, promising to return some time 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 having been demolished, rounds consumed, and races dissected in detail 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 assured us 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 be in no mood to depart, but we persuaded him

to phone the yard to check everything was under control (which, as it transpired, it was) and call 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 o'clock, 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? Didn't you realize 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 there, but that bit of inconsistency just 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 just 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'll be needing 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 and, after dinner beside the swimming pool, we adjourned to the rooms, and retired to the realms of totally justified sleep, knowing further adventures awaited and 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 be needing 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 over the preceding year or so a busy hour was spent collecting the oil we hoped would fuel a successful afternoon on the punt. With the calls out of the way, armed with raw information and copies of every form guide we could lay our hands on 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 attacked the fields in search of a couple of standout bets, thinking if I could link them in a couple of all-up bets we might be able to eat somewhere reasonable afterwards and worked my way through tipsters' polls, ratings approaches, selection systems and expert advice before settling on three horses 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 already up a couple of grand after the first race. Recriminations over yesterday's stratagem were temporarily forgotten.

Knowing Waddles would only occasionally be venturing in search of liquid refreshment 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 window 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 return to the bar for further 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 safely 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 and that since it would come to two hundred and twenty so Bright Eyes would need to contribute twenty dollars of her own, some of her objections disappeared.

The financial negotiations completed, Bright Eyes set out in search of likely conveyances. Noticing another shortener in Melbourne, I headed for the ring, returning to find that 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 four horse accumulators with the bookies, maximizing 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 the Bright Eyes Investment fund 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 the three hundred in the cunning kick would be better spent on strong drink, rather than joining the 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 over \$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 making 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 here 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, we learned, 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 suggested 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 and 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 with pockets already bulging from the accumulated wealth squeezed into them to collect from the tote, I was forced to remark 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 any time.

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 consumption of alcohol while investments are being made, preferring to make up for lost time after his activities had concluded, so we were unaware of his financial status as he joined us after the last moaning he'd dropped ten grand after being *well up* due to the later longer priced winners.

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 general exhaustion. The decision had little or nothing to do with the fact that Waddles continued to bemoan his bad luck.

In any case, we had little option but to say nothing since the horses he was berating so vehemently 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 to bring forth 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 large 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 ourselves into penthouse at a downtown five star establishment and another to secure a table at one of Sydney's better restaurants for dinner.

After settling up we were back in transit and 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 tonight.

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 from Rutherglen.

THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

Facing the inevitable aftermath of the evening's celebrations, under normal circumstances I would have preferred to remain in my room, quietly recuperating until hunger forced me to set out in search of brunch, and if that idea 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.

By the time 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 for him to ignore. It took a while to rouse him, and once he'd voiced his displeasure at being disturbed I was able to point out that breakfast downstairs was scheduled to conclude within the half-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 a bit. First things first. When do we want to get home? Remembering it's going to take us a good couple of days. Three or 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 wanted 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 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 nearby 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 be spending 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," I went on. "That's going to give 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 the question I suspected to prove to be the crux of the matter.

"So if we're on the Gold Coast on Tuesday night, we need an excuse for not continuing on to 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 two 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 viable possibility.

I conveniently neglected to mention that hotel staff in reception were already researching along these lines, 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."

"There's no way that's going to be a problem," I countered. "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, waving the document I'd been perusing in the time between my return to the room and the reconvening of the conference.

"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 the time while we're in the tasting rooms and we'll get them to call you on your mobile when we're ready to head to the next place. 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 were looking for someone to drive our car from here to the Hunter Valley today. 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."

The 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, and while I was ringing around for somewhere to base ourselves, a glance at the booklet and the range of attractions to be sampled removed the last reservations, though she needed 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 standing 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 to find the voice belonged to a slim individual of the questionable-male persuasion, someone you'd be easily able to picture in a bell boy's outfit even if he wasn't wearing a bell. 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 those details," our new acquaintance lisped. "The valet parking boys are very good friends of mine."

"I think," Jeffrey remarked as the slim 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* and 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'm going to survive the next couple of hours without something to drink. I thought I'd be OK, but I suspect 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, "there's any way we'd be able to trouble you for a six pack of Fosters and, say another of Bluetongue. That'd be your preference wouldn't it in Herston? At the bar? Fine. We'll also need something like 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 sported a couple of wine cartons, several garbage bags, a six-pack of Fosters, another of Bluetongue and a couple of 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 in there, 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, we resumed our journey as Jeffrey placed a second 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 the 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 are likely to 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 on, if you don't mind. As I was saying before, if you find yourself having an unplanned party in the back yard without an esky handy you'll find the washing machine makes a perfectly satisfactory 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 though it could well include *some poor buggers*.

Once we'd obtained an esky and a further supply of ice I allowed myself a beer on the basis it was sufficiently chilled and chilling out in the back seat on a sunny Sunday afternoon as the countryside beside the freeway 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 was enough to ensure 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 an enquiry whether I wanted to stop in at the Visitor Information Centre on the way to the accommodation.

The size of the wine-producing 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, so 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 close to the epicentre of the Valley's activity with tasting and shopping operations 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 also realized if we wanted an enthusiastic and compliant chauffeur the following morning it was advisable to give her the option of retail therapy in the afternoon, so I dropped her in the first suitable premises and set out towards the nearest tasting facility *via* a book store, where I stocked up on reference books.

When five o'clock rolled around and the tasting venues closed their doors I returned to base, reported on proceedings and settled down to map out an itinerary for the following day, directing my attention towards those with the highest ratings in the various consumer guides and anything 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 before bed.

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," I asked my companions as another establishment disappeared behind us, "they knew we were on the way? Everywhere else we wander 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 and Bright Eyes was pointed in the direction of 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, by the way. 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. As long as they keep on bringing out the museum samples that's fine with me. 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 and the reception committee inside were ready to steer Bright Eyes in the direction of the art gallery while the winemaker was on hand to personally 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 be starting to reach its peak in about ten years, an aged chardonnay and three dozen reds, we found there was no need to maintain security as to our next stop.

We were in the process of being ushered into the restaurant when the winemaker asked whether, since lunch would probably 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, one late thirties, the other a bit older and a blonde who looks like she should be in the centrefold driving a red convertible. You're not exactly what you might call 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 reasonably impressed. I had pencilled in 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 one's Number Three for the afternoon, so I think we'll be getting to both."

By the time we'd finished our tasting there were about forty dozen bottles earmarked for delivery to Denison, and after a rest it was time to adjourn to the restaurant for a quiet dinner with liquid accompaniment limited to a couple of glasses from wineries we'd been unable to visit during. 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 consecutive 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 Bluetongues as well (it definitely 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 scenic delights.

We rolled into Reception at Jupiters around five-thirty, and, 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 forth 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, though 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 just 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've 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 void.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," I started, "what seems to be the problem?"

"No problem," was the reply from the largest of the three, "unless, that is, you're tied up with this arse-hole. In which case you'll be needing 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 that 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 definitely a *better* class of fucking arsehole than you arseholes will ever be," concluding the last sentence as Bright Eyes foot hit the accelerator and she swung into the mainstream of traffic, causing 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, in a 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, placed them on the table 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. Bright Eyes and I had been watching the backpackers go about their 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 these next couple of years off? No, they're not. They weren't, as you might recall, exactly 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, so if you two are standing around I have the excuse that *I'd* be keeping *you* waiting and, in any case, they'll be wanting 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 drive way? 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 female 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 that there'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 foyer in the motel's lobby bore, at first glance, a remarkable resemblance to a former Australian 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 gentleman staffing 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 establish contact with the constabulary. Movement on the edge of 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, some 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. Much the 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're the issue here Herston. 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 your 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 the bulk 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 whether 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?" I suggested.

TRAVELLING NORTH

Having established a game plan involving an early departure I was expecting activity when I emerged from my room just before seven, but I wasn't quite prepared for the extent of activity undertaken before I appeared on the scene.

Bright Eyes had been up and about for a while, presumably unable to sleep before the ordeal she was about to undergo. As I hove into view I was greeted with the news that she'd been about to knock on my door 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 where 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 we expanded on once my luggage had been consigned to its allocated space and 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 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 that 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 the 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 usually doing something in the afternoon before we started. Once we get back to base 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 otherwise you're 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 just 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 about that. They're going to 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 hadn't anticipated that one car would have been moved into the other driveway. As we pulled into the driveway, one of the garage doors 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 more comfortable in the downstairs lounge while Bright Eyes was busy upstairs. As we waited we could hear discussion upstairs 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'd returned upstairs, but 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 with the Carters.

Our chauffeur had changed her regular uniform for something demure and Jeffrey and I had applied several doses of breath freshener before our departure from the Gold Coast.

With the telltale aroma of stale booze removed, and the liquid supplies stowed comfortably out of sight in the boot, despite all these precautions, the atmosphere remained strained. Could it have been the esky's location athwart the rear seat?

Suggestions that we needed somewhere to store the salad rolls we intended to snack on along the way were met with disbelief, even after I'd opened the container to avail myself of the mineral water we'd stacked underneath the cling-wrapped salad rolls that formed the top layer of the contents.

The coolness undoubtedly resulted from disbelief in their daughter's claims she intended to use the next couple of years to upgrade her qualifications through external studies. In any case, regardless of the cause, Mr Bright Eyes Senior had adopted 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 realization 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.
- (3) 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 always careful not to overindulge in the turps. Experience to date suggested that while she was capable of socking plenty away, Bright Eyes was quite happy to change to soft drink and engage in polite conversation or frenetic gyrations on the dance floor while she waited for her passengers to decant themselves from the bar.

She was, in other words, 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.

I knew if Jeffrey was to venture the opinion that Bright Eyes was *capable of handling the piss, knows when to stop before she's too stonkered to drive and wouldn't be interested in rooting anything older than twenty-five* the information would do nothing to ease the tension, so it was better to remain silent.

Her parents, however, appeared dubious about their daughter's chosen path as the Mercedes pulled away from the kerb in 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 that, 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 colour, creed, religious affiliation or filial relationship from having anything remotely resembling a good time.

The remarks explained, at least from where I was sitting, her desire to avoid returning to Brisbane and also 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 have we? 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 that 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 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 the chariot 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 alcoholic 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 inquired, *if that was Burpengary, where the fuck are Fartengary and Belchengary?*

We were passing the Nambour turnoff when a police car left the side of the road and settled itself in our wake. While we were sure Bright Eyes had been within the speed limit, the presence was disconcerting. After a few kilometres, the car moved up and signalled that Bright Eyes should pull over:

A brief interview, an inspection of her driving credentials, a breathalyzer sample and inquiries about our movements followed, before, with some reluctance, the police officers returned to their vehicle, indicating that we were free to continue our journey.

When 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 road worthiness while Bright Eyes provided a breath sample, usually being encouraged to take deep breaths by someone with a more than passing interest in her mammary development.

We reached the conclusion, as we rolled over the kilometres, this inordinate interest in assessing Bright Eyes' sobriety was due to boredom on the part of police stationed in country towns.

As far as we could figure out, their duties, consisting of pulling up the odd motorist for speeding or some other trivial offence when they *could* be playing a leading role in the fight against organized crime, would become mundane, so they must have needed some excitement in their otherwise drab day to day lives. 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 view to stopping in Rockhampton, but it seemed that 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 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. Noting the likelihood of delays at Benaraby, Calliope and points north on the way to Rockhampton, it seemed unlikely that our arrival there was likely to occur before night had well and truly fallen. We were about a dozen kilometres north of Miriam Vale, when a roadside sign alerted me to 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 or two to weigh up the options. 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 there's 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," Jeffrey opined. "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 and we could order meals through room service, so we placed orders, paid in advance and 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 having sighted 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, since attention from the Highway Patrol and requests to pull over on the outskirts of every major settlement would have resulted 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 realized that the detour had been a wise move.

The requests to pull over resumed at Bloomsbury. As we passed the turnoff to the airport south of Proserpine I noticed yet another police car on the side of the road. Predictably, it sprang into action when we'd gone past.

Once we'd pulled over, as we sat waiting for the occupant of the police car 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're going to have to check the stolen vehicles registry." It took a second for the penny to drop. When it had I realized that the inquiry was emanating 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'd 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 as I wasn't I couldn't. The response indicated that his appointment to Proserpine was a comparatively recent development.

"Tell me, mate, this is about 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. What do you reckon? 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 that 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, as did the gentleman whose height advantage resulted in a significant focus of attention in Bright Eyes' direction.

"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'll 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, but 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 prowling 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," I replied. "Unless he's changed since I coached 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. Since it seems like they're only passing the info on to the next car along the line 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 that if we were going to be making extended journeys along the highway, it might be an idea to use a vehicle that was somewhat less conspicuous.

As we approached the outer limits of Denison we had, it seemed, 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 buggie home," Jeffrey observed.

"What you'd expect," I replied. "Sandy's at work and 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 most of 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 Merc 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 her departure for Sydney, so she was able to point out finishing touches that had been 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 and I’ll drive down to 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 perfectly 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 the accuracy of my recollections (neither Hopalong nor Sandy being noted Riesling lovers), Jeffrey cast an eye over the contents of the parcels I’d opened so far.

“Be 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 little 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 anyway, 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 on the laundry front I could, I suppose, 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 I thought 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, and as I headed off with the last items I was informed that 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 remaining 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, and Sunday would probably see most of us into recovery mode, so 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 obligatory.

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, for example, preferred to travel light, so once the clothes were in the wardrobe moving in was complete. There was, for instance, no need to make any 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.

I, on the other hand, had a large quantity of music in various formats, a substantial library and the living room furniture we'd commissioned Hopalong to construct back when he was inflicting himself on us while we completed Lotto research.

The furniture wouldn't fill both rooms, and once we'd retrieved it out of storage I'd placed the existing stock where it seemed most appropriate and commissioned Hopalong to fill in the spaces. Since that would be difficult to do while someone was living in the area, the task had been postponed until after we'd 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 vast 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, in the motel era, a *family room*, and was obviously best suited for living quarters, so the room next door would house the music library and stereo. Once the stereo had been installed, wires had been 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 my purchases 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 an 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 the spin cycles on the washing machines had reached the height of their passion.

Stage Two involved hanging the contents of the now-quiescent washing 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 o'clock I'd finished the washing and was safely tucked away enjoying classic New Orleans Jazz, emptying boxes, placing the contents on the shelves and stowing empty containers in the spare bathroom, unaware of activity on the other side of the door.

Once the Riesling was gone, given the likelihood that there'd be some form of celebration 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 might pass the time until 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 came the sound of voices. Since the *welcome home* party was already in progress it would need a musical background, 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 it was obvious Hopalong had returned from wherever he had been hiding, since 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, and 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 was mildly flabbergasted to observe that Jeffrey, reclining on a banana lounge, was 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?"

"Bonorama? By coincidence their CD is right beside the stereo. Back in a moment."

Ducking back into the control room, it only took seconds to place the disk in question in the player. With that accomplished, it seemed a stroll down to the bar to grab another bottle of Riesling would be a good idea, before I rejoined the assembled multitude. It was obvious someone out there would have a glass that needed refilling, and so I grabbed one myself, 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, it seemed highly suspicious that the present recount was the first I'd actually heard of some of the deeds that were described over the next hour.

Of course, if I *had* been unconscious, Jeffrey would also have been somewhat *tired and emotional* and either physically incapable of performing the acts of gymnastics he was describing, or incapable of recalling the final details in the morning.

Given frequent mornings where some 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 themselves, while they might not have been accurate in historical detail, were delivered with a verve and gusto matching that achieved by the best theatrical raconteurs. To keep him going at full spate, 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 bar and back.

Once a couple of glasses had been refilled, I joined them on the periphery of the party.

“So,” I started, keeping one ear on the pool-side 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, “that 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 pair 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 couple of 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 note book 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 what was needed was a *Welcome Home* surprise party.”

“Which the pair of 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’s paper came out with a note in the *Gleanings* about your ETA and a note reminding the readership that the premises operating under the title of **Moderation** are not licensed, and that 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 already 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,” and as I spoke the Bright Eyes mobile arrived, disgorging a further couple of attendees including, I noted, the Terrible Twins from the *Sausage Wrapper’s* news room, 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 for lunch 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 down there straight after work, but they didn’t really start rolling up much before four, so 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 sundry citizens, 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 the silence descended I was in the middle of 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 (my preference) *Eighty-eight*, with the latter tag being the number of

keys on a piano keyboard. 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 moved to Denison, initially without her daughter, in the wake of a messy divorce from a prominent 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 instituting a musical dialogue, but the responses suggested that while Bernelle was reasonably open-minded where music was concerned, 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 the 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 five minute interval between musical interludes had been interpreted as signalling the end of the evening's proceedings. Various people were contacting the taxi service *via* mobile phone and assorted eskies were being rounded up. It seemed Captain Headrush and his colleagues were in for a busy hour.

Remembering it was likely to be a good five to ten minutes before there was any activity on the taxi front I decided this might be time to answer the call of nature since a hospitable host should probably 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.

As we headed inside the thought of my escort occupying themselves in my living quarters was not one that filled me with unrestrained joy. Turning to the book case, I grabbed a copy of Charlie Gillett's history of Atlantic Records, explained that I might be some time, and that, after a substantial repast last night, there was a considerable threat of 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 the lack of adverse commentary as an encouraging sign.

Once we were outside the crowd gradually dwindled. Cabs arrived and 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*, and 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, so another course of action seemed necessary.

Despite suggestions about the taxi service, Bernelle and Gloria were reluctant to leave. Conversation continued sporadically until I managed to 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 no apparently 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 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 seemed 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, thinking that 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 off 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. It should, of course, be remembered that 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 what was, in retrospect, a little too much enjoyment in my voice. Suggestions that the water at this time of 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 say 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. So, while I emerged from the spa to investigate the intrusion they were going to 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 business man, who had wandered in looking for his daughter: 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 the restrictions placed on his midweek activities by his wife.

"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.

"Well, she's got to run the shop tomorrow. The missus and I are goin' 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 fortuitously 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 climbed into the driver's seat and made a remarkably quiet departure. As a concerned parent, he 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 that 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 the latter stages of the plan would restrict the time available 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 and hoping that 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 that 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 soothing sounds of John Fahey's guitar ringing softly in my ears.

Was it my imagination, or could I hear the sounds of frantic knocking somewhere in the distance?